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“Becoming Our Best, Most True Selves”: An Exploration of the Psychologization of Yoga in the United States

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“Becoming Our Best, Most True Selves”: An Exploration of the Psychologization of
Yoga in the United States

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
Of Bard College

by
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The Sociological Background of Yoga in the United States

I sat on the floor with my arms tense and quivering above my head, elbows locked and fingers curled into a mudra. Everyone around me was chanting passionately in Sanskrit, but I needed every bit of my focus to make sure my arms did not drop, so I sat with gritted teeth and tight lips. The instructor apparently noticed, because she yelled above the noise of the chanting and the instrumental track playing over the speakers: “Emily! Keep chanting... there is strength in the words. We’re almost half way there!” I looked around in disbelief; we had been at this exercise for what felt like an eternity and I was sure my arms could not take any more. How could we only be “half way” there? What had I gotten myself in to?

This was my first Kundalini yoga class. Though at first I was taken aback, I learned that these sorts of exercises, ones involving holding the body in specific positions for extended periods of time, intense breathing, and rhythmic chanting, are believed to be integral to achieving the core tenant of Kundalini: awakening and channeling latent energy. Through pushing the body to its physical limits, Kundalini practitioners find that they gain clarity and stamina. I did not make it through this particular exercise (my arms dropped shortly after the seven minute mark), but over time, I came to understand that these techniques, perceived as ancient sources of mystical wisdom, are thought to help practitioners become, as one instructor put it, “our best, most true selves”.

This class, which met for 90 minutes once a week, was held at one of two studios that I regularly visited during my time in the field. Going forward, I will refer to this studio as Vitality Yoga. Vitality Yoga is a small studio, located near the center of a small town in rural upstate New York. The space has a small foyer used for storing personal items like shoes and

electronics, a room where classes and workshops were held, and another room used as a retail area, where visitors can pay for classes or purchase yoga gear. The practice space is an airy, bright room with white walls and wooden floors. It is minimally decorated, with a few spiritual sayings written in scrawls hung on the walls, and white, billowy curtains adorning large windows. In the front of the room by the windows is a set of floor pillows where the instructor sits. Near the pillows on the floor there'd often be burning incense or dried sage, and a prominent framed picture of Yogi Bhajan, who is widely credited with bringing Kundalini to the United States. The majority of classes at Vitality are instruction for a variety of yoga called Kundalini. Kundalini is distinctive in that it emphasizes extended periods in postures and repetitive, intense breathing patterns, while most of the most popular types of yoga in the U.S. instead involve smooth, connected postures with are intended to "flow". Over the course of the summer, I got to know the main teacher at Vitality Yoga, who I will refer to as Nina, quite well. Nina, a white woman in her mid-forties, lives alone in a large, old farmhouse a few miles away from the studio. Nina credited her independence (she never married or had children) for the freedom she enjoyed to make a living through her passions; she worked simultaneously as a photographer, massage therapist, and yoga teacher.

The second studio I regularly visited, which I will refer to as Unity Yoga, was strikingly similar in design: airy, with white walls, wooden floors, and this time, red and billowy curtains. This space was a bit more colorful, with a large mural referencing Sri Radha, a Hindu goddess, and parrots, which she is often pictured with. This studio also had a small lobby area for checking in and paying for classes, with less for sale. This studio is located in another town in upstate New York that, though quite small, is more densely populated, and thus has more of an urban feel. While Vitality Yoga focuses on the Kundalini strand of yoga, Unity has mostly

Vinyasa classes. Vinyasa, which is the most popular type of yoga practiced today¹, consists of a series of physical postures, with an emphasis on connecting movement and breath. Movements should be smoothly connected, without jerky or sudden transitions. Unlike Kundalini, there was not much chanting or holding of positions, and unlike the “fixed forms” of yoga, like Bikram, the postures are variable, changing each class according to the instructor. Typically, the beginning of a class will be focused on “building heat” in the body- doing poses which increase the heart rate and breathing rate, while the end of the class will be focused on poses which build balance and flexibility. Unlike Flow Yoga, Unity has many instructors, and I sometimes encountered different teachers week-to-week there. However, I most often attended classes taught by an instructor named Sandy, who was also my main point of contact at the studio.

Yoga and is, and has been for some time now, on the rise in the U.S. There were over 36 million yoga practitioners in 2016, up from just 15.8 million in 2008.² The meditation app Headspace now has over 20 million users.³ What started as fringe practices, associated with the esoteric “tantriks” of the 1920’s, and later the counter-cultural movement in the 1960’s, are now largely mainstream. While thousands of studies focus on yoga, especially regarding its physical and emotional health benefits (Broderick⁴, Mendelson et al.⁵, and Tang⁶ are just a few examples),

¹ Do You Yoga. “Do You Yoga Global Survey”. Accessed October 2, 2018.

<https://www.doyouyoga.com/these-are-the-most-popular-yoga-styles-in-the-world-55277/>

² Ipsos Public Affairs. Last modified 2016. Accessed April 15, 2018.

<https://www.yogaalliance.org/Portals/0/2016%20Yoga%20in%20America%20Study%20RESULTS.pdf>

³ Mullin, Benjamin. “Meditation App Headspace Inks Partnership with NBA”. *The Wall Street Journal*. Last modified March 20, 2018. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/meditation-app-headspace-inks-content-partnership-with-nba-1521556200>

⁴ Broderick, Patricia. “Mindfulness and Coping with Dysphoric Mood: Contrasts with Rumination and Distraction” *Cognitive Theory* 29: 501-510.

⁵ Mendelson, T. et al., “Feasibility and Preliminary Outcomes of a School-Based Mindfulness Intervention for Urban Youth”. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology* 25: 129-149.

⁶ Tang, Y. “The Neuroscience of Mindfulness and Meditation”. *National Review of Neuroscience* 16: 213-225.

few have situated it within the larger trend of increasing focus on self-cultivation and self-improvement. Yoga studios are prime sites for examining this development, what I will call “psychologization”, as defined by Jan De Vos⁷, because they are spaces where people come together specifically for the purposes of cultivating their minds and bodies in order to better themselves. My study seeks to understand how and why yogic practices have been appropriated in the U.S., and furthermore, how yogic techniques both constitute and constrain modern subjectivities.

Literature Review

Most agree that a defining feature of our time is an increased focus on what we call “the self”. While reflexive awareness, our recognition of our own consciousness, has always been part of what distinguishes human beings, the conception of the self as stable, coherent, and discrete, has not. Moreover, the self has become an entity to be worked on, improved upon, and ultimately, actualized; as Giddens puts it, “We are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves”.⁸ This development has been concurrent with that of academic disciplines devoted to studying the self as a knowable, rational unit: mainly psychology and psychiatry, but also sociology, economics, and the social sciences in general. These two developments, theorized to be mutually constitutive⁹, form the basis for “psychologization” theory.

Through psychologization, the logic and techniques of psychological sciences are transferred to areas of life in which they previously did not exist. For Nikolas Rose, psychology and economics have become for contemporary, Western society what religious morality was for

⁷ De Vos, Jan. *Psychologization and the Subject of Late Modernity*. Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan Publishers, 2013.

⁸ Giddens, Anthony. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991.

⁹ De Vos, Jan. 2013.

the Puritans: they form the basis for an attempt at unifying life around a “single model of appropriate subjectivity”.¹⁰ Rose cites examples of the manifestation of what he calls “psy” in a number of diverse settings: everything from I.Q. tests used in schools and personality tests used in career placement, to the ubiquity of the term “Freudian slip”. In many cases, these seemingly mundane ways of doing things seem to be “normal” or “natural”; this is evidence of the deep influence that “psy” has had on our subjectivities.

Multiple scholars have examined the many manifestations of psychologization, and particularly the growth of “self-help”. Self-help guidance, traditionally offered in the form of self-help books, provides techniques and advice for self-guided improvement on a variety of fronts, but has a special focus on relationships, career, and cultivating positive emotional states. Micki Mcgee explores the rise of self-help as a cultural phenomenon, illustrating the shift through changes in hegemonic ideals of self.¹¹ She argues that while early 20th century Americans idolized figures like Benjamin Franklin and Andrew Carnegie, men who were self-made, but achieved success in ways that were largely measurable and external (money and power), as well as community involvement and moral rectitude, psychoanalysis added a new psychological component to the ideal self. Freud’s theories led to value being placed on things like a “emotional well-being, a subjective experience of happiness, and the pursuit of pleasure”.¹²

Self-help has been the site of much critique; Mcgee argues that self-help, while intended to cure the emotional ails of the population, actually gave people a new way to formulate and identify emotional “problems” within themselves, leading to a cycle of internal absorption and

¹⁰ Rose, Nikolas. *Inventing Ourselves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

¹¹ Mcgee, Micki. *Self Help, Inc.: Makeover Culture in American Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

¹² Ibid.

emotional upheaval. Others (Young¹³, Kugelmann¹⁴, and Fassin¹⁵) echo this belief; anthropologist and psychiatrist Allan Young, for example, notes that when PTSD was introduced to the DSMIII (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the basis for psychological diagnosis), rates of victimhood, dependency, vulnerability, and inability to subsist increased. Others are skeptical of the therapeutic discourse simply because it has made suffering into a multibillion dollar business (self-help alone is now an \$11 billion industry). Moreover, it primes people to seek market-based solutions to their emotional woes. Political scientist Michael Parenti writes,

“The reader of advertising copy and the viewer of commercials discover that they are not doing right baby’s needs or hubby or wife’s desires; that they are failing in their careers because of poor appearance, sloppy dress; that they are not treating their complexion, hair, or nails properly... In order to live well and properly, consumers need corporate producers to guide them. Consumers are taught personal incompetence and dependence on mass-market producers”.¹⁶

Self-help also restricts the pool of those who can be helped to those who can afford it, either through costly therapy sessions or self-help guides.

Others offer critique on the grounds that self-help is individualizing in a way that responsabilizes the individual in the case of potential failure, thus ridding the state or community of any blame.¹⁷ Heidi Rimke, like Parenti, links logic of self-help to that of the economic sphere: “Appropriating democratic liberalism’s and neoliberalism’s ways of seeing the individual and

¹³ Young, Allan. “An Anthropological Perspective on Medical Knowledge”. *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 5 no. 2 (1980): 102-116.

¹⁴ Kugelmann, Robert. “Hammering Metaphor from Metal: A Psychology of Stress”. *PsycINFO* (Spring 1982): 253-261.

¹⁵ Fassin, Didier. *Power and Disease in Africa: Social Anthropology in the Suburbs of Dakar*. Paris: University of France Press, 1992.

¹⁶ Parenti, Michael. *Inventing Reality: The Politics of the Mass Media*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1986.

¹⁷ Birk, Rasmus Hoffman. “Making responsible residents: On ‘Responsibilization’ Within Local Community Work in Marginalized Residential Areas in Denmark”. *The Sociological Review* 66 no. 3 (2018): 608-622.

social world, self-help promotes the idea that a good citizen cares for herself or himself best by evading or denying social relations”.¹⁸ The rise of self-help and therapy culture coincides with a shrinking welfare state, and smaller social safety net.

Because psychological discourses pathologize “codependency”, a too-close reliance on other people,¹⁹ the tendency of self-help to encourage individuals to evade community-oriented solutions has also been a frequent topic of inquiry. Heidi Rimke notes that in the past, close human connection and attachment was considered either “natural” or “feminine”, but was not problematized until quite recently.²⁰ Early on, Durkheim posited a link between mental health and community connection, arguing that egoistic suicide results from social isolation.²¹ Later, concerns about loss of human bonds were expressed in works like Christopher Lasch’s *The Culture of Narcissism*²², Robert Bellah et al.’s *Habits of the Heart*²³, Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone*²⁴, and Sherry Turkle’s *Alone Together*²⁵.

