

Parallels Between the Yamas of Yoga and Social Work Ethics



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Abstract

The social work and yoga fields each recognize a set of guiding ethical principles for practitioners, and these ethical principles have considerable parallels. The ethical principles in both professions guide interactions and serve to protect both the clients and the practitioners. Practitioners of both social work therapy and yoga would benefit from gaining a better understanding of the similar ethical principles that guide both professions. As these fields grow closer, social work practitioners can help clients better understand the mind-body relationship, which can improve the health and growth of the clients. Similarly, yoga instructors can guide students who need additional support towards therapeutic treatment when needed. In order to assist both professions in understanding the similarities in ethical guidelines between the fields, this article examines yoga's yamas and compares them to social work ethical standards.

Keywords: Social Work; Ethics; Yoga; Yama

Introduction

Yoga originated at least 2,500 years ago and has become popular in the Western hemisphere in the last 100 years. The modern view may often associate yoga with fitness; however, the original goal was to facilitate self-awareness [1]. The principles of yoga, called the yamas, transcend a mere physical practice. In fact, the physical postures (asana) are traditionally only a small part of the practice used to prepare the physical body for other stages of achieving self-awareness. The yogic yamas set forth principles of ethics that have guided the practice of yoga for generations and continue to offer guidance today. Social work as a profession touches many aspects of clients' lives, including their biological, psychological, social, and spiritual lives. Just as the yamas provide the system of ethics within yoga, the National Association of Social Workers have set forth a code of ethics to guide social work practice. As Cournoyer states in his textbook for social work students, "Ethical responsibilities take precedence over theoretical knowledge, research findings, practice wisdom, agency policies, and, of course, our own personal values, preferences, and beliefs". Ethics must always be the highest priority. The yamas and the Code of Ethics overlap to a surprising degree. Although the professions seem disparate, both fields hold similar ethical principles, especially in the context of human relationships, to

guide best practices in their respective fields. Practitioners of both social work and yoga could benefit from studying ethical principles of each field.

The Yamas

The practice of yoga involves more than the asanas, or physical postures, that people assume in a yoga class. Yoga practice stems from the eight limbs as outlined by the ancient yoga scholar Patanjali in the Yoga Sutras [2]. The founders of modern yoga return to these eight limbs of yoga to outline how to live well as a yogi and a human being [3]. The eight limbs of yoga required for the "quest for the soul" [3] include:

1. Yamas (universal moral commandments)
2. Niyama (self-purification by discipline)
3. Asana (postures)
4. Pranayama (control of the breath)
5. Pratyahara (withdrawal of the mind from the senses)
6. Dharana (concentration)
7. Dhyana (meditation)

8. Samadhi (a state of profound meditation in which the individual joins with the divine spirit) [2,3].

The first two limbs, the yama and niyama, “control the yogi’s passions and emotions and keep him in harmony with his fellow man” [3]. The consistent practice of yoga is a way to nourish these eight limbs (Swenson, 1999). In particular, the introspection that takes place in yoga asana practice gives us insight and develops the qualities of yama and niyama (Swenson, 1999). As social workers and therapists, it is important to be able to control emotions and work well with others. Thus, the yamas and niyamas are highly relevant to social work practice. This article will focus on the yamas, Patanjali’s first limb in the system of yoga, which provides the foundation of yoga and all authentic spirituality [1]. Patanjali contends that one must be moral to obtain successful yoga practice. The yamas consist of five ethical principles. These yamas provide the foundation to transform an individual and allow for change [1]. These principles include ahimsa, which means non-harming; satya, meaning truth; asteya, which is non-stealing; brahmacharya, often translated as chastity or moderation; and aparigraha, or non-hoarding. These methods or strategies for living can also assist social workers and therapists in clinical practice and have strong parallels to the Code of Ethics [4]. The following sections will discuss each yama and some of the corresponding ethical guidelines from the National Association of Social Work and social work practice.

Yama 1: Ahimsa or “Non-Harming”

The first yogic ethical principle, ahimsa, is the principle of non-violence or non-harming [3]. This is a key concept not only in the Sutras (one of the ancient texts in yoga philosophy), but also in most of the world’s religions [1]. The concept encompasses more than just abstaining from physical violence. According to Iyengar, the greater meaning is love, and that the “to kill or to destroy a thing or being is to insult its Creator” (1976, p. 31). Some translations state the true meaning of ahimsa is to not cause pain [2]. Satchidananda states, “causing pain can be even more harmful than killing. Even by your words, even by your thoughts, you can cause pain” [2]. The practice of ahimsa aims to create an environment free of harm.

