



The relationship between yoga involvement, mindfulness and psychological well-being



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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The aim of this study was to examine how different levels of yoga involvement are related to different parameters of mental health and illness.

Design and setting: A total sample of 455 participants (410 females) were investigated by means of an internet survey. 362 yoga practitioners (327 females) rated their degree of yoga involvement on the Yoga Immersion Scale. A control group was comprised of 93 gymnastics practitioners (83 females).

Main outcome measures: All participants completed the Multidimensional Inventory for Religious/Spiritual Well-Being, the Freiburger Mindfulness Inventory and the Brief Symptom Inventory for psychiatric symptoms.

Results: Highly involved yoga practitioners exhibited a significantly increased amount of mindfulness and religious/spiritual well-being (both $p < 0.01$) and lower psychiatric symptoms such as depression ($p < 0.01$) compared to those who were only marginally/moderately yoga-involved or who were in the gymnastics control group.

Conclusions: In accordance with the literature, yoga practice might have its biggest impact on mental health when it is part of a practitioner's worldview. Further research focusing on the impact of yoga involvement in clinical groups is encouraged.

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1. Introduction

A holistic view of human beings is becoming more and more central to the practice of medicine these days. At the same time, there is a growing need to develop efficient treatments for psychiatric diseases. According to the World Health Organization 37% of the “healthy working years” are lost due to mental disorders.^{1,8} Therefore, it is a matter of concern for psychosomatic research to find out more about the specific functional mechanisms which cause the positive effects of Complementary and Alternative Methods (CAM), such as yoga, for psychological well-being.² According to² yoga is an ancient practice rooted in India, which unites movement, respiration, concentration and meditation. Although there is a vast amount of different schools of yoga these days, it can be concluded that the most common yoga styles include physical postures (*asanas*), control of breath (*pranayama*) and the use of meditation

(*dyana*) to increase strength, flexibility and mindfulness.⁴ Furthermore there are several yoga styles that include only one or two of these components (e.g. Iyengar Yoga includes solely asanas or Kriya Yoga includes only meditation). The main focus of yoga is essentially to arrive in the “here and now” – by focusing on the present moment, similar to mindful meditation techniques.¹⁰ As a result, mindfulness is trained on one's own feelings, thoughts, body and environment.

Evidently, the practice of yoga offers a perspective for the prevention, as well as for the treatment, of mental and physical disorders.^{1,8,10} Most prominently, yoga was observed to be positively associated with more adequate stress coping by influencing various physiological parameters (such as breathing and heartbeat) positively^{5,13} as well as psychometric parameters; for instance, practicing yoga in clinical and non-clinical settings showed a positive effect for the treatment of anxious/depressive symptoms.^{1,8,4} Correspondingly, there is also growing evidence for the positive influence of yoga on subjective well-being as confirmed by neuronal correlates in the brain.¹

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1.1. The impact of yoga involvement for psychosomatic health

Yoga, practitioners, represents a way of living which can affect all aspects of life, depending on how deep the practitioner is immersed into it.⁹ Therefore the impact of yoga on the practitioners' subjective well-being might depend on the degree of involvement into the practice itself.^{3,4} Being "intrinsically motivated" for something can be equated with something being in a central position of a hierarchical personal construct system.^{9,12} Consequently, a centrally mounted construct should influence the experience and behaviour of an individual in a significant way.¹² As suggested by Huber,¹¹ a multidimensional (religiosity) trait can be assumed as comprising five different core dimensions: the intellectual, the ideological, the experiential, the private practice and the public practice dimension. Now the probability that religion moves to the central ("autonomous") position in one's personality rises with frequency and intensity of activation of the religious construct system.¹¹ In line with this model, we propose the idea of a "yogic construct system". In order to assess the centrality of yoga in the self-concept of a person, a short scale (Yoga Immersion Scale, YI-S) was constructed and validated in a previous study.⁹ Here Yoga Immersion was defined as "the extent of personal involvement into the teachings of yoga running on a continuum".^{9, p. 32}

1.2. Research aims

In this study we explore the idea that the practice of yoga might show its most powerful effects on Mindfulness and several parameters of psychological well-being when linked to a higher level of yoga involvement. Therefore the level of Yoga Immersion is correlated to several parameters of mindfulness, subjective well-being and psychiatric symptoms in a non-clinical group of yoga practitioners who were then compared to a control group of gymnasts.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and procedure

The test subjects were recruited via announcements in yoga and fitness studios, yoga forums, as well as through the support of the professional association for yoga teachers in Austria (BYO) and Germany (BDY). The entire study was conducted via an online survey and took place from January–March 2014. The inclusion criteria for this study were the practice of yoga or gymnastics as well as fluency in the German language. In order to lay some groundwork regarding the relevance of yoga involvement as being related to psychological well-being we did not set any exclusion criteria. The study protocol was approved by the ethics board of the University of Graz, Austria. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. There was no financial remuneration, however all the participants were entered into a contest with small material prizes (e.g. yoga mat).