Alternative practices, often stemming from Eastern religions, and considered spiritual and mystical, have emerged in the literature as a possible evidence of a backlash to a narcissistic culture gone too far. Bar posits that yoga is sought as one of these alternative practices, acting as a remedy for the “suffering of the privileged”, which has resulted from the imperative to seek individualized solutions along with the commanding drive to “self-actualize” with prestigious,

¹⁸ Rimke, Heidi. “Governing Citizens Through Self-Help Literature”. *Cultural Studies* 14 no.1 (2000): 61-78.

¹⁹ Rice Steadman, John. *A Disease of One’s Own: Psychotherapy, Addiction, and the Emergence of Co-Dependency*. London: Transaction Publishers, 1998.

²⁰ Rimke, 2000.

²¹ Durkheim, Emile. *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*. London: Routledge, 2005 [1897].

²² Lasch, Christopher. *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1978.

²³ Bellah, Robert. *Habits of the Heart*. NY, New York: Harper Collins, 1985.

²⁴ Putnam, Robert. *Bowling Alone*. NY, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.

²⁵ Turkle, Sherry. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. New York: Basic Books, 2011.

often stressful, jobs in the upper-middle class.²⁶ For Bar, yoga's emphasis on slowing down and "making space" is a direct reaction to an individualized world. Yoga provides a space that feels separate from the harsh expectations in the outside sphere.

In this way, the popularity of yoga is considered, by some, a result of a Giddens's "detraditionalization"- both because people are able to choose a spiritual practice (i.e. they are not obligated to practice any religion in particular) and because yoga is symbolic of transcendence and ultimate meaning- which is seen as missing in a secular, individualized society. According to Giddens, "Modernity confronts the individual with a complex diversity of choices and, because it is non-foundational, at the same time offers little help as to what options should be selected".²⁷ This supposed variety of choices offers both freedom to create a life in line with ones' desires and goals, while also causing anxiety due to lack of guidance.

For Giddens, psychologization and detraditionalization go hand-in-hand. He posits that therapy culture, because it focuses on lifestyle choices of the individual, and on a self-referential life-course, rather than a rigid set of traditions passed down through generations, frees individuals from many of the social constraints which bound them in the past. However, for Foucault and Foucauldian thinkers, therapy culture is not liberating, and in fact, it extends the reach of the state and thus hegemonic power further into peoples' lives. By molding people so that they *want* to be productive, responsible, and independent, therapy culture both harmonizes the desires of the state and its citizens, while obscuring the power relations which constitute it. From that point of view, therapy culture does not signal the end of tradition, but rather a new

²⁶ Bar, Neta. "Tightrope Walkers: An Ethnography of Yoga, Precariousness, and Privilege in California's Silicon Valley" (doctoral thesis, Duke University, 2013).

²⁷ Giddens, Anthony. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991.

tradition in which individuals make decisions within a coherent moral landscape; in this case, they do so for their “own good”²⁸, rather than for fear of punishment or ostracization.

Overview

Few studies have approached yoga as a practice constituted by, rather than a backlash to, psychologization. When yoga is understood as a “foreign” practice, with a linear and coherent transmission from East to West, it indeed appears as an individualized choice, and evidence of one’s ability to break out of a hegemonic moral schema. However, as I describe in the following chapter, yoga is far from “pure”, both because there never was one singular, coherent practice called “yoga”, here or in South Asia, and because the heterogeneous ideas and techniques that did come from India in the 19th and 20th centuries were modified, and in some cases censored, to better appeal to an American audience. Thus, I go on in Chapter 2 to demonstrate just how much yoga does reflect and reinforce the dominant discourses of therapy culture, and, in Chapter 3, how psychologization then constitutes modern subjectivities through the practice of yoga, thus rendering yoga a “technology of the self”²⁹, and its practitioners very much still within the realm of social constraint.

Methodology

My study consisted of dual methods: participant observation and interview; this research took place between May and September 2018. For the ethnographic portion of the study, I spent time in two local yoga and meditation studios, usually attending one or two classes a week, and taking time to get to know the other students before and after class. The studios, Vitality and Unity, as described earlier, offered mainly Kundalini and Vinyasa classes, respectively. However, I also attended a range of one-time events, including a workshop on addiction and a

²⁸ Rimke, 2000.

²⁹ Foucault, Michel. (October 25, 1982). Personal interview with Rux Martin.

“sound bath”. I recruited participants at the beginning of each class and workshop I attended, by giving a verbal introduction at the front of the class, along with a written consent form completed as the individual signed in. The ethnographic portion of the study proved crucial, as I was interested in how techniques of yoga are experienced by practitioners, which cannot be adequately explained through interview alone.

The second portion of the study was open-ended, semi-structured interviews with yoga teachers. The interviews lasted approximately one hour, in which I asked a prepared list of questions, as well as spontaneous follow-up or related questions which arose organically from the conversation. I recruited interviewees using snowball sampling, starting with staff at the two studios I studied for the ethnographic portion of the study. I interviewed six participants, with five interviews taking place in-person and one over the phone. Interviewing, as a method, does not directly follow from the theoretical groundwork I have laid- Foucault, for example, at times denies the existence of a stable self. However, it is precisely this active structuring of self that I was intrigued by; I wanted to know how interviewees conceived of themselves as teachers and yogis, and to understand how they created meaning in relation to their yogic practices.

Of course, the nature of the size of the study and location of the studios means that my experiences are not statistically reflective of yoga and meditation practices in the U.S. Though American yoga and meditation studios are generally coded as spaces for those who are white and middle class,³⁰ due to the demographics of the areas surrounding the studios, the population I interacted with was generally whiter, and had a higher socioeconomic status, than the wider meditation and yoga-practicing public. However, I do not intend to draw generalizations about yoga practitioners which are statistically significant, rather my aim is to add to theory regarding

³⁰ Bar, 2012.

the process of psychologization, through the theoretically significant practice of yoga in these two studios. My position as a student at Bard College may have affected my interactions with the participants, as Bard is well-known throughout the area as a private, liberal-leaning college. However, while this may have affected the way people discussed politics with me, I do not believe it affected our conversations regarding deeper questions I aimed to explore- those concerning meaning, identity, sense of self, and existential precarity. Additionally, following the work of Eva Illouz, I hoped to avoid an “epistemology of suspicion”; I was not interested only in what yoga (as cultural practices) accomplishes or fails to accomplish politically. Rather, I aimed to explore how meanings and values were formed and contested in the studios, without an assumption about what social relations should look like.³¹

³¹ Illouz, Eva. *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture*. Berkeley: University Of California Press, 2008.

The Myth of Authenticity in Yoga

“It’s just... special. To be connecting with all of the people who’ve come before me, who’ve faced the same human difficulties that we all face, and who used these same techniques which I’m practicing to help them live their best lives”.

This is how Christina, a long-time student at Unity, explained her passion for yoga to me. For her, the long, complex history of yoga is part of what makes it so appealing. She went on to explain, “Don’t get me wrong, the scientific advances we’ve made are amazing and they’ve saved so many lives. But the wisdom that has gone into refining these techniques over thousands, maybe tens of thousands of years, is just amazing”. Christina’s view was consistent with how Unity presented itself; its Instagram is sprinkled with photos of Hindu goddesses and canonical texts like the *Bhagavad Gita*, while its website describes various techniques taught in its workshops as “sacred” and “classic”. However, during my time at Vitality and Unity, I came to understand that the techniques practiced there (mainly *asanas*, or physical postures), are only a small part of what has traditionally been considered “yoga”. Moreover, the decontextualization of these *asanas* has allowed them to take on new moral meanings from those that were originally intended. In this chapter, I will explore how yogic practices have been appropriated and altered by Western yogis, along with why yoga studios still tend to present themselves as purveyors of “pure” sources of yogic wisdom.

A Brief History of Pre-Modern Yoga

The yoga studios I studied were not unique in their presentation; in fact, many instructors teaching in the West have attempted to claim linear trajectories of transmission in order to create what Mark Singleton calls “touchstones of authenticity”.³² Moreover, the practice is not new; K.

³² Singleton, Mark. *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Pattabhi Jois, an Indian yoga teacher credited with establishing Ashtanga yoga, a popular method of yoga which involves synchronizing the breath with a series of postures, in the 1960's, has claimed that certain series of movements used in Ashtanga can be traced back to ancient texts, specifically the *Yajur* and *Rg Vedas*. The fact that this claim, among many similar ones by other *gurus*, has been called philologically and historically “untenable”³³ seems not to have affected believers like Christine.

First and foremost, it is important to note that there is no single, static practice called “yoga” which could have been transmitted to the U.S. in a unified, coherent way. Though it is clear that yoga has generally South Asian roots, there have existed various techniques called “yoga” which evolved, often simultaneously, in diverse cultural groups. For that reason, I will offer Geoffrey Samuel’s definition of yoga, which takes into account the heterogeneous nature of the practice. For him, yoga is “disciplined and systematic techniques for the training and control of the human mind-body complex, which are also understood as techniques for the reshaping of human consciousness towards some kind of higher goal”.³⁴ This definition gives us the conceptual groundwork for determining exactly which practices “count” as yoga.

As far as getting to the “origin” of these practices, some claim that there is archaeological evidence to suggest a form of yoga was present as far back as the Indus Valley Civilization. The “Pashupati” seal, which depicts a figure that looks to be seated in a yogic posture, can be dated to 2500 BCE. However, the first textual, and thus less speculative, evidence of yoga is found in the “Greater Magahda” culture of present-day northern India (circa 600 to 500 BCE), which was primarily composed of renouncers of prominent religions: Buddhism, Jainism, and Ajivika. In

³³ Jain, Andrea. *Selling Yoga: From Counterculture to Pop Culture*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015.

³⁴ Samuel, Geoffrey. *The Origins of Yoga and Tantra: Indic Religions to the Thirteenth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

this context, yoga was a systematic set of ascetic techniques involving mainly meditational and devotional techniques, often mentioned in relation to escaping karmic rebirth.³⁵

Later, these practices were adopted into the more orthodox Brahmanical culture, and there is where we see the first instance of the word *yoga* used in the way Geoffrey defines it. The influence of the practice can be seen in the shift in Brahmanical emphasis on an ideal of strong male warriors, to an ideal of male celibate renouncers, or *brahmacarin*, since celibacy as an ascetic practice was present in the yoga practiced in Greater Magahda as well.³⁶ While these two cultures varied greatly in their beliefs, they both believed in reincarnation, shared the goal of escaping rebirth, and used yoga as a means for attempting that escape. Thus, as yoga continued to develop, both in Jainism and Buddhism, it took on different characteristics in each but remained a soteriological practice.³⁷

The *Yoga Sutr*s, written around 400 BCE by a sage named Patanjali can be viewed as a compilation of knowledge about yoga from a variety of older traditions. Though often identified as a Hindu text, the author was influenced by Buddhist and renouncer traditions as well. The *Yoga Sutr*s is mainly known for providing an eight-step guide for escaping the ordinary awareness, or *kevala*, of everyday life. Because it is a compilation, which is organized and easily read-able, it is one of the main textual sources cited in contemporary practice, though it is often misunderstood as being closer to modern day practice than an accurate translation would reveal.³⁸ The eight steps are referred to as “limbs”; the limbs consist of mainly preparatory techniques and behavioral guidance which can be seen as prerequisite for escaping *kevala*. The

³⁵ Jain, 2015

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Samuel, 2008.

first five are “external limbs”³⁹, (1) *yama*, or behavioral restraints which were common in South Asian renouncer traditions, including celibacy, nonviolence, and restraint from attachment, (2) *niyama*, or ritual observances, (3) *asana*, physical postures, (4) *pranayama*, breath control practices, and (5) *pratyahara*, or “sense withdrawal” practices. There are also three “internal limbs”, which focus on reflection: (1) *dharana*, which involves spatially fixating on an object of meditation, (2) *dhyana*, temporally fixating on an object of meditation, and finally, (3) *samadhi*, cultivation of one-pointed concentration.

