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## “Yoga resets my inner peace barometer”: A qualitative study illuminating the pathways of how yoga impacts one’s relationship to oneself and to others

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## ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** The purpose of this qualitative study was twofold: (1) to better understand how yoga practitioners perceive intra- and interpersonal outcomes of their yoga practice, and (2) to develop a conceptual model of yoga effects on intra- and interpersonal outcomes that may underlie the “relational” influences of yoga.

**Design:** As part of a larger study, 107 community-dwelling yoga practitioners (age  $M = 41.2 \pm 15.9$  years) completed open-ended questions which asked questions focusing on whether yoga influences one’s relationship to oneself and to others. A subsample ( $n = 12$ ) completed in-depth interviews. The open-ended responses were analyzed using content analysis, and verbatim interview transcripts were analyzed for emergent themes using a constant comparison approach.

**Results:** Four emerging themes were identified such that practitioners talked about the ability of yoga to generate calm states, mindfulness, (self-)compassion, and a sense of connectedness. Throughout the themes, a common pattern emerged such that yoga practice first led to positive intrapersonal changes, which then influenced one’s interpersonal relationships. Based on these results, a conceptual model was developed depicting potential pathways of how yoga works to enhance relational outcomes.

**Conclusion:** Findings demonstrate the promise yoga holds to improve one’s relationship to oneself (intrapersonal) through mindfulness and self-compassion, and to others (interpersonal), through the enhancement of compassion and social connectedness, which may potentially lead to enhanced health and wellbeing outcomes. Further empirical testing of the model is warranted.

## 1. Introduction

Over the past few years, the mind-body practice of yoga has gained increasing interest from both the general population and the scientific community.<sup>1,2</sup> While modern yoga classes in the West can be heavily fitness oriented (lacking some elements of traditional practice), yoga is traditionally founded on a combination of breathing, physical postures, meditative components, and ethics, which together facilitates the union of the body, mind, and spirit for health and wellbeing.<sup>3,4</sup> Mindfulness cultivated through yoga (regardless of style) may help individuals to better connect to oneself and to others,<sup>5–7</sup> leading to enhanced health and wellbeing across the lifespan.<sup>8–11</sup> Yet, little is known on the relational influences and pathways of yoga to attain health and wellbeing. The existing social relationships literature has placed emphasis on the *interpersonal* dimensions (how one relates to others), whereas the mindfulness literature has largely focused on the *intrapersonal* dimensions (how one relates to oneself), which is often at the root of

contemplative practices, including yoga. Importantly, although understudied, the benefits of yoga are believed to extend beyond the individual, “off” of the mat.<sup>4</sup>

One route in which yoga may garner relational benefits is through the *yamas* and *niyamas* (the ethics of yoga practice), which act as guidelines for practitioners to be at peace with oneself, one’s family, and one’s community.<sup>12</sup> In particular, *ahimsa* (i.e., the first precept of the *yamas*), or compassion for all beings (including the self), is a characteristic that is often embedded in yoga practice. Hence, it is feasible one may become more compassionate with repeated practice. Moreover, mindfulness (i.e., the nonjudgmental attitude and openness) cultivated through yoga may also facilitate one’s ability and willingness to connect to others. Despite the scarcity of research examining relational outcomes, yoga has previously been linked to compassion and a sense of connectedness.<sup>13,14</sup> In a qualitative study with depressed women, it was found yoga served both as a self-care (intrapersonal) and relational (interpersonal) technique, reflecting the *yamas* and

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niyamas.<sup>14</sup>

Considering *ahimsa* encompasses kindness towards oneself, yoga may also cultivate self-compassion, a caring way of relating to oneself in the face of one's own shortcomings and inadequacies.<sup>15,16</sup> Based on Neff's three-component conceptualization of self-compassion (self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness), self-compassion and mindfulness are thought to be interconnected; yet, also with distinct characteristics. Self-compassion has been identified to be a pivotal mediator in mindfulness-based interventions,<sup>17-20</sup> with preliminary evidence demonstrating yoga's potential to generate self-compassion.<sup>5,6</sup> Despite the burgeoning evidence, whether practitioners *perceive* yoga helps them become more accepting and compassionate towards themselves remains to be determined.

The lack of a unifying conceptual model makes it difficult to truly understand the mechanisms through which yoga impacts relational outcomes, health, and wellbeing. Ross et al. (2014) examined the effects of yoga on interpersonal relationships using an adapted biopsychosocial model.<sup>21</sup> While this model is helpful to explore the interpersonal benefits of yoga, it provides insufficient detail regarding the specific constructs and mechanisms through which yoga leads to relational benefits. Consequently, there is a need to develop and test a conceptual framework that elucidates the pathways through which yoga enhances relational outcomes; and, subsequently, improves health and wellbeing.

