

Research on Yoga: Still a Long Way to Go



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Submission: March 14, 2017; **Published:** April 03, 2017

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Introduction

If a researcher enters the key word “yoga” into the search field of the Pubmed website, the outcome will be the opening of a drop box containing the following 19 yoga classifications: yoga therapy, yoga stress, pain yoga, yoga low back, yoga anxiety, yoga depression, yoga cancer, effects yoga, yoga pregnancy, yoga back, yoga heart, effect yoga, yoga chronic, yoga diabetes, yoga breathing, yoga children, yoga mental, yoga cardiovascular, hatha yoga and yoga breast. On March 7th of the current year, the Pubmed displayed 3858 articles on yoga. Definitely, yoga has become a synonym for the practice of physical postures, or one of the many types of hatha yoga, such as: ViniYoga, Shiva, Ashtanga Vinyasa/Power, Iyengar and Gathashtha [1], although from a North-American perspective McCall [2] mentions a few others such as: Bikram/Hot Yoga, Kripalu, Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy, Anusara, Kundalini, Integral, Tantra and Gym Yoga, applied to 50 health problems [3]. However, nowadays, most practitioners cannot even mention the 10 ethical principles of yoga: the yamas and niyamas [4], laid down by Patanjali in his Yoga Sutras.

Singleton [5] considers the expansion of modern postural yoga as an expression of a transnational physical culture revival and illustrates his train of thought with the main schools of physical culture, such as Harmonial Gymnastics, created by Mollie Bagot Stack in England before the Second World War, or German Gymnastik released by Hede Kallmeyer and the work of Alexander Lowen. What catches the eye is that most scientific articles don't describe exactly the sequences of the postures, or the duration of each one, let alone the exact breathing exercises, mudras and mantras taught in the yoga sessions. Additionally, if yoga is supposed to comprise a healthy lifestyle, most articles don't even mention the practitioners' behavior: if they changed their diet, left smoking, drinking alcohol and using drugs once they started practicing yoga. Furthermore, most researches published on yoga contemplate the effect of physical postures and breathing upon a certain illness, disease or mental state. Little or nothing at all is said about the social effect of yoga: the sociability produced by a group practice. The search for “yoga

and sociability” in the Pubmed yielded only two articles: one study applied yoga to a residential behavioural health unit [6], the other to psychotic patients [7].

Likewise, research papers on yoga do not analyze the setting in which the yoga classes take place. Nevrin [8] considers that the environment of the yoga practice shapes the individual experience. Some practitioners prefer the use of Sanskrit words, incense, candles, Hindu attributes and decoration, the use of devotional mantras, etc., that evoke feelings and emotions, while others prefer choreographed poses without any mystical attributes. The social environment of the yoga studios also plays a role in that practitioners chat and exchange experiences. All these factors may induce behavioral change and develop a so-called yogic way of being.

Interestingly, other different types of yoga, like Bhakti (yoga of devotion), Jnana (yoga of wisdom acquired from the sacred texts) or Karma (yoga of impersonal service) are not studied at all. It is as though traditional yoga's main purpose to reach mystical and spiritual states has simply been left out of the research themes. The question arises, then, if yoga practices for the purpose of reaching these spiritual states should be considered as a health issue or if they should be allotted to the area of the science of religion. Pattabhi Jois, in an interview to Anderson [9], insisted that what he called the philosophy of yoga be understood by the practitioners. Without the philosophy, a yoga practice would be reduced to a stretching or fitness session.

Lastly, it is noteworthy that most papers on yoga are authored by North-American, European or Indian researchers, and there is a complete void of Central and South American researchers in this field. As regards the methodology, very few articles use qualitative techniques.

Conclusion

There are many aspects of yoga which have been left out of research in the health field. Yoga must be looked upon as a complete practice with its ethical, philosophical, social and physical components.

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