

North American Yoga Culture: An Interdisciplinary Vehicle for Female Empowerment

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Amanda Nielsen has been practicing yoga for the past seventeen years and teaching yoga for the past five years. As a female yoga practitioner she has witnessed the transformative and empowering effects of a regular yoga practice first hand. As the mother of two young girls she is passionate about improving the image of women in Western media as well as empowering girls and women to make smart choices that improve their mental, physical and spiritual health. Amanda currently works at Red Deer College in Red Deer, AB as their Corporate Training Coordinator and practices her yoga at the local Bikram Yoga Studio. She holds her BA from the University of Alberta and her MA-IS from Athabasca University.

Introduction

When investigating yoga culture in North America, an interdisciplinary approach provides a well-formed representation of the connections between mind, body, and spirit within a modern context. History, psychology, and cultural studies, as well as embodied learning and feminism, have heavily influenced North American yoga culture as it exists today. The results of a recent unpublished grounded research study that focused on the relationships between women, yoga, and identity argues that there are components of yoga culture in a North American context that are of particular interest to women (Nielsen, 2013). These components are acceptance (of self, body, and life), connectedness (to self, others, time, and space), and spiritual awareness (recognition of a higher level of being, thinking, and energetic essence as well as aspects of mindfulness); these constituents provide grounds for the premise that a unique North American yoga subculture exists within the dominant North American consumer culture. It can be argued that this North American yoga culture is particularly appealing to women because of these unique elements. This paper will address the unique aspects of North American yoga culture that offer an opportunity for women to own their bodies and their identity in their daily lived experiences. An interdisciplinary approach to analysis of the yoga culture that exists in North America will be presented, and the opportunities for female discovery and empowerment described.

The study and practice of yoga is by nature interdisciplinary. While North American yoga has focused primarily upon the physical asana (postures or positions) of yoga, it is in fact an integrated system of history, philosophy, psychology, and cultural studies. The practice is rooted in a system that is very much connected to a specific culture and identity, Indian Hindu and Sikh societies in particular. There is support in favour of the notion that the stories from which North American yoga has evolved actually endorsed the caste system from which it stemmed, and that

while the central teachings of classical yoga sage Patanjali may have beneficial side-effects in our daily lives, they are designed for a higher purpose: to limit the accrual of karma that results in having to return after death in a new body so as to work out the unresolved consequences of our past actions. (Walker, 2012, 7-8)

By examining the influences and effects of each discipline upon yoga as it exists in North American context, one can see why women in North America have embraced it and its potential for self-empowerment.

History

Yoga originated almost 5,000 years ago in India. The history of yoga and its development can be

divided into four broad periods: the Vedic, Pre-Classical, Classical, and Postclassical Eras (Feuerstein, 2006). Within these eras, the cultivation of the ancient philosophical texts, practices and rituals, lifestyles, and cultural contexts of ancient yoga developed and adapted according to the needs of the Eastern societies to which they belonged. These societies were, for the most part, devoted to a patriarchal system within which women had little power or involvement.

Traditionally, in Indian culture, yoga was not available to women; gurus (teachers) would only accept male students and it was a devotion only taught to young boys (Desai, 2004). This changed with T.K.V. Krishnamacharya who, over time, began to see the potential for women in the discipline. According to Krishnamacharya's son, Desikachar, his father

was able to smell what was happening...my father's views about women changed...he said that "I think that if we do not encourage women the great Indian tradition [of yoga] will die...women are the future, youth are the future, invest in women and youth". (Desai, 2004)

Indra Devi was the first foreigner and the first woman to be taught by Krishnamacharya; she brought the first yoga studio to North America (California) and continued to spread yoga's teachings throughout southern North America and into South America. She "dissolved all cultural boundaries" and exemplified the future that Krishnamacharya had predicted (Desai, 2004).

The morphing of yoga within North American context into the modern yoga that exists today began only in the late nineteenth century. While the historical, cultural, and philosophical roots of yoga are well situated in the East, practitioners in North America and in particular women in North America, began to adapt it to fit their unique physical needs (in particular, for exercise and physical activity). Further, yoga's unique mental and spiritual connections have been manipulated by strategic marketing and consumer culture initiatives. North American consumer culture has had an effect on how yoga in the modern age (post-1970s) has been and continues to be presented and interpreted in this modern environment. This becomes particularly evident when examining media, advertising, and the portrayal of women from this time period.

Psychology

In Joy Lynn Kelley's doctoral thesis, *Body Esteem and Psychological Well-Being in Female Yoga Practitioners*, the connections between female yoga practitioners and their body self-esteem is investigated. Kelley posits that yoga is a tool that women can use to "positively influence body esteem" (Kelley, 2009). She also asserts that yoga "may cultivate a relationship with the body" and provide an opportunity to build a positive relationship with one's self (Kelley, 2009). This psychological influence on women's body image and self-worth is infused throughout consumer and body culture and is instrumental in the marketing and media industries. The linking of psychological well-being with social and cultural components via body esteem is supported in Kelley's investigation (Kelley, 2009). A theoretical framework for yoga's beneficial effects for women is presented as a way to "yoke" (join) multiple disciplines, and as an opportunity to increase self-esteem lessening the emphasis on women's bodies, appearance, and sexual attractiveness. This is of particular importance in North American consumer culture where females continue to be measured according to these physical traits and controlled through their bodies and physical measures of attractiveness (Bordo, 2003).