There has been a growing appreciation for mixed methods research to better understand complex mind-body practices.<sup>22-24</sup> Qualitative approaches provide a comprehensive interpretation of the phenomena under study and facilitate tapping into constructs that are particularly relevant to these practices, but challenging to quantitatively measure, such as mindfulness.<sup>25,26</sup> Given the unique nature of yoga encompassing both contemplative and physical dimensions, the relational influences of yoga may manifest in ways that have not been considered or assessed through conventional quantitative methodology. A qualitative approach therefore holds promise to obtain subtle nuances that may arise in the generally understudied relational outcomes derived from yoga.

In this study, we present qualitative data generated through open-ended survey questions and in-depth interviews of community-dwelling yoga practitioners with diverse levels of experience. The purpose of this work was twofold: (1) to better understand how yoga practitioners perceive intra- and interpersonal outcomes of their practice, and (2) to develop a conceptual model of yoga effects on intra- and interpersonal outcomes that may underlie the relational benefits of yoga, by proposing specific pathways that could be further tested and fine-tuned by future research.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Design and setting

This qualitative study was part of a larger study, the Daily Off the Mat (Daily OM) study, which took place between February and August 2016. In the Daily OM study, yoga practitioners were recruited to participate in a 21-day daily diary study (observational in nature) with an overarching purpose to better understand the relational influences of yoga practice. Community-dwelling yoga practitioners were recruited to the Daily OM study in person and via fliers posted in community locations (e.g., cafes, public bulletin boards, studios). Recruitment was initiated in yoga studios in the local communities; however, in an effort to increase recruitment efforts, the study was expanded to include regional yoga studios (mainly targeting yoga studios in the state of Pennsylvania in July 2016). Eligible participants were at least 18 years of age, practicing yoga at least once a week (e.g., studio, home practice), and had daily access to the Internet for the completion of surveys.

At the first laboratory assessment, participants provided informed consent and completed a baseline survey including demographic and

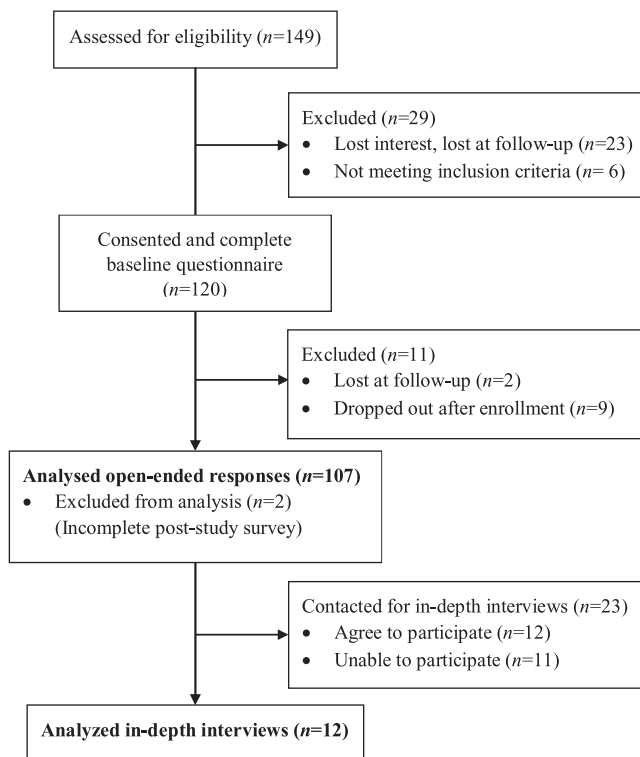


Fig. 1. Participant Flow.

psychosocial questionnaires. During this initial visit, participants were instructed on how to access the daily Internet surveys through a secure website at the end of each day over the course of the three-week period. After the 21-days in which participants completed their daily surveys, participants were asked to complete a second visit to complete a post-study survey. All participants ( $N = 107$ ) took part in the qualitative portion of the study, which was embedded in this post-study survey (through a set of open-ended questions). A subsample of participants ( $n = 12$ ) were recruited to complete in-depth interviews in March 2017 using a purposive sampling strategy<sup>27</sup> (See Fig. 1). The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at the local institution (Fig. 2).

### 2.2. Data collection

Participants completed a computer-based questionnaire about their yoga practice, which asked to indicate their (dis)agreement with the following statements: "Q1. I have a better relationship to myself, as a person, because of yoga," and "Q2. My relationships with others are better because of yoga." Participants were asked to indicate 1) yes, 2) neutral, or 3) no, and to elaborate and to explain on their answer choices for Q1 and Q2, and to share the perceived relational benefits of yoga practice in separate text boxes by providing a specific example of a situation which reflected or did not reflect the two statements (See Supplementary file 1).

To better understand practitioners' perceptions of how (including directionality of effects) these relational influences occur, a subsample of participants ( $n = 12$ ) who completed the computer-based questionnaire were invited to complete a 45 min in-depth interview. A semi-structured interview guide was created, including open-ended questions that focused on the intra- and interpersonal dimensions of yoga practice (See Supplementary file 2). In-depth interviews were conducted by a trained researcher in a laboratory setting and were audiotaped, transcribed, and compared with recordings for accuracy. Following the interview, participants completed an interactive activity, where they were asked to describe associations among key constructs of interest

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