The two limbs which were most often mentioned in the classes I attended were *asana* and *pranayama*. Instructors often referred to the postures practiced in class as *asana*, and the breathing techniques as *pranayama*. This snippet of a class at Vitality provides an example of this:

“Today I want to focus on pranayama, breath. A few weeks ago, I introduced ujjayi breath, and as we move through our asanas today, let’s try to hold on to that. For those of you who weren’t here, ujjayi breath involves constricting the muscles in your throat while you breathe. It helps to maintain a rhythm through your practice. It sounds like this...”

Most modern-day yoga classes most often consist of a variety of physical postures and breathing techniques, and usually special attention is paid to coordinating breath and movement. However, in the *Yoga Sutras*, *asana* actually refers to any bodily position which allows a person to be comfortable and steady for the sake of meditation. Thus, the benefits of learning proper *asana* did not come directly from the posture, but from the greater concentration allowed by proper posture. Moreover, *pranayama*, which today entails any number of breathing exercises focusing on the rate of breath or technique for breathing, in the *Yoga Sutras* meant working on increasing

³⁹ Larson, Gerald J. "Yoga's 'A-Theistic'-Theism: A New Way of Thinking About God." *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*: 25, no. 6 (2012).

the periods of retention of breath, by cutting off the movement of breathing out and in.⁴⁰ Because when broken down, *pranayama* translates to “life force” (*prana*) and “control” (*yama*), modern day *pranayama* techniques are often done for the purposes of energizing the body. One that we frequently practiced at Vitality is called “breath of fire”, and involves breathing rapidly through the nose, which is thought to “Adjust the subtle psycho-electromagnetic field of the aura so that the blood becomes energized”.⁴¹ Similarly to the *asana*, the practice is done today to contribute to greater wellbeing and energy in everyday life, while in the *Yoga Sutras* it likely referred to the reduction in breathing rate which often comes with deep meditative states.

Moreover, Unity Yoga’s website states that they are dedicated to “all aspects of yoga”, and then lists *asana*, meditation, and community as the three practices which they perceive as constituting yoga. Though the *Yoga Sutras* cannot possibly be representative of all the practices which can be considered “yoga”, it’s a helpful text in illustrating a snapshot in time, when yoga was considered to be a collection of various methods- methods which affected many parts of individuals lives, and entailed a good deal of sacrifice and dedication (for example, some never married due to the celibacy tenant). By defining “all” of yoga as *asana*, meditation, and community, Unity obscures the rest of the practices which historically, played a large role, and both exaggerates and misidentifies the role of *asana*. To understand how a heterogeneous conglomeration of demanding ascetic practices for religious devotees came to be understood in the U.S. as mainly physical postures and breathing techniques, it’s helpful to explore yoga’s introduction to the United States and its subsequent movement, in the words of Jain, “from counterculture to pop culture”.⁴²

⁴⁰ Jain, 2015.

⁴¹ 3HO Foundation. “Breath of Fire”. Last Modified 2018. Accessed October 10, 2018. <https://www.3ho.org/kundalini-yoga/pranayam/pranayam-techniques/breath-fire>

⁴² Jain, 2015.

Yoga in the United States

Though today yoga is usually categorized as Hindu, throughout the centuries following the *Yoga Sutras*, yoga continued to be altered and edited, often via exchanges between orthodox Hinduism and various other schools of thought. These include exchanges between with the Buddhist Madhyamika School in the second century C.E., the Buddhist Yogacara school in the third and fourth century C.E., and the Advaita Vedanta in the eighth century C.E.⁴³ . By the 19th century in India, a variety of diverse yogic techniques and objectives were in practice, though the practice had waned significantly due to British colonialism. Some Americans were aware of yogic practices at the time (Transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau are known to have praised the ethical dimensions of it)⁴⁴, but many credit the Parliament of the World's Religions, in Chicago, 1893, for bringing yoga into American consciousness, with Hindu monk Swami Vivekananda and Zen master Soyen Shaku giving speeches. Vivekananda, in particular, impressed many with a series of improvised talks.

By the time Vivekananda arrived in the U.S., there'd been a bifurcation between "Raja" (royal) yoga- those aspects of yoga associated with the philosophical and meditative parts of yoga, and Hatha yoga, which focused on the physical. Hatha, developed beginning in the 12th century, was innovative in that it had a goal of achieving divine consciousness while remaining in embodied existence, rather than achieving it as a means of salvation from the worldly realm.⁴⁵ Hatha drew from the Buddhist and Hindu *Tantras*, various sacred scriptures. Though most tantric practices were consistent with previous yogic practices, like visualization, mantra, and devotion, some esoteric practices posited that one could directly experience the divine, but only through

⁴³ Samuel, 2008.

⁴⁴ Jain, 2015.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

purposefully transgressing ethical standards. These practices included ritual sex with conventionally “forbidden women”, and thus tantra came to be associated with scandal and vice.⁴⁶

Due to Hatha’s association with the Tantra, and Tantra’s association with the erotic, ascetics distanced themselves from it. Thus, Vivekananda suspected that the largely Christian and restrained American public would react similarly to Indian ascetics. So, when he arrived at the conference, he avoided discussion of the physical aspects of yoga, and focused on transcendental meditation. Moreover, also in an effort to better suit American preferences, he presented yoga as an experiential practice, one which was best understood through doing, rather than a dogmatic religious practice, which he thought of as more in line with the modernism present in the U.S. Vivekananda went on to teach throughout the country, always toeing the line between appeasing conservative tastes with non-threatening rhetoric, while gently offering his own beliefs, noting that Americans tended to prefer “doing” over “being”, and reminding people that “you are not your body” and, more jarringly to American followers, “you are not your mind”.⁴⁷

It was almost a half century later when guru Tirumalai Krishnamacharya shifted the focus of yoga again back to the physical practice, ultimately resulting in what westerners today most commonly recognize as yoga. Hatha yoga, which by this point had lost its sordid reputation, was reframed as a fitness regimen, due to teachers like Krishnamacharya and S.K. Pattabhi Jois. Krishnamacharya constructed an aerobic system, in which practitioners moved through a sequence of repeated and connected movements. The renewed focus on hatha as a purely bodily practice represented a sharp break from older “bodily” yogic practices; the Tantric Hatha yogis

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

saw the body as an important, but not ultimate, vehicle for enlightenment. That is to say, physical posture practice was not central to any yoga practice prior to this one. Singleton writes that this break was possible because of the fitness culture which had taken hold in Western Europe and the United States, as exemplified by the popularity of military calisthenics, bodybuilders, and gymnasts, and the rising cultural importance of fitness centers like the YMCA.⁴⁸

Considered the “father of modern yoga”, Krishnamacharya had dozens of disciples, and many went on to continue to popularize yoga in the West. Actress Indra Devi, for example, learned from Krishnamacharya while spending time in Bombay as the wife of a diplomat, and went on to open a yoga studio in Hollywood in 1947. Devi had a number of celebrity clients, including Greta Garbo and Gloria Swanson, who helped to make the practice mainstream. These early studios helped to cement yoga’s place in the realm of the physical; advertisements for Devi’s yoga studio feature young, fit women posing in exercise clothes, consistent with western advertising of the day. Along with fitness culture, modern science also helped to establish and legitimize postural yoga; places like The Yoga Institute in Bombay used scientific discourse to explain the perceived fitness and health benefits, thus transforming it into something that is “modernized” and “medicalized” .⁴⁹ This version of yoga has continued in ascendancy until today, where yoga is decidedly mainstream.

Feigning Authenticity

Though it’s clear that modern yoga is not a result of a linear transmission of knowledge and technique, the studios I encountered presented it as such, and the students I spoke to largely perceived it that way. Some types of yoga credit specific teachers for either “bringing” that strain of yoga to the West, or for establishing the strain as a new way of practicing. This personal

⁴⁸ Singleton, 2006.

⁴⁹ Alter, Joseph. *Yoga in Modern India*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004.

connection, one which is understood as tying the practices of South Asia to the West, is one of the ways that studios obscure the heterogeneity of yoga.

For Kundalini, that personal connection is Yogi Bhajan, and Vitality Yoga, as a studio focused on the Kundalini strain, prominently featured photographs of Yogi Bhajan throughout the studio. In fact, a framed portrait sat on the floor next to the instructor during every class. According to the website of 3HO, the organization that Yogi Bhajan founded in the U.S., Yogi Bhajan “brought” Kundalini to the West in 1968. Kundalini, which is mentioned in the Vedic writings known as the *Upanishads* (written between 1,000 and 500 BCE), like all yoga, has changed a great deal since its first mention, when it referred to mainly a spiritual philosophy rather than a technical practice.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, Nina spoke of Kundalini as one of the most “pure” strains of yoga: “Because Kundalini was considered advanced practice for a long time, it was kept pretty much under wraps. So, when Yogi Bhajan brought it here, not much had changed from since its conception... It’s pretty pure”. Nina here, uses Yogi Bhajan as evidence of authenticity, and having the portrait of Yogi Bhajan in the studio during class contributed to this framing. When one student joked that it was “creepy” having “him watch us all the time”, Nina laughed, but responded, “It helps me feel a connection to the roots of the practice. It helps me feel gratitude...”. By using the word “roots”, Nina is insinuating that Yogi Bhajan acts as a sort of junction between the origins of Kundalini and the present-day studio, and by describing the practice as “pure”, Nina is presenting the practice as monolithic and static.

A second strategy for advancing claims of legitimacy is the use of Sanskrit. Since Sanskrit is an ancient language, no longer in use, and is the primary liturgical language of Hinduism, it has taken on a special association with spirituality and authenticity. During class,

⁵⁰ Scott, Mary. *The Kundalini Concept: Its Origin and Value*. Fremont, CA: Jain Publishing Company, 2007.

instructors would sometimes use Sanskrit words, most commonly *asana* and *pranayama*, as explained before, but also sometimes to refer to specific types of *asanas*, to talk about ethical values perceived as having roots in yoga, or to perform *mantras*. For instance, some postures would be referred to both in Sanskrit and English, like *trikonasana*, or “triangle pose”, and *shavasana*, “corpse pose”, while others solely in Sanskrit, like *chaturanga*, which in practice is a plank pose with bent elbows. During class, we’d often be told to engage our *mula bandhas*, or pelvic floors. Many exercises in Kundalini were done for the purposes of awakening our *prana*. Usually once per Kundalini class, we’d perform the *Kritan Kriya*, which involved continuously chanting the syllables “sa ta na ma”, a drawn out version of the phrase *sat nam*, which translates to “true identity”.

When questioned on this, Nina referred to the perceived healing properties of sound; “So, different words have different vibrations from our vocal cords. And according to the ancients, there are certain vibrations which are good for our health and mental wellbeing”. During an interview with another teacher, I asked again about the significance of using Sanskrit words in class. She explained in a similar way: “So, I open and close most of my classes with the mantra ‘om’, and a lot of teachers do this. Basically, the sound vibrates at 432 hertz, which is the same vibration as the universe, as what’s found in nature. So by changing it we are physically tuning in to nature and the universe”. These explanations give the sense of an inherent value in the Sanskrit language; by tying the words to something perceived as scientific or “natural” (sound waves), the words are universalized. If the vibrations which result in speaking certain words are beneficial for human health in general, the words take on meaning beyond just their literal translation, and thus can be valued by those besides people who speak Sanskrit, and still retain their authenticity as having come from “the ancients”.