Much of the Code of Ethics [4] concerns avoiding causing harm to clients. Client must first understand what they are agreeing to do in treatment by providing informed consent [5]. Once a client has agreed to treatment, it is the responsibility of the social work practitioner to provide the highest level of care. In fact, a social worker can commit malpractice by failing to meet an accepted standard of care and thus potentially causing a client harm [6]. One way in which social workers must avoid causing harm is by limiting their practice to fields in which they are competent [4]. Ethical standard 1.04 provides that social workers must have the knowledge and skills needed to practice in their field, should

avoid unfamiliar practice areas, and must use good judgment when practicing in emerging areas to avoid harming their clients [4]. This concept is mirrored in the ahimsa principle that harm can arise out of ignorance [3].

The principle of non-harming also relates to the social work core value of self-determination. One aspect of the concept of ahimsa holds that “violence is the attempt to impress our will or beliefs onto others” [1]. In other words, if a practitioner thinks they know what is best for another person, they are committing a subtle form of violence against that person and taking away their autonomy [7]. This notion is illustrated by an old yogic folk tale about a monkey trying to save a fish from a flood. The monkey carries the fish into a tree and says, ‘I saved you from drowning.’ But, of course, the fish cannot survive in the tree. By thinking it knew what was better for the fish, the monkey harmed the fish. Ahimsa warns against imposing our beliefs on others, even if our intentions are good.

Similarly, the core social work value of ‘dignity and worth of the person’ emphasizes the importance of client’s self-determination [4]. Social work counsels that instead of giving the clients advice or answers, practitioners should support clients in finding their own answers. Social workers must recognize “the individual has within himself or herself vast resources for self-understanding, for altering his or her self-concept, attitudes and self-directed behavior - and that these resources can be tapped if only a definable climate of facilitative psychological attitudes can be provided” [8]. This concept aligns with ahimsa and encourages social workers and yoga practitioners alike to trust that clients are the experts in their lives, and to trust and support them in their own journeys [4,7].

Yama 2: Satya or “Truth”

The second principle, satya, or truth, may be “the highest rule of conduct or morality” [3]. According to principles of yoga, a person should prioritize being honest in his interactions with others over trying to be kind to best assist a person in growth [7]. Subramuniyaswami (a yoga guide) suggests that instead of pointing out another’s faults, offering a clear plan and positive outlook can allow for internal healing to take place [9]. Similarly, one of the core values of social work is integrity [4]. As Cournoyer states, “we expect helping professionals to tell the truth, to refrain from any forms of dishonesty, fraud, and deception, and to honor commitments to clients and others” [6]. Social workers should prioritize honesty when working with clients. Social workers may use several common therapeutic techniques that can focus on honest interactions, including reframing, rehearsing an action step, confronting, or pointing out endings [6].

For example, a social worker may confront a client by pointing out actions the client is taking that do not line up with their stated goals. Social workers should conduct these

confrontations gently with an emphasis on both truth and avoiding harm. Social workers also can use techniques such as encouragement, education, recording progress, reflecting feeling, and meaning, and partializing [6]. For example, a social worker could emphasize a client's strengths and provide examples of times the client has overcome other challenges. The worker could then suggest partializing to help the client break the problem down into manageable pieces and review the action steps needed to accomplish them. These techniques emphasize both truth and avoiding harm. Both the fields of social work and yoga recognize that the obligation to tell the truth can have limits. For example, in yoga the principle of avoiding harm can override the obligation to tell the truth if the truth would cause significant harm [9].

Similarly, social workers are bound by confidentiality except when telling the truth would avoid significant harm. In particular, the Code of Ethics states "social workers should protect the confidentiality of all information obtained in the course of professional service, except for compelling professional reasons" [4]. These compelling reasons typically involve situations when a social worker must share information to avoid serious physical harm to the client or another person. In these circumstances, it is still imperative that the social worker protect as much of the client's information as possible, releasing only what is imperative to prevent harm [5]. In other words, the fields of yoga and social work both value truthfulness while at the same time recognizing competing interests.

Yama 3: Asteya or "Not Stealing"

The third principle, asteya, means not stealing. This discipline is closely related to the first yama of non-harming, as stealing harms the victim [10]. McAfee [1] discusses alternative translations that also include 'absence of jealousy' and 'absence of envy' to express the full spirit of the yama. Subramuniyaswami [9] adds the spirit of not coveting and avoiding debt. According to Iyengar [3], this includes avoiding misappropriation, breach of trust, mismanagement, and misuse. Finally, Subramuniyaswami [9] insists that to be perfect in asteya, one must also practice charity. This includes sharing what we no longer need with others.