2.2. Socio-demographic and psychometric assessment

Socio-demographic data such as for instance gender, age and education status were assessed via an anamnestic datasheet. Furthermore, the frequency and duration of practice were assessed to determine the intensity of yoga/gymnastics practice.

The *Yoga Immersion Scale* (YI-S)⁹ is used in order to assess the amount of yoga involvement (Yoga Immersion). The YI-S consists of 10 items, which are answered on a six-point likert scale (1—totally disagree to 6—totally agree). Some item examples can be given as follows: "The wisdom of yoga affects my way of seeing things in everyday life" or "By practicing yoga I can concentrate better".

The *Freiburg Mindfulness Inventory* (FMI) is a 30-item instrument that assesses mindfulness, which can be best understood as the attentive, unprejudiced perception of all mental content, such as thoughts, feelings, emotions and bodily sensations.¹⁷ The questions are answered via a four-point likert scale (1—hardly ever to 4—almost always).

The *Brief Symptom Inventory* (BSI-18)⁶ measures the amount of three categories of psychiatric symptoms, namely Somatization, Anxiety and Depression, which can be summarized to a total amount of general symptom burden: the Global Severity Index (GSI). The instrument consists of 18 items which are answered via a four-point likert scale (0—not at all to 4—very strong).

The *Multidimensional Inventory for Religious/Spiritual Well-Being* (MI-RSWB)¹⁵ is a multidimensional measure to assess six different dimensions of religious and spiritual well-being, namely General Religiosity, Forgiveness, Connectedness, Hope immanent, Hope Transcendent and Experiences of Sense and Meaning, which can be collated into a total amount of RSWB (Religious/Spiritual Well-Being). The instrument consists of 48 items, which are answered via a six-point likert scale (1—totally disagree to 6—totally agree).

2.3. Statistical methods

To compare the participants with regards to their level of Yoga Immersion (YI), three groups (total: 362 participants), were formed and compared to 93 gymnasts. The total sample of yoga practitioners was divided into three groups by means of a tertile split based on their YI-S total score, where the participants could reach a minimum score of 10 points and a maximum score of 60 points.

10–33 points = Y1 : Yoga Immersion marginal : 111 participants;

34–46 points = Y2 : Yoga Immersion moderate : 120 participants;

47–60 points = Y3 : Yoga Immersion high : 131 participants.

These three Yoga Immersion sub-groups (marginal, moderate, high) were further compared with the respondents who exclusively practiced gymnastics (93 participants). Differences in sociodemographic data as well as frequency of yoga/gymnastics practice were investigated by means of χ^2 test. Univariate (ANOVA) and multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) were conducted to investigate the differences between the amount of YI and how it compares to gymnastics practitioners due to FMI, BSI-18 and RSWB dimensions. Gender, age and level of education, frequency and duration of practice were considered as important covariates. By conducting Analysis of Covariance we observed only the covariate "Age" to have a significant influence on the GSI and BSI-18 subscales "Anxiety" and "Depression". All other covariates had no influences on the observed parameters and were thus excluded from further analysis. Tukey-HSD was used for post-hoc comparisons. The relationships between YI and socio-demographic, yoga/gymnastics related variables, FMI, BSI-18 and RSWB dimensions were investigated by means of Pearson correlation statistics. The α -level was set to 0.05. Bonferroni correction was applied in order to control for α -inflation.

3. Results

The total study sample was comprised of 455 participants (410 females). We examined a group of 362 yoga practitioners; in this group, 327 subjects (90.3%) were female and the age ranged from 18 to 68 years. Furthermore, we investigated a comparison group of 93 gymnasts, where 83 of them were female (89.2%). This group was aged between 16 and 71 years. Depending on the yoga style practiced, multiple answers were possible. Within the sample of

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