Unity advertises its teaching program as “rigorous” through detailing the thorough instruction in Sanskrit that teachers-in-training receive there. Instructors and dedicated students alike leveraged varying levels of Sanskrit knowledge as evidence of their devotion and competence in yoga. For example, Sandy proudly spoke of her time in India with a well-known Hatha guru, “When I got there I didn’t speak a word of the language. But I was pretty immersed, and I got close to fluent. That’s helped me a lot in my development because so many texts have never been translated, but I’m still able to read them and incorporate them into my practice for myself and my students”. Here, Sandy links “development” and the ability to read untranslated texts; thus, understanding the language is a way of getting more direct access to the unadulterated wisdom of yoga. It’s clear that language is seen as an important connection to the perceived authentic yoga, and yoga practitioners use language as a way of showing their connection and dedication to the “authentic”.

Lastly, even where instructors accepted that parts of modern yoga could not be legitimately traced back to pre-modern systems, they argued that the ethical meaning of the techniques could. In some cases, instructors were aware that certain sequences of movements were modern inventions, but insisted that they were created in the same vein, and with the same goals in mind. One instructor I interviewed, Veronica, noted, “No, not all of the postures we use today were practiced in India thousands of years ago. That’s not how any system works- things always change over time. But the philosophy has stayed stable. People then wanted calm, clarity, and to generally be their best selves”. It is difficult to place an overarching system of morality on premodern yoga systems because of their heterogeneity, and because they were used in a range of objectives, ranging from the embodied to the transcendental. However, it’s clear that the majority of these practices were used to *destabilize* consciousness through, as Vivekananda put it

in the early 20th century, revealing the “myth of the self”.⁵¹ Whether the goal was an experience of the divine in this world, or a transcendental escape from karmic rebirth, the practices almost always involved blurring the boundaries between one’s self and the world, according to a belief in ultimate “oneness”. This kind of experience, which today is sometimes referred to as “ego death”⁵², often requires direct confrontation with one’s mortality, and thus certainly does not usually encourage “calm”. Furthermore, the word *yoga* means “yoke”, and it is often used by instructors to refer to a “yoke”, or joining, of mind and body. This, too, is used as evidence that yoga retains its metaphorical meaning in modern times. However, to premodern practitioners, it was used to refer to a “yoke” between the individual and the universal consciousness, and thus be a mechanism for dissolving the idea of self- not strengthening its stability and wellness.

Balancing the Desire for, and Fear of, the “Foreign”

So why does modern yoga cling so tightly to the myth of authenticity, when it is clear that in many ways, it is a system unique to its western context? One point of view is that as consumerism became increasingly important throughout the 20th century, and thus, consumer desire did as well, consumer desire for foreignness has presented itself in the popularity of things considered “foreign”, like yoga. In marketing, this is called the “foreignness effect”⁵³, and for Western consumers, it has been linked to self-esteem. Foreign objects and practices can be considered markers of good taste, knowledge and appreciation of other cultures, and are associated with membership in elite groups. Varenne’s 1976 study of yoga in France shows us that the desire for “foreignness”, and especially foreign religious practices, has existed for some

⁵¹ Jain, 2015.

⁵² Graham, Dogo. *Kill Your Self: Life After Ego: A guide to Zen Buddhist Practice in Real Life*. Houston: River and Stone Press, 2011.

⁵³ Malhotra, Naresh. *Review of Marketing Research*. Bingley, U.K.: Emerald Group Publishing, 2013.

time now, and it's not particular to the U.S.⁵⁴ Even earlier, in an essay written between 1904 and 1918, Victor Segalen attempts an explanation of the mechanism for the appeal of the exotic, which he hoped to situate between the 18th century propensity for romanticizing all that was foreign, and what he perceived as his contemporaries' tendency to reduce the exotic to "colonial". He, perhaps too optimistically, posited a mechanism of appreciation for the aesthetics and ontology of the foreign, writing, "Exoticism's power is nothing other than the ability to conceive otherwise".⁵⁵

In some ways, Vivekananda himself helped to formulate yoga as a "foreign" practice, and some have been critical of this, arguing that it was to the detriment of the Indian people. Richard King, for instance, writes,

"In Vivekananda's hands, Orientalist notions of India as 'other worldly' and 'mystical' were embraced and praised as India's special gift to humankind. Thus the very discourse that succeeded in alienating, subordinating, and controlling India was used by Vivekananda....".⁵⁶

Recognizing a desire for authenticity, Vivekananda, at times, put forward the same notion of purity and linear transmission that I experienced in modern-day yoga classes. This is illustrated by some of his own words, such as "From the time it was discovered, more than four thousand years ago, yoga was perfectly delineated, formulated, and preached in India".⁵⁷ By describing the roots of yoga as it having been "discovered", Vivekananda is presenting an image of something other-worldly, originating as a complete and full discipline, rather than a man-made one, worked on and changed over thousands of years.

⁵⁴ Varenne, Jean. *Yoga and the Hindu Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976

⁵⁵ Segalen, Victor. "Essay on Exoticism". Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002 [1918].

⁵⁶ King, Richard. *Indian Philosophy: An Introduction to Hindu and Buddhist Thought*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1999.

⁵⁷ Jain, 2015.

On the other hand, Vivekananda recognized that while the allure of the foreign was in some ways a strength for yoga, affection for it would only go so far. Western reactions to aspects of foreign cultures have sometimes been those of fear and repugnance, often times facilitated by racism and colonialism. From the British anti-Indian hysteria triggered by the Indian Rebellion of 1857, to the way India is still exoticized and stereotyped in popular media today,⁵⁸ advocates of yoga have had to, and will continue to face images of India and its practices as “backward” and possibly dangerous. Students of modern-day yoga continue to fall into exoticizing tendencies; some techniques, particularly those used at Vitality, were seen as “weird”, in the words of one student. Similarly, Vivekananda observed how the body-centric Tantric rituals were stereotyped in the West as unseemly, and instead emphasized the pieces of yoga which fit more closely with western ideals, like individuality and productivity. In fact, Vivekananda actually censored his own *guru*, Ramakrishna, by selectively omitting his engagement with hatha yoga, and especially tantra.⁵⁹ By presenting only decontextualized fragments of yoga, while simultaneously claiming purity in his teachings, he began to “reconstruct modern yoga systems in ways that universalized them by attributing to them benefits that were removed from specific Indian nationalist and mystical contexts and instead reflected the self-developmental desires that dominated consumer culture”.⁶⁰ Thus, yoga was changed in order to better appeal to westerners, but that change was obscured in the discourse used by early teachers like Vivekananda.

⁵⁸ Sexton, Jamie. “The Allure of Otherness: Transnational Cult Film Fandom and the Eroticist Assumption”. *Transnational Cinemas 1*: no. 1 (2017): 5-19.

⁵⁹ Kripal, Jeffrey. *Kali's Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

⁶⁰ Jain, 2012.

The Imperative of Widespread Appeal in a Commodified Landscape

During my time in the field, and through my interviews with instructors, I encountered evidence of both of these two competing perspectives; markers of authenticity were used to legitimate both instructors and studios, while practices considered too “out of the ordinary” were met with trepidation and sometimes repulsion. I contend that despite the tension between the two, the studios attempted to keep the “best of both worlds”, by retaining decontextualized markers of authenticity (such as using Sanskrit and maintaining a connection to Indian *gurus*) but presenting them in ways that were consistent with American norms and values. In this way, students were able to utilize wisdom they considered universal and “authentic”, but were not made to move very far away from their preconceived moral schema, and studios were able to reap the benefits of a perception of “foreignness” while avoiding many of its downsides.

This is a process that Altglas calls domestication⁶¹, and for Stark⁶², it’s vital to the success of all religious and semi-religious movements. These movements must be appealing to a wide array of people, but also must maintain a sense of mysticism or supernatural-ness in order to avoid the vulnerability of empirical testing. As Stark notes, joining a religious movement with roots in another culture *could* result in a loss of cultural capital; when individuals are socialized and educated in a certain way, they are investing their time in that way of living. Thus, fully accepting a religious philosophy that is inconsistent with one’s prior socialization will cause a high expenditure of cultural capital. Therefore, successful foreign movements go through a process of change in order to make them more compatible with domestic norms.

⁶¹ Altglas, Veronique. *From Yoga to Kabbalah: Religious Exoticism and the Logics of Bricolage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

⁶² Stark, R. “Why Religious Movements Succeed or Fail: A Revised General Model”. *Journal of Contemporary Religions* 11, no. 2 (1996): 133-146.

Commodification and the Case of Bikram Choudhury's Attempted Copyright

“Success” in the case of yoga studios often is determined by their ability, or lack thereof, to make profit, and profitability requires a certain degree of widespread appeal. Jain notes that some early proponents of yoga and Eastern philosophies, whom she refers to as “entrepreneurial godmen”, paved the way for mass marketers in the present.⁶³ These gurus provided criticism of established religion at a time where religious disillusionment was widespread (notably, during the counter-cultural movement of the 1960’s; the Beatles were one high-profile group of adherents). At other times, they adjusted to a decreased tolerance for cultural critique in the American psyche and appropriated existing practices, like stretching and aerobic routines.

Bikram Choudhury’s 2015 attempt to copyright 26 yoga poses and breathing exercises illustrates that this market logic has continued to inform the activity of yoga studios and instructors. Choudhury, who developed the popular Bikram yoga by compiling existing Hatha techniques, and popularizing the practice of moving through the 26 poses in a heated room, filed a complaint against a previous colleague, Mark Drost, for instructing students in the series popularized by Choudhury. This signals two things: first, popular practices like Bikram are extremely profitable, to the point where Choudhury felt he was missing out on substantial financial reward by not being the single purveyor of Bikram Yoga. Second, at least some *gurus*, who often market themselves as spiritual and selfless, are indeed concerned with worldly matters of status and wealth. Though ultimately, the courts sided with Drost, on the grounds that copyright is limited to original expression, and does not extend to systems, methods, or processes, the attempt signals the extent to which yogic practices have been commodified.

⁶³ Jain, 2015.

Conclusion

Yoga, as a for-profit industry, must appeal to a wide audience, and individual studios have to contend with competing pressures: the desire for, and fear of, “foreignness”, in order to reach that goal. Thus, yoga studios project an image of authenticity through citing personal connections, using the Sanskrit language, and obscuring the historical purposes of certain techniques, though the “purity” of yoga is a myth. Simultaneously, they decontextualize techniques, often through a misinterpretation of historical texts, in order to avoid stepping too far out of the norm. In the following chapter, I will discuss more deeply exactly what yoga has been re-contextualized with, exploring the moral schema which determines how yoga is appropriated.

The Psychologization of Yoga

As I discussed in the previous chapter, modern yoga is a conglomeration of decontextualized bits of premodern yoga systems, with additional elements (mainly those focusing on the physical) which were added in the West. As such, it has been appropriated by practitioners in the West hoping to gain something from the “authentic” wisdom promised from a practice perceived as Eastern and ancient, without moving too far away from preexisting values and norms. As yoga was disembedded from its perceived tantric, pleasure-centered physical aspects, and re-embedded into an ascetic, fitness-focused physical culture, I argue that it not only took on new physical meanings, but mental ones as well. In this chapter, I’d like to take a closer look at how yogic techniques practiced today have been adapted to and formed around American norms and values. Specifically, building on the work of theorists like Nikolas Rose⁶⁴ and Heidi Rimke⁶⁵, I argue that yoga has been “psychologized”, and thus functions as a means of self-improvement and emotional control rather than transcendence.