This yama has a clear connection to the social work ethical code provisions relating to the core value of integrity. Social workers, particularly those working as therapists, should avoid dishonest practices such as overcharging for services, entering into too much debt, and other practices that could amount to stealing from the client. The practice of charity also relates to social workers. Social workers have a duty to provide services for those in need, not just those who can afford to pay [4]. Social work's mission includes meeting the basic needs of all [4]. The Code of Ethics [4] encourages social workers to provide some services pro bono. Social workers are encouraged to participate in activities to ensure that all individuals have access to resources and services they need to meet their basic needs. For example, some social workers may provide free therapy sessions for a specific number

of individuals each week. While the activities of 'charity' may look different in yoga than in social work, the spirit is the same.

Yama 4: Brahmacharya or "Chastity"

The fourth yama is the principle of brahmacharya, which is difficult to translate into English. The Sanskrit word is made of two parts: 'brahma,' or god, and 'charya,' to follow. Nolan infers a deeper meaning of observing all of one's desires of the body and mind as "manifestations of the desire for the one true divine Self" [11]. The most common translations include chastity, moderation, or continence, sometimes with a focus on sexual abstinence. Seiberling [12] contends this yama relates to distributing one's energy in a mindful and intentional manner.

The literal translation of chastity finds a clear parallel in the Social Work Code of Ethics. Ethical Standard 1.09 states social workers must not have sexual contact with current or previous clients [4]. Sadly, certain yoga professionals have made recent news for violating the principle of brahmacharya by engaging in sexual acts with their students [2,13,14]. Beyond the strict interpretation, brahmacharya also could imply setting appropriate boundaries. "Boundary issues occur when social workers establish more than one relationship with clients or former clients, whether professional, social, or business" [5]. Social workers must set appropriate boundaries to protect both themselves and their clients and must set boundaries to avoid causing harm to clients.

Finally, the interpretation of brahmacharya as distributing one's energy in a thoughtful manner also parallels social workers' obligations. Social workers recently have recognized the importance of self-care [15]. Self-care practices are important not only for the health and well-being of the social worker, but also for the benefit of the client. Social workers ability to provide quality service is limited if the worker is distracted, exhausted, or burned out [15]. Thus, yoga practitioners and social workers alike must be cognizant of setting appropriate and healthy boundaries and to use their energy in a thoughtful manner.

Yama 5: Aparigraha or "Non-Attachment"

The last yama is aparigraha, which typically translates into either 'absence of greed' or 'non-attachment.' Iyengar [3] states the core of this value includes not taking more than one needs and not taking something without working for it. The concept of aparigraha as the absence of greed fits well with the core social work value of integrity. Social workers must act honestly and responsibly, including when setting fees [4]. The second translation of aparigraha as 'non-attachment' also parallels principles of ethics within social work. Social workers want to see positive changes in their clients; however, they will not be effective if they are too attached to the results of the work.

An approach involving non-attachment allows the therapist to release their own aspirations for the client and be present with the client. This approach also benefits the client who will not feel

pressure from a therapist who is too attached to the outcome. Although therapists (and yoga instructors) need to care enough to provide for their clients, as Siegel states, “when we are too attached to client outcomes, we can suffer greater secondary trauma, compassion fatigue, and engage in countertransference driven interventions that are disempowering, invasive, and controlling” [16]. Practicing mindfulness can cultivate non-attachment to client outcomes, as it allows the therapist to be aware of their own feelings and emotions, to balance those emotions, and to be flexible with clients. This allows one to be present with the client in the moment and to be creative in seeking solutions [17].

Non-attachment can pose challenges for social workers, as social workers hope to see progress in a positive direction through their work with a client. Social workers also may struggle to avoid pushing for changes they may wish to see in a client, such as abstaining from harmful drugs or leaving an abusive partner. However, as discussed previously about ahimsa, the Code of Ethics emphasizes the value of self-determination which requires that social workers allow clients to make their own decisions to increase their autonomy and independence [18]. In following the values of self-determination and non-attachment, social workers must allow clients to make their own decisions, even if the social worker believes it may not be the best decision. While this can be incredibly challenging for the social worker (or yoga guide), it is in the client’s best interest to allow them to make their own choices in their own time.

Conclusion

The social work and yoga fields each recognize a set of guiding ethical principles for practitioners, and these ethical principles have considerable parallels. Social workers and yoga instructors have relationships with clients in both one-on-one and group settings, and these relationships involve important elements of trust. The ethical principles in both professions guide interactions and serve to protect both the clients and the practitioners. Social work is beginning to recognize the benefits of incorporating yoga into social work practice. Yoga can benefit both the therapists as well as the clients [19,20]. As more social workers refer their clients to yoga or become yoga instructors themselves, practitioners in both fields can gain an appreciation for each other. Practitioners of both social work therapy and yoga would benefit from gaining a better understanding of the similar ethical principles that guide both professions. As these fields grow closer, social work practitioners can help clients better understand the mind-body relationship, which can improve the health and growth of the clients.

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