

Elements of Yogic Practice: Perceptions of Health Professions Students

Lauren Justice, BA, RYT 200, Kari Sulenes, MA, RYT 200, Jillian Freitas, MA, Margaret Shean, MA, RYT 200, Julia Ray, MA, Heather Freeman, MA, RYT 200, Erika Razmjou, BA, Nadezhda Vladagina, BA, RYT 200, Lisa Girasa, MA, Dharmakaya Colgan, MA, RYT 200 and Christiane Brems, PhD, ABPP, RYT 500

Pacific University | Hillsboro, Oregon
E-Mail:

Background

- ❖ Modern Western yoga is increasingly focused on physical health and fitness (White, 2011).
- ❖ Yoga is becoming disconnected from ancient roots in Eastern philosophy and Western insights about the mind, body, and spirit connection (de Michelis, 2004; Feuerstein, 2014; Singleton, 2010).
- ❖ Previous studies have demonstrated yoga's utility as an integrative healthcare strategy, but have mostly focused on physical practices such as asana and, to a lesser degree, pranayama (Jeter, Slutsky, Singh, & Khalsa, 2015).
- ❖ The extensive literature on meditation and mindfulness does not openly acknowledge whether the practices are within the yoga traditions.
- ❖ Boggs (2014) issued a call for yoga researchers to broaden scientific horizons beyond the physical practices to endorse yoga as a healing strategy, not simply physical exercise.
- ❖ The current study explores students' perceptions of the essential practices of yoga (related to the eight limbs of yoga based on Patanjali's Yoga Sutras) to investigate which elements of yoga are endorsed by actual and contemplating practitioners.

Methods

- ❖ We surveyed a large group (N = 1,585) of students across 10 health professions programs at a small northwestern university; received 513 hits on the survey, led to usable 498 surveys; response rate of ~30%.
- ❖ The *Acceptability of Yoga Survey* was developed for purposes of a larger yoga perceptions study (cf, Sulenes et al, 2014; Brems et al, 2015).
- ❖ Current study focuses on survey items developed to explore central concepts within each of the eight limbs of yoga
- ❖ Participants rated each of 31 items on a 3-point scale; due to skew, data were dichotomized for analysis into *essential* versus *non-essential* aspect of a yoga practice.

Conclusions

- ❖ The most frequently endorsed limbs were physical postures (asana) and breathing practices (pranayama), regardless of respondents' personal yoga practice.
- ❖ Ethical foundations of a yoga practice (yamas) were the least endorsed limb, regardless of respondents' personal yoga practice.
- ❖ This perception of yoga is somewhat limited, overemphasizing asana and pranayama and perhaps reflecting a body-centric culture focusing on aspects of yoga most commonly mentioned in popular media, research studies, and yoga classes as taught in gyms or health clubs.

Implications

- ❖ If health professionals and students have a limited understanding of the entirety of the healing system of yoga, they may underutilize it as a complementary or alternative treatment approach (Sulenes et al, 2014)
- ❖ By disregarding some limbs, the practice of Yoga may not yield its full spectrum of health benefits. For example, not practicing the principles of ahimsa (nonviolence) may contribute to injuries from an overly aggressive physical practice disregard of inner practices such as pratyahara and dharana may limit the effects of yoga on self-regulation and enhanced heart rate variability unskilled methods of svadhyaya may contribute to self-preoccupation rather than the development of empathy
- ❖ It is important to increase awareness of yoga's many facets to create a more inviting practice that will include even those groups who currently may not perceive themselves as potential yogis due to the limited portrayal of the practice (cf., Brems et al, 2015).

References

- ❖ Boggs, W (2014, January). The next legs of the journey. [Editorial]. *International Journal of Yoga Therapy*, 23(2), 5.
- ❖ Brems, C., Justice, L., Sulenes, K., Girasa, L., Ray, J., Davis, M. Freitas, J., Shean, M., & Colgan, D. (2015). Improving access to yoga: Barriers and motivators for practice among health professions students. *Advances in Mind-Body Medicine*, 29, 6-13.
- ❖ de Michelis, E. A history of modern yoga: Patanjali and western esotericism. New York, NY: Continuum.
- ❖ Jeter, P. E., Slutsky, J., Singh, N., Khalsa, S. B. S. (2015). Yoga as a therapeutic intervention: A bibliometric analysis of published research studies from 1967 to 2013. *The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*, 0, 1-7.
- ❖ Salmon, P., Lush, E., Jablonski, M., & Sephton, S. E. (2009). Yoga and mindfulness: Clinical aspects of an ancient mind/body practice. *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice*, 16, 59-72.
- ❖ Singleton, M. (2010). *Yoga body: The origins of modern posture practice*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- ❖ Sulenes, K., Freitas, J., Justice, L., Colgan, D., Shean, M., & Brems, C. (2015). Underuse of yoga as a referral resource by health professions students. *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*, 21, 53-59.
- ❖ White, D.G. (2011). Yoga, a brief history. In D.G. White (Ed.), *Yoga in practice* (pp. 1-23). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.