De Vos defines psychologization as the process of “Psychological vocabulary and psychological explanatory schemes entering fields which are supposed not to belong to the traditional theoretical and practical terrains of psychology”.⁶⁶ Yoga, having roots in a multitude of spiritual practices which are antithetical to empiricism, is not the most obvious space for conceptualizing a person as rational, measurable, and autonomous. In fact, most studies of yoga perceive it as precisely the opposite of this kind of space- one where people seek mysticism and transcendence to avoid the rationality and coldness of everyday life.⁶⁷ However, this is called

⁶⁴ Rose, 1996.

⁶⁵ Rimke, 2000.

⁶⁶ De Vos, 2013.

⁶⁷ Bar, 2012.

into question if one accepts my earlier claim that yoga has been adjusted to better fit within the logical framework of the West. I hope to situate the techniques of yoga within the therapeutic emotional landscape, and illustrate the ways in which therapeutic culture presents itself within those techniques.

Self-Interpretation

A key factor in the therapeutic ethos is the epistemology of self: in order to work on, and improve the self, it's important to locate and study one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. As Giddens notes, the self becomes a "reflexive" project, which depends on continuous self-monitoring.⁶⁸ Information about the self has been increasingly measured and tracked throughout the past century, with technology, like wristwatches which measure and track a person's biometric data, and gene testing which is able to provide information on ancestry and health, ever-improving. The studios I attended both reflected the predominance of this practice, and instructed students to become better at it. As Giddens notes, awareness, and especially body awareness, though present in some versions of early yoga, was generally practiced as a means of dissolving the ego, while here, I contend, the practice works to construct a stable, differentiated self.⁶⁹

It is striking how often we were encouraged to just "sit" or "be" with our emotions during class. In almost every one I attended, no matter what version of yoga we were practicing, during times of quiet introspection the teacher would say something along the lines of, "Whatever comes up, just sit with it, even though it may be uncomfortable". Throughout the class, we would be asked to "check in with ourselves" multiple times, and often encouraged to see how we felt before and after doing an exercise. This held true for the physical aspects of the process as well;

⁶⁸ Giddens, 1991.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

we were encouraged to “observe” our breathing, feel for spots of tension within our bodies, and take note of any physical discomfort.

Shavasana, also known as “corpse pose”, is how most yoga classes are closed. The pose involves lying flat on the ground, with eyes closed, and instructors often will turn off any lights or music in order to reduce distractions. In this way, the practice encourages quiet introspection. Instructors also linked these techniques to positive outcomes; Nina, for example, told me that people becoming “conscious of themselves” leads them to be more “fully functional and complete”. Four of the teachers I interviewed noted how often they practiced, and how their practices of self-monitoring were built in to their daily routines. In one session, Sandy told us to “devote thirty minutes a day to checking in with yourself. You will be really surprised at what you find”.

We were also encouraged to “check in” with ourselves outside the classroom, by employing “mindfulness”. Mindfulness has taken off both within and outside of yoga studios, as a largely secular practice of awareness. The use of the word mindfulness, which began to slowly creep up during the 1960’s hippie movement, and skyrocketed starting in the mid-1990’s⁷⁰, has become popular with wide-ranging groups: business executives, as a way of increasing productivity and decreasing burnout⁷¹, school teachers and administrators as a way of increasing focus and academic achievement⁷², and by prison staff for contributing to “rehabilitation” of

⁷⁰ Google Books Ngram Viewer. “Search for ‘Mindfulness’”. Accessed December 2, 2018. https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=mindfulness&year_start=1800&year_end=2018&corpus=15&smoothing=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2Cmindfulness%3B%2C0

⁷¹ Butcher, Jim. “Mindfulness as a Management Technique Goes Back to at Least the 1970s”. *Harvard Business Review*. Last modified May 8, 2018. <https://hbr.org/2018/05/mindfulness-as-a-management-technique-goes-back-to-at-least-the-1970s>

⁷² Alton, Nancy Schatz. “How 3 Local Schools Are Using Mindfulness”. *Parent Map*. September 28, 2017. <https://www.parentmap.com/article/mindfulness-programs-washington-state-schools>

incarcerated people.⁷³ Mindfulness, according to Sarah, who regularly teaches mindfulness courses, is a way of achieving a meditative state throughout normal daily activities, “It’s a way of bringing those feelings that come with meditation- peace, tranquility, and clarity- to the rest of daily life. It’s a means for training yourself to live completely in the moment, and so you make your best choices possible, because you’re aware of what you’re doing”. Notice that Sarah used making good “choices” as a justification for the practice; she is insinuating that mindfulness is about more than self-knowledge, but about the control over one’s self that can come with that self-knowledge.

Nina described the goal of her teaching practice in a similar way, and, tellingly, did so through the use of a psychologist, Viktor Frankel’s, words: “Between stimulus and response there is space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom”. After quoting him, she told me, “It gave me a choice... I often, early on, spent a lot of my time feeling victimized by my circumstances... And not taking responsibility for things”. Though she doesn’t use the word “mindfulness” directly, the meaning is the same. When a person is able to observe one’s reality (in Nina’s words, the “stimuli” which we are surrounded by) more fully, she is able to better control her response, or “choices”. By making the “truth” of the world and the self known, one becomes more responsible for them.

Though the yoga classes I studied focused mainly on cognitive techniques for “getting to know one’s self”, when speaking to fellow students I found that many combined their yogic techniques with other techniques commonly suggested by proponents of mindfulness, such as journaling. For instance, Aaliyah, a frequent student at Flow, found that she was able to “keep herself on track” with twice-daily “bullet-journaling” and twice-weekly yoga classes. A bullet-

⁷³ Prison Mindfulness Institute. “Projects”. Accessed November 14, 2018. <https://www.prisonmindfulness.org/projects/ri-doc/>

journal, which multiple students mentioned, is combined calendar-journal-to-do list, which is usually formatted by the individual user, so that it functions as a portable, convenient, and personalized way of keeping all of one's important information in one place. In the words of Aaliyah, "Putting it in writing just lets me track my progress better. Before, when I just kept everything in my head, it's so easy to forget: how many glasses of water *did* I drink last Thursday? I have no idea!" Indeed, many bullet-journals include "trackers" which allow users to mark off each day they completed a wanted habit; usually things like eating a certain servings of vegetables, drinking the recommended amount of water per day, exercise, and meditation, as well as daily moods. By tracking and writing down her habits, Aaliyah is, in effect, able to appraise her being, through the collection of long-term knowledge about herself, down to the minutiae of things like how much water she drank on a specific day. Though bullet-journaling was not specifically recommended by either of the studios I attended, it's a corollary practice than many yogis practice in addition to yoga, and provides a helpful illustration of the kind of self-knowledge many yogis aim for.

Self-Confession

Another important aspect of therapeutic culture confession. Foucault poses a link between the confessional techniques codified by the Christian church and the more recent development of divulging one's innermost thoughts to a psychoanalyst or therapist.⁷⁴ Both models are based on an assumption that through introspection and confession, one is able to get at their "true" self. That is, a person has an underlying, inherent nature which should be understood in order to live a fulfilling and happy life. While both Christian confessional and therapy sessions with psychologists require the presence of two parties, the confessor and either

⁷⁴ Foucault, 1984.

the priest or psychologist, subsequent theorists have applied Foucault's theories to self-confession, in which subjectivities are ontologically split between the rational, observing self and the innate, more primitive self⁷⁵ (evidence of this type of split is present in early psychology, including Freud's "id" and "ego"). In this case, the rational self works to uncover the deepest motivations and desires which may be partially hidden to the conscious, waking mind. In turn, this type of confession, again, leads to a more full understanding of the self.

While Hazledon points to techniques for self-confession promoted in self-help books, I observed that many yogis described their yoga experiences through the lens of self-confession. Kylie, a teacher who had been practicing yoga for years, said,

"Yoga helps me get to a place of stillness in my mind. During good sessions, I will realize that I have not had a thought in a while, for a few minutes, my mind has been completely empty. And, when I'm in that empty place, it's like my unconscious mind opens up. Things come to the surface that I haven't had time to notice while I'm busy with other things. I'll have these moments of clarity, I'll catch a glimpse of what's been hiding just under the surface".

This brings to mind the frequently cited iceberg metaphor for Freud's ego and id, while the superego and ego sit above the water, within the realm of the conscious, the id is underneath, with the authentic self hidden from view. By contending that one's every day, mundane, initial thoughts and feelings are not what they seem to be- but actually are interconnected with deeper, more authentic "truths", therapy culture encourages self-examination, as it is only with deep knowledge and close care that one may be able to "uncover" the deeper meaning.

Changing/Controlling Emotion

Since therapy is considered a treatment for mental ailment, a huge part of therapy culture is the importance of a therapeutic transformation. The purpose of getting to know the intricacies

⁷⁵ Hazledon, Rebecca. "Love Yourself: The Relationship of the Self with Itself in Popular Self-Help Texts". *Journal of Sociology* 39, no. 4 (2003): 413-428.

of one's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors is to ultimately change them to be closer to the ideal standards presented. In class, transformation was primarily focused on thought and emotion, while students reported changes in behavior outside of class as well. Every student and teacher I spoke to about why they practiced yoga offered explanations of a similar form: they were struggling with one or multiple aspects of their lives, decided to give yoga a try, and noticed an improvement. Some would argue that this narrative arc, one of progress and self-development, is a defining feature of our time⁷⁶, and depends upon tools for a transformation that allows the narrative to take shape.

This vision of progress occurs within a person, rather than externally, and thus the solutions for problems presented in class worked on changing one's outlook, or understanding of the problem, rather than attempting to alter external circumstances. I observed a striking example of this strategy in two students who were experiencing a common problem (financial troubles); one student had been coming regularly to yoga classes, for over seven years, while the other had just started a few months ago. Darren had a view that his distress should be dealt with from the inside out, and that it would ultimately contribute something positive to his life;

“Money has been tight lately, but I still make coming to class every week a priority, because it's important for me to be able to practice with a community, and Sandy's just a great teacher. I feel like you just need to be able to sort of ride the wave- everything in life comes in cycles... Recognizing that and being able to be okay and stay present through the low points has been really vital to my growth as a human being”.

Amanda, on the other hand, connected her distress to the wider sociopolitical system of the U.S.: “I just don't get why we keep giving tax breaks to the super rich. Like, all those people who voted for Trump, why? Unless you make over a hundred thousand dollars a year, how is he going to help you? They're tricked into thinking the immigrants are taking their jobs...”. Darren

⁷⁶ Giddens, 1991.

expressed his trouble as a normal part of life, and did not ascribe blame to anything in particular, while Amanda was concerned with the economic system in which she needed to function. Because I am arguing that therapy culture is indeed, a culture, and thus permeates many areas of life, it's impossible to say that Darren learned this way of looking at the world only through yoga. Nonetheless, yoga, as a focused, consistent practice could have had an effect on the difference between Darren and Amanda's responses.

Though Arlie Hochschild does not explicitly connect her theory of emotion work to psychologization, I find her distinctions between "feeling rules" and "framing rules", as well as the cognitive, bodily, and expressive aspects of emotion work helpful for conceptualizing the many techniques used in yoga for altering thoughts and emotions. For Hochschild, emotional life exists along two axes: feeling and framing. Distinct feeling rules exist for a majority of situations, and provide guidance for how one is "supposed" to feel. These rules generally are consistent with emotions considered "natural", for example, in many cultures there is sadness when a loved one passes away. However, the rules can be used to apply to situations which may be considered more ambiguous, and may differ cross-culturally. These rules dictate what one *ought* to feel, and thus if one does not feel that way, one uses emotional work to accomplish feeling that emotion. Framing rules, on the other hand, dictate how one reads a situation, and thus goes on to connect the situation with its designated feeling rules. Given one situation, two people from the same culture may offer a different set of feeling rules, depending on the interpretation of what is happening.⁷⁷

Hochschild offers the example of two mothers dropping their children off at day-care for the day and heading to work, who both feel guilty. One mom, a traditionalist, might read the

⁷⁷ Hochschild, Arlie Russell. "Emotion Work, Feeling Rules, and Social Structure". *American Journal of Sociology* 85, no. 3 (1979): 551-575.

situation as a neglect of her proper duties as a mother, and thus feel as though she ought to be feeling *more* guilty. Another, a feminist, may interpret her guilt as a reflection of sexist standards, and thus think she should be feeling *less* guilt. I argue that yogis use emotional, cognitive, and expressive strategies for altering emotion to more closely align with that dictated by “feeling rules”, while over time, students begin to act consistently with the “framing rules” provided in yogic spaces, which are largely consistent with those provided in therapy culture.⁷⁸

In the short-term, yogis used cognitive, bodily, and expressive strategies altering emotional experience in the present moment. Cognitive work occurs when there is an attempt to “change images, ideas, or thoughts in the service of changing the feelings associated with them”.⁷⁹ This was most evident when we engaged in visualization techniques, which require conjuring a mental images, usually with eyes closed. One common visualization technique is the practice of “loving-kindness meditation”. This technique borrows from *metta bhavana*, which comes from the Pali language, a Middle Indo-Aryan language used from the 5th-1st centuries BCE, and translates to “love cultivation”. Though according to Peter Harvey the practice is much different than how it would have been interpreted by native Pali speaker⁸⁰, the process as explained by Nina includes: first, visualizing someone you love, and sending kindness through repetitions of phrases like “may you be free from suffering”. Next, repeating the process with someone you feel neutral about (like a stranger you saw in the street recently), and then, finally, with someone you dislike, or someone who has wronged one in the past. Ultimately, the goal is to change the alter the experience of anger into an experience of love and kindness.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Harvey, Peter. *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values, and Issues*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Bodily techniques, those “trying to change somatic or other physical signs of emotion”, were extremely common; we engaged in increasing and decreasing breathing speeds, relaxing and tensing muscles, stretching out ligaments, and a variety of other techniques with the explicit goal of creating an emotional reaction. These practices included both metaphorical and scientific justifications. For example, one common exercise, called “tree pose”, or *vrkasana*, involved balancing on one foot, with one leg placed on the other’s calf or thigh, and the holding hands in a “prayer” position. Instructors would usually connect this pose to feelings of stability and strength, using metaphorical references to actual trees. During practice one morning, Katie told us to “Imagine your feet as roots... going deep into the earth. Your gaze is steady and strong, and you are deeply grounded”. Along with those sorts of explanations, teachers would sometimes refer to neuro-chemical processes which allowed for bodily positions to alter emotion. With rag doll position, which involves bending forward at the waist and releasing the head and arms, Nina told us, “bending forward and releasing the neck allows those muscles to relax. You release switches in your neck which trigger a drop in cortisol... and a relaxation response”.

Expressive emotion work, changing emotive gestures in order to change emotion, was less evident, but still did exist. In one instance, we were told to “stand tall” to combat feelings of unworthiness. In this case posture, commonly analyzed as a marker of status, was used to change the inner experience of status. The three strategies can and often do overlap, take, for example, “Smiling Buddha”. It involves sitting with one’s hands in a “mudra”- or a specific finger position- in this case, the index and middle fingers are extended while the ring and pinky fingers are curled down, in contact with the thumb. The physical position is considered quite important so that energy can flow properly through- this is bodily work. In fact, while meditating or doing most kriyas, it’s thought to be very important that one’s spine is aligned and one is sitting

straight up. There are various exercises aimed at getting a person into the right posture, such as gently swaying forwards and backwards, until the body lands in a natural, comfortable point in the middle. With the body in an upright, but comfortable position, the mind is able to stay alert, without being distracted by discomfort in the body. Meanwhile, one chants a mantra- “saa taa naa maa” (infinite, life, death, regeneration); the mantra is symbolic of the life/death cycle, and functions to take thoughts away from anything else. This is cognitive work. Finally, the eyes are gently closed and looking toward the third eye (the middle part of the forehead, just above the eyebrows, while the lips are curved slightly upward, in a smiling position); this is expressive work.

Framing Rules and the Construction of Emotional Difficulty

While I’ve illustrated the ways in which yoga is used to control or treat pre-existing emotional states, there is also something to be said for the constitutive power of yogic discourse in these same emotions. Some argue that psychology and its therapeutic offshoots, while presenting as a strategy for solving emotional difficulty, may actually create what it aims to solve through providing an expectation of certain emotional patterns.⁸¹ It’s possible that yoga, as appropriated through a therapeutic lens, may function in the same way. Bar, for example, finds that the participants in her study tended to feel more lonely, and articulate more problems in their lives, the longer they went to yoga.⁸² This is both because yogic discourse tends to draw sharp lines between the space inside the studio (safe, warm, loving), and the outside (harsh, cruel, dangerous), and because it simultaneously presents an idealized harmony and “oneness” which is impossible to achieve.

⁸¹ Young, 1980.

⁸² Bar, 2013.

Though I am skeptical that yoga creates only negative feelings in people (they continue to come to yoga because it's perceived as creating positive emotion), I certainly observed a reinterpretation of both positive and negative emotional states. Hochschild's framing rules are useful here: by presenting a distinct set of framing rules, yoga instructors affect not only emotion in the here and now, but alter the frameworks that are used to construct emotion in the long-term. In particular, I found that instructors' emphasis on "gratitude" had an effect on students' emotional frameworks. The importance of "gratitude" seemed to shrink the pool of situations in which it was all right to feel negative emotion. Take, for example, this snippet of a conversation between Nina and I: "At any moment, whenever I need it, I just remind myself: I am alive. I am breathing. I'm grateful". Nina is linking gratitude, a positive emotional state, with something that is constantly happening- being alive. Therefore, in any situation, no matter how bad, one is "still breathing", and therefore, should still be grateful.

The Conceptual Integration of Mental Health and Yoga

The evidence of psychologization that I've discussed thus far is mostly implicit; that is, the participants did not see these techniques as tied to therapy or psychology. However, at some points, participants did directly classify yoga as therapy, and perceived it as a treatment for "mental health" issues, which are usually left to specialized therapists. Ariana, for example, started yoga for the physical benefits (she was a gymnast in high school and was disappointed in the loss of flexibility she witnessed in subsequent years). However, she did not commit herself to yoga on a regular basis until she was living in New York City during September 11th, 2001, and its aftermath: "... I felt depression for the first time after 9/11 happened.... but the yoga, whenever I would go to practice yoga, I would feel way better, and more clear, and every one would cry in yoga class... I just thought 'Wow! I have to spread more yoga around the world'".

Ariana went on to teach, as some of her first clients, firefighters and first responders struggling with PTSD after working during 9/11.

Ariana's story is reflective of a broader movement towards a yoga teacher-as-therapist model. Though most yoga teachers still do not usually make statements on diagnosable mental health disorders, the practice is becoming more common. Therapists have begun to recommend yoga as part of a patients' treatment plan⁸³, and many prominent psychologists, such as Kelly McGonigal of Stanford, are also certified as yoga teachers. Moreover, there are institutes, such as Yoga Rising based in Boston, which exist specifically for giving mental health professionals certifications in yoga.

Conclusion

My work suggests that yoga is better understood as constituted by, rather than a backlash to, psychologization and its individualizing tendencies. By teaching yogis how to more efficiently monitor themselves, investigate themselves, and control their emotional lives, yoga functions similarly to other therapeutic practices. However, yoga has not faced the same kind of scrutiny as, say, self-help, because it is not usually perceived as a site where psychologization has taken place. Next, I will examine the ways in which the psychologization of yoga places the locus of discipline on the individual, and calls narratives of religious bricolage and detraditionalization into question.

⁸³ Van Pelt, Jennifer. "Integrating Yoga and Meditation with Anxiety Treatment". *Social Work Today* 13, no. 3 (2013): 28.

Yoga as a Technology of the Self

In 1979, Thomas Luckmann was the first to apply the concept of “bricolage” to religious life, noting the loss of social control, and subsequent privatization of, religion, inserted a dimension of choice into the matter of what one’s religion would be.⁸⁴ New age religions, and fragmentary practices of “spirituality” started to color the religious landscape, as individuals were able to choose (often decontextualized) bits and pieces of religious practices which suited their needs best. Subsequently, other have argued that this same culture of consumption has spread to other spheres of life not traditionally associated with the market- and due to the heterogeneity of what is available, people often end up with “bricolage” lifestyles; different aspects of one’s life may have roots in varying, and sometimes competing, worldviews.⁸⁵

Many sociologists of religion and modernity have taken this imperative of choice to argue that, as Luckmann does, “anything goes”. For instance, Heelas says that “much of the new age movement is beyond tradition, beyond established or codified ethicality, indeed beyond belief”.⁸⁶ However, what I observed during my time in the field was not that anything goes; rather, many aspects of individual’s stories were strikingly consistent in form and moral meanings. I contend that yoga is functioning as one part of a larger project of individualization and responsabilization in a neoliberal scheme of governance. Care for one’s own physical and mental wellbeing has increasingly become the responsibility of one’s self, and this logic was reflected in the yoga classes I studied. However, I do not agree that this signals the end of all

⁸⁴ Luckmann, Thomas. “The Structural Conditions of Religious Consciousness in Modern Societies”. *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 6 (1979): 121-137.

⁸⁵ Levi-Strauss, Claude. *The Savage Mind*. Paris: Librarie Plon, 1962.

⁸⁶ Heelas, Paul. *The New Age Movement*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1996.

tradition and order, or a liberation from social constraints; while religion, family, and even nationality do not play the same role in structuring people's lives as they once did, the psychologization of social life has introduced quite stable frameworks. While personal choice, based on market logic does play a large part in yogi's lives, individuals make choices within a moral landscape of self-fulfillment, and with the presumed goal of moving towards ideal selves.

Detraditionalization

When yoga and other "alternative" practices began to grow in popularity, particularly after the 1960's, scholars of religion seemed to be surprised by the sheer number of them, and the variety of cultures that they came from. Peter Lemesurier speaks of "an extraordinary mish-mash of ideas, a positive ferment of beliefs having little obvious connection with each other".⁸⁷ Similarly, Lowell Streiker refers to them as a "hodge-podge"⁸⁸, and Rosalind Hackett notes that they are "very eclectic".⁸⁹ Peter Berger offers an explanation: he links the "counter-culture" to Weber's "iron cage"⁹⁰, arguing that it provides a liberation from the controlling forces of more mainstream institutions.⁹¹ Following the same line of thought, Gehlen posits that institutions, in modern times, have ceased to be the "'home' of the self".⁹²

Many of these arguments converge on a single point: society has been drained of many of its traditions. "What to do? How to act? Who to be?" These are focal questions for everyone living in circumstances of late modernity..."⁹³, here Giddens illustrates a crucial piece of the

⁸⁷ Lemesurier, Peter. *This New Age Business: The Story of the Ancient and Continuing Quest to Bring Down Heaven on Earth*. Forres, Scotland: The Findhorn Press, 1990.

⁸⁸ Streiker, Lowell. *New Age Comes to Main Street*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990.

⁸⁹ Hackett, Rosalind. "The Spiritual Sciences in Africa". *Religion Today* 3, no. 2 (1986): 8-9.

⁹⁰ Weber, Max. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010 [1905].

⁹¹ Berger, Peter. "Some General Observations on the Problem of Work". In Peter Berger (ed.) *The Human Shape of Work*. New York, NY: Macmillan, 211-241.

⁹² Gehlen, Arnold. *Man in the Age of Technology*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1980.

⁹³ Giddens, 1991.

detraditionalization argument- that of individual choice. And while I agree that individual choice is indeed emphasized through therapy culture, his argument obscures the landscape in which individuals must choose, as well as the consistency among choices made.

Moral Meanings of Health and Market Logic in Self-Care

One obvious structure which constrains individual choice is the economy. Yoga is a for-profit industry, and yoga classes are expensive. Therefore, it's worth looking at how the economic system, and its underlying logics, affect yogis' decisions. At Vitality Yoga, a walk-in class cost \$25, and at Unity, \$16. Because Yoga is a weekly, and sometimes multi-weekly habit for many, yoga classes may well cost over \$100 per month. The popularity of yoga despite its cost is telling, especially since there are thousands of free resources online which help people to practice yoga at home. As I came to find out, many practitioners think of yoga as an "investment in their health", and moreover, the instructors branded it that way. One young man, Eric, told me: "Yeah, it's kind of a lot of money, but it's worth it. I'd rather invest in my health and wellbeing than in a fancy car or some other material thing that won't do anything to better me". Teachers would often congratulate students for making the "right choice" by choosing to "show up for yourself tonight". Nina once explained this idea succinctly: "you'll never regret coming to yoga. You might regret staying on your couch all night, but you won't regret coming here".

The wellness field, as we know it today, has more or less always been commodified; after all, the term refers to an active pursuit of health through choice, one which goes beyond the absence of illness through the addition of wellness technologies and practices. However, a tangential field, medicine, has not. Its commodification in tandem with wellness, and in fact, before the emergence of wellness, was crucial in preparing individuals to think of health as

something that can be bought and sold.⁹⁴ After President Nixon signed into law the Health Maintenance Organization Act of 1973, which allowed insurance agencies, clinics and hospitals to begin functioning as for-profit entities, the U.S. healthcare system transformed into one of the most market-oriented in the world. Presently, “consumer” is often used interchangeably with “patient”⁹⁵, and phrases like “your wealth is your health” are used abundantly.

In consumer culture, one uses market choice to construct a “lifestyle”, which, as described by Giddens, is the “set of practices which an individual embraces, not only because such practices fulfill utilitarian needs, but because they give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity”.⁹⁶ Moreover, one’s lifestyle choices have an effect on her social standing. Certain lifestyle choices- to exercise, eat healthily, and meditate, for example, are morally coded as good, and as evidence of moral virtue. Others, like drinking excessively, smoking cigarettes, and watching loads of television, are coded as bad, and as evidence of a lack of moral virtue, laziness, or gluttony. For example, a 2010 content analysis of news reports found that the media predominantly blames obesity on bad individual choices and emphasize individual-level solutions.⁹⁷ Moreover, many lifestyle choices are linked to consumption of goods and services.⁹⁸ To exercise, one buys a gym membership, and to watch TV, one purchases a Netflix subscription. Thus, in the modern era, what one consumes is not only reflective of who one is, but actually is a constitutive piece of identity formation. This framing is helpful in

⁹⁴ Christiansen, Isaac. “Commodification of Healthcare and Its Consequences”. *World Review of Political Economy* 8, no. 1 (2017): 82-103.

⁹⁵ Goldstein, Melissa and Daniel Bowers. “The Patient as Consumer: Empowerment or Commodification?” *Journal of Law, Medicine, and Ethics* 43, no. 1 (2015): 162-165.

⁹⁶ Giddens, 1991.

⁹⁷ Saguy, Abigail and Kjerstin Gruys. “Morality and Health: News Media Constructions of Overweight and Eating Disorders”. *Social Problems* 57, no.2 (2010): 231-250.

⁹⁸ Baudrillard, Jean. *Jean Baudrillard. Selected writings*. Cambridge: Stanford University Press, 1988.

understanding why yogis are willing to spend large sums on a practice so clearly not necessary for material survival.

Though one's monetary worth, and thus spending habits, have long been linked to social status, large segments of society having enough disposable income to form varying identities through consumption is a recent development.⁹⁹ Thus, many have linked the relatively new consumer culture to troubling social developments: Bauman contends that new anxiety and insecurity have been created by this consumer freedom, and in fact, the role of advertising is to assuage some of the self-doubt which accompanies choice. The ability to choose means that one can make the wrong, irrational choice, and thus face social disapproval.¹⁰⁰ Additionally, Foucault argues that late capitalism, and the culture of consumption which it entails, is linked to the practice of neoliberal responsabilization governance. The state has moved away from governing through force and coercion, and the welfare state has been reduced; these developments have led to some theorists positing a retreat of the state, arguing that government simply plays a lesser role in individual lives than it did in the past. However, for Foucault, these developments actually led to an expansion of the state: it not only retained its traditional functions, but also expanded into other domains. This was caused by a diversification in the technologies used by the state; specifically, "technologies of the self", techniques which encourage individuals to act in accordance with the best interest of the state, but which also are made to feel "natural" and thus from coming from within one's self, are of critical importance. Thomas Lemke, who translated many of Foucault's lectures, gives a concise explanation, "The strategy of rendering individual subjects 'responsible'... entails shifting the responsibility for social risks such as

⁹⁹ Federal Reserve Bank of Saint Louis. "Real Median Household Income in the United States". Accessed October 15, 2018. <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/MEHOINUSA672N>

¹⁰⁰ Bauman, Zygmunt. *Liquid Modernity*. New York, NY: Polity Books, 2000.

illness, unemployment, poverty, etc., and for life in society into the domain for which the individual is responsible and transforming it into a problem of ‘self-care’”.¹⁰¹

The beliefs of yogis like Eric, who thought of yoga as a literal investment in his health, and many of his fellow yogis are indicative of an internalized logic of responsabilization. Conceptualizing health in terms of monetary value, as neoliberalism encourages one to do, leads to a conception of health as something that is rational and controllable, can be worked for and invested in. In some aspects, individuals do indeed have the ability to improve their health outcomes; exercising, eating well, and abstaining from harmful activities like drinking and smoking do, statistically, lower risk of illness and death. However, understanding health in terms of the market, which is supposed to be *purely* rational, obscures out the cosmic unknowability of an individual health outcome. While public health initiatives often improve outcomes on the large scale, there is no guarantee that an individual’s efforts to maintain health will not be cut short by a tragic accident, something that there was no way to know or prevent from happening. Moreover, genetics play a role in many diseases, and individuals certainly are not (yet) able to control their genetic material. Existing in the world is an inherently risky business, and the application of market logic to health gives individuals a false sense of control over the world and wrongly places the blame of a bad outcome on an individual.

Kylie, a yoga teacher and Ayurvedic medicine provider, emphasized the importance of “empowerment” in both her medical and yoga practices. She explained that many of her clients come to see her because they are fed up with the hierarchical nature of traditional medicine, and in contrast, Kylie worked as more of a collaborator than an authority figure: “...people like that they become their own doctor. I have them look at their bowel movements, their temperature,

¹⁰¹ Lemke, Thomas. “‘The Birth of Bio-politics’: Michel Foucault’s Lecture at the College de France on Neo-liberal Governmentality”. *Economy and Society* 30, no.2 (2001): 190-207.

their hunger... I have them look at their whole life... and just put everything together as a package so they can start being empowered to treat themselves". Though Kylie was eager to provide suggestions and advice to her clients, she was clear that ultimately, the success or failure of the treatment was in their hands, "A lot of people do want a quick fix. They just want to take a pill. But the thing is that's not gonna help them. I would say that's my biggest frustration- giving them all these tools and then people not following through". Kylie, by encouraging "empowerment" was responsabilizing her patients, since she encouraged them to "treat themselves".

As Cruikshank puts it, power constitutes, but also constrains, one's subjectivity.¹⁰² Kylie takes it for granted that her clients would want to take their health into their own hands, and that they would desire a state called "health" in the first place. There is nothing in evolutionary psychology to show an inherent human desire to take the long view when it comes to health, nothing to encourage making healthy (abstemious) decisions. In fact, if one accepts that humans are pre-wired for anything at all, it is pleasure in the short-term and instant gratification.¹⁰³ Cruikshank, like Foucault, believes that the distinguishing factor of the modern state is that governing techniques work by reforming both society and the individual by harmonizing their interests, indirectly. There are obvious advantages for the state when it comes to having a healthy citizenry; for one, healthcare is extremely expensive. The U.S. government pays directly for the healthcare of certain segments of the population (through Medicaid and Medicare), and so reducing the number rates at which these individuals visit the doctor and the emergency room is financially beneficial. Moreover, healthy citizens are synonymous with productive citizens,

¹⁰² Rimke, 2000.

¹⁰³ Feldman, David. "The Brain's Fixation on the Short Term is Hurting Politics". *Psychology Today*. April 11, 2017. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/supersurvivors/201704/the-brains-fixation-the-short-term-is-hurting-politics>

which are vital in keeping the economy strong and producing innovation which gives an edge over other countries.

For Cruikshank, psychologization, through technologies like “self-help”, is the mechanism through which the individual’s interests are aligned with the state’s. Nikolas Rose, has a similar view, though he refers to the process more broadly, as “psy”. While Cruikshank takes a Weberian view, by foregrounding the transition from Christian charity to empowerment techniques, and Rose emphasizes the importance of the “disciplinization” of psychology and psychiatry, both agree that when psychology began to “infuse and even to dominate other ways of forming, organizing, disseminating, and implementing truths about persons”¹⁰⁴, it allowed for greater discipline at the level of the individual. As I discussed in my last chapter, it’s clear that psychologization has affected yogic discourse and technique in the U.S. Now, I’d like to examine the ways that yogic training goes on to influence yogi’s lives outside the studio, as well. Before I go on, it is important to note that psychologization does not imply a single model of the person, but is constantly being contested.¹⁰⁵ Therefore, my observations simply reflect what is paradigmatic of psychology in this specific time and place.

Therapeutic Frameworks and Discipline

While Giddens and Luckmann’s coupling of individualization and detraditionalization would likely lead to the view that Eric and Kylie’s perception of health as something that can be invested in, through choices of the consumer, is evidence of both developments, I contend that yogis are able to be individualized, while not detraditionalized. This is because though yogis framed their behaviors as choices, they occurred along far too consistent lines to have happened within a social vacuum. In order to demonstrate this consistency, I will describe two particularly

¹⁰⁴ Rose, 1996.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

salient patterns I observed: first, the primacy of the self and self-esteem as a way of problem-solving, and second, the imperative of personal growth, which seemed to be a goal of almost every yogi. While these two ideas were viewed as natural desires, coming from within the practitioners, it's clear that they were shaped, to some extent, by therapy culture. Moreover, because these two tenets tend to craft people into autonomous and harmonious individuals, it is largely through them that yoga acts as a technology of the self.

First, though it may seem counterproductive in an argument *against* detraditionalization, I want to describe the intensity at which, yogic practices acted upon, and enhanced, the primacy of the self. By focusing on the agency of the self, yoga actually teaches a standardized way of conceptualizing and solving problems. Moreover, these lessons are reflected in the dominant culture of self-help and self-realization.

One day in the studio, as I was helping tidy up after class, an instructor at Vitality was showing me pictures of her nieces and nephews on her cellphone. Before she opened the photo, I noticed her screensaver, which read "happiness comes from within". I was intrigued by the saying, and asked her why she chose that one to be her screensaver.

"I mean, to me, that's the whole reason for my practice. I really believe that a person living a good or bad life has everything to do with mindset; it's all relative. Like, someone who living in extreme poverty and has little will be made happy by things that we take for granted here. Privileged people like us can get upset over the smallest things-not being able to afford a new iphone or whatever. So external events don't determine your thoughts or your mood... but how you perceive them does".

Even yoga teachers, ostensibly a second party involved in the therapeutic process, did not think of themselves as directly affecting change in their students. Instead, they spoke of providing "tools", or "strategies", so that students could ultimately do the work themselves.

Subjectivism, reflected in this conversation and many others had at the studio, can, for some, be

alienating. If the only truth in life is one's own mental activity, it's hard to know how closely related one's thoughts and feelings are to loved ones. However, it also provides a direct and simple way of problem-solving: changing one's perceptions. In fact, this is consistent with dominant thinking in the world of clinical psychology and psychiatry, as well; Otero notes that post-psychoanalytic theories almost always rest on the assumption that the solution to life's problems can be found in a change in attitudes.¹⁰⁶ As I posited in the previous chapter, yoga studios offer both feeling rules and framing rules- subjectivism is one framing rule which can affect yogis' lives beyond the walls of the studio.

Therapy culture emphasizes changing one's perceptions as a problem-solving tool, and a strategy for changing perceptions that we often discussed in class was increasing self-esteem. "When you love yourself, you stop understanding unfortunate situations as your fault. When you are confident with yourself and your actions, you are able to see clearly that when someone is unkind to you, it's on them, not you", Nina said during an class opening, "...today I want you to focus on self-love". Interestingly, while the psychological sciences often use the word "self-esteem" directly, yoga instructors tended to prefer "self-love". Sometimes, self-love was spoken about in relation to "ahisma", which is one of the five moral constraints which make up the Yamas, or the first limb of the eight-limbed yogic path. Ahisma most directly translates to non-violence, and in ancient texts is usually taken to mean abstaining from violence against others, such as in the instruction of abstention from war,¹⁰⁷ and even against animals, as evidenced by the prevalence of vegetarianism in some strains of Hinduism and Buddhism.

¹⁰⁶ Otero, S. "Fearing Our Mothers: An Overview of the Psychoanalytic Theories Concerning the Vagina Dentat Motif F547.1.1". *American Journal of Psychology* 56, no. 3 (1996): 269-288.

¹⁰⁷ Balkaran, Raj, and Walter Dorn. "Violence in the Valmiki Ramayana: Just War Criteria in an Ancient Indian Epic" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 3 (2013): 659-690.

However, the instructors I spoke to often related ahimsa to lack of violence towards one's self. Violence, in this case, was considered persistent, critical thoughts directed at one's self.

Sandy opened one Wednesday morning vinyasa class by posing a question to the class: "When was the last time you gave yourself a compliment?". Slightly taken aback, and probably weary due to the 8 am start time, the class remained quiet.

"Seriously, think about it. You know, we're so used to negative self talk- 'I've gained weight, I'm procrastinating my work, I'm behaving unkindly'", but how often do we nourish ourselves with positive self-talk? Today I want to focus on ahimsa, non-violence, on cultivating positive self-talk towards ourselves, and we will begin with a mantra: 'I believe in my skills and abilities. I am enough'".

We collectively spoke the mantra a few times, and then went into a usual vinyasa class, stopping here and there for Sondra to tie in the theme to the movements. In child's pose, for example, a movement which involves kneeling and placing one's forehead on the ground, she told us, "This pose is about surrender. It's about acceptance. Take this time to accept yourself, breathe in kindness and light, breathe out negativity and self-hate". This class is an especially stark, yet not unusual, example of the ways in which self-esteem was moralized as good, and techniques were offered for moving towards higher self-esteem.

Second, the yoga classes I attended provided consistent models of conduct and ideal 'ways of being'. The ethical telos of the classes was to be well-adjusted, autonomous, productive, and in charge of one's emotional life. The classes provided these models through both the behavior of the instructors, and the techniques taught which were meant to affect specific emotion. The goal of the yoga classes, as explained by both students and instructors, was to move towards this ideal self, and both spoke of their progress in terms of growth towards the ideal version of themselves.

When asked what the ultimate goal of her teaching practice was, Ariana said, “I think ultimately it’s about growth. Yes, it’s fun to watch people make progress physically- but to me, that should be a reflection of inner progress, too. Are they becoming a better person? That’s how I measure if I’ve succeeded”. This sentiment was shared by all the teachers, and many students, who I talked to. The instructors aimed to provide students with the tools needed to grow into better, more full human beings, and believed that their own practices continued to allow them to do the same. The imperative of personal growth is integral to the psychologization of social life- “growth” has become the ultimate arbiter of a successful life in advanced, industrial societies like the U.S.

Practitioners gave what seemed to be, at first, quite variable examples of the ways yoga had contributed to their “growth”. One man, Dominic, replied that yoga had helped him be kinder to his children:

“I think every parent has had the experience of just becoming overwhelmed in the moment and saying something they wish they didn’t say. But I don’t want to repeat the mistakes of my parents... don’t want to make my kids feel inferior, ‘cause they’re not. Since I started doing yoga a few months ago I’m so much better at looking at the situation from an outside point of view, taking a breath and letting it roll off me, so I don’t snap at them as much... barely at all actually”.

Another reported that she wasted less time on social media, and thus was able to spend more time on the “important things” in life: “Facebook was eating up a lot of my time. I found myself just endlessly scrolling, scrolling. Now I’m way more conscious about it. I don’t do it right when I wake up anymore, or right before bed. And I really think yoga helped me find the willpower to do that”. A third student reported that yoga helped her to release pent-up anger toward her ex-husband, and a fourth she felt more motivated to cook nutritious food for herself. These developments focus on disparate parts of an individual’s life- children, romantic relationships, how leisure time is spent, and what food is ingested. However, what they have in common is that

whatever was positive about the change, what made it considered “growth” by the practitioner, is that it resulted in a change in the person’s behavior or outlook. Moreover, that change resulted in a greater ability to inhibit one’s pleasure-seeking, unwanted habits.

Depoliticization

My time in the field seems to suggest that due to the increased attention to responsibility for one’s self, there was little extra room for considering one’s responsibility for the well-being of others. Or, in the case of Pamela, taking care of one’s self was equated with doing good for the world. As Pamela and I talked about social problems and yoga’s role in them, she said, “I see it this way- if every day, I am practicing loving kindness, I am focusing on sending everyone in my orbit love and care- if everyone were to do that, themselves, don’t you think the world would be a better place?” She went on to mention the famous 1993 Washington, D.C. experiment where over 4,000 meditators gathered, and meditated in silence, in order to create “a powerful influence on the larger level of consciousness”.¹⁰⁸ Pamela, like many yogis, believes that because consciousness is ultimately universal, the smallest of actions (such as meditating alone) causes a ripple effect, and thus any positive thought or action one engages in, even if done alone, contributes to a better world. In this way, yoga can be depoliticizing; equating care of the self with care of others, for obvious reasons, leads to less engagement in the political realm.

Moreover, Yoga teaches students to stay vigilant for negative emotions like anger- and provides techniques for debilitating them when they do occur. These techniques always involve a retreat into one’s self, rather than interaction with the other party or parties. Though uncomfortable, emotions like anger have historically played an important role in righting

¹⁰⁸ The State News Service. “Meditating to Try to Lower Crime Rate”. *The New York Times*. August 1, 1993. Accessed November 24, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/08/01/nyregion/meditating-to-try-to-lower-crime-rate.html>

political wrongs. Yet, therapy culture warns against the harmful effects anger can have on its holder- reflected in common phrases like “forgiveness is one of the greatest gifts you can give yourself”. What’s insinuated here is that holding on to anger so damages the mental health of a person that it’s better to forgive any wrongs before it builds up, even if there are not proper steps taken to remedy the situation. It is for these reasons that I question yoga’s role in emotional control, when one has a pre-set, effective toolkit for dealing with negative emotion, one is less likely to reach out to community for support, and so less likely to find patterns in abuses of power.

Conclusion

It’s clear that although yogis are practicing spiritual techniques deemed “alternative”, both by themselves (as I discussed in chapter 2) and by some sociologists of religion, the moral logic presented in western yoga classes is consistent with mainstream society. Yoga instructors have used practices based in Eastern religion to reach the goals provided by therapy culture: self-fulfillment, autonomy, productivity, and control of emotion. Moreover, those techniques transfer the locus of discipline to the individual, and thus contribute to responsabilization. However, I do not wish to disregard the detraditionalization thesis completely; it’s obvious that in some ways, individuals have been freed from certain social constraints: for example, women are able to support themselves economically, and thus marriage is not imperative, traditional religion has less sway, and an untold number of social mores have been transgressed, and subsequently dissolved.

For this reason, I offer a distinction first proposed by Neil Gross, between “regulative” and “meaning-constitutive” traditions. While regulative traditions involve threats of exclusion from a community, meaning-constitutive traditions are linguistic and cultural frameworks,

through which one is able to make sense of the world.¹⁰⁹ I believe that therapy culture is both regulative and meaning-constitutive, though its regulative aspects result in less extreme punishment than previous hegemonic traditions (failing to become self-actualized, for example, may result in exclusion from elite social groups, but will probably not result in bodily harm). When Giddens and others speak of detraditionalization, they are underestimating the enduring strength of meaning-constitutive traditions, like therapy culture, and thus failing to see the ways in which non-penal traditions continue to structure social life.

¹⁰⁹ Gross, Neil. "The Detraditionalization of Intimacy Reconsidered". *Sociological Theory* 23, no. 3 (2005): 286-311.

Conclusion

The goal of this project, spurred by the increasing popularity of yoga and general talk of “self-care”, was to explore what draws people to yoga. Specifically, I was interested in what people gained from the practice, as I saw no obvious material benefit. I found that yoga offers a unique combination of the “exotic” and the familiar; techniques which are perceived to have roots in the ancient, but which work for modern purposes. Because the fundamental nature of modern yoga has rarely been questioned by sociologists, its popularity has been seen as evidence of a post-traditional world, in which “foreign” practices are freely assembled according to individual desire. However, when one looks more closely at how those desires are constituted, the separation of self and society seems less salient.

Moreover, while psychologization is individualizing in that it places the locus of discipline on the individual, it does not signal release from the “iron cage”¹¹⁰ of society. Foucault suggests that, on the contrary, through therapeutic discourse the self is made to work seamlessly for and within a system of power.¹¹¹ In this way, yoga functions as a “technology of the self”, harmonizing the interests of the self and the state.

My analysis may seem like a critique, and indeed, for many, the encroachment of state power into the realm of individual desires is a negative development.¹¹² However, I’d like to take a moment to acknowledge the historically provided alternatives; Foucault illustrates the previous penal system with the example of the violent and chaotic torture of Robert-Francoise Damiens in the 18th century. Before the development of individual discipline, order was kept through public displays of cruelty, in the service of dissuading transgression through fear. This is not to say that

¹¹⁰ Weber, 1905.

¹¹¹ Lemke, 2001.

¹¹² Rimke, 2000.

bad is better than worse, or that we should not question a power structure as it exists for fear that it will morph into something more harmful, but rather that social relations are always organized according to some framework(s) or other. In fact, it is these frameworks which form the ground on which we postulate the same ethics used to critique them. For that reason, it is difficult to dismiss therapy culture wholesale; I, like the students I practiced alongside, hope for a fulfilling life, want to make healthy decisions, and find it useful to be able to control negative emotions when they are inconvenient.

Foucault, recognizing that power both enables and constrains subjectivities, hoped to elucidate the way power functioned in society, not to get rid of it, but to expand the realm of what it is possible to think, do, and be. It is my hope that this study, in some small way, has contributed to that same goal.

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