Consumer Culture

The images that represent yoga that are perpetuated in popular consumer culture in North America are part of a longstanding gym culture as well as a patriarchal tradition within which women are evaluated according to a sexual ideal. In North America, this ideal can be summed up as "thin, voluptuous and hot" (Markula, 2001). The business of yoga in North America, motivated by consumer culture, has altered yoga in order to be marketable and further perpetuate the consumer culture "ideal" that subordinates women through body control. This emphasis on the body is detrimental to women who could be enticed to attend yoga classes; "there's this trend to be decked

out in Lululemon, and make comparisons to others in class...it's a question of what sells vs. what's reality and what's integrity" (Walton, 2012, post). When considering body esteem, consumer culture and feminist theory, it can be affirmed that modern North American women are searching for an opportunity to gain control over their bodies and the constant pressures placed upon them to meet the consumerist female ideal (Bordo, 2003). There is juxtaposition between the consumerist "ideal" of yoga in North America and the actual physical, mental, and spiritual practice of yoga asana, pranayama (breathing techniques), and spiritual practices. While the presentation of yoga in North America can be observed as conforming to consumer culture, within the studios and the actual physical, spiritual, and mental practice of yoga, there is a countermovement to this consumerism. Although marketers and advertisers of apparel and lifestyles work to perpetuate the subservience of women, emphasizing their worth in body alone, women are embracing the practice and realizing that they are not defined by their bodies (Klein, 2012). Yoga as a practice actually becomes an opportunity for empowerment, enabling women to take control of and come to terms with their bodies.

Within the context of North American consumer culture of the twenty-first century, the traditionally Eastern male practice of yoga is being embraced and altered by Western women. It has been adopted by and reorganized within a new cultural context; "intertwining the lived experience with academic theory and history is a form of scholarship that stretches the discursive limits of qualitative research and provides an alternate paradigm of inquiry" (Tate & Douglas, 2010, 9). As Melanie Klein explains, yoga permits one to appreciate one's body, which offers an opportunity to shed the dominant cultural expectations of body and self:

Practicing yoga didn't require punishment or a push to achieve a result outside the present moment. The physical postures operated as suggestions, not destinations. Yet, I came to understand that the sacred space of a yoga practice and the rapidly expanding yoga industry weren't necessarily related. As yoga grew in popularity and was absorbed into mainstream culture, it began to reflect many of its toxic values and norms. I found the heart of yoga to be in serious contradiction to the messages perpetuated as the branding and commercialization of yoga exploded. (Klein, 2012, 28)

"That femininity," as Dorothy Dinnerstein has argued, "is perceived as both frighteningly powerful and, as the child comes increasingly to recognize the hierarchical nature of the sexual division of labor, utterly powerless" (Bordo, 2003, 208). The maternal power that women possess and in which they can perhaps feel confident as a result of higher self-esteem from practices such as yoga has been contradicted by the dominant culture; this is evident in the media's attempts to objectify the women used in ads as a well to sell products.

By these standards, yoga as practiced and conceived of by the contemporary mainstream is

actually an impediment to liberation. Today's contemporary sell-out glorification of the body seems to prove this. In fact, many practitioners of popular yoga may have little, if any idea of Dukkha [the truth that human experience is transient and that suffering results from excessive desire and attachment] and the stereological purpose of yoga practice to free us from it—and equal ignorance of the Dukkha their "feel-good" celebration actually perpetuates and encapsulates. (Boccio, 2012, 50-51)

Embodied Learning

Feminist perspective insists that "it is hard for women to feel good about themselves and have a good relationship with their bodies (body esteem) when they are steeped in a culture which has evolved into men having possession of resources and power" (Kelley, 2009, 31). Yoga encourages embodiment of experience and the linkages of body, mind, and spirit. This embodiment of awareness is termed "mindfulness" by being present in the moment and aware of the mental, physical, and spiritual components of their practice, female practitioners can regain control over their bodies. This in turn allows them to utilize yoga practice as a tool in creating a yoga culture

that serves them personally rather than the media's ideal that continues to perpetuate the dominant North American cultural ideal that places bodily power in the hands of males (Bordo, 2003).

North American consumer culture has attempted to codify yoga in order to conform to the "gender-coded signification, suffusing other meanings, overdetermines slenderness as a contemporary ideal of specifically female attractiveness..." and has emphasized that in "dominant Western religious and philosophical traditions, the capacity for self-management is decisively coded as male" (Bordo, 2003, 205). The sexual objectification of women is ingrained in North American consumer culture and this media has taken the spiritual practice of yoga within which women can find freedom from sexual objectification and altered it to fit these North American cultural norms.

Yoga gives women a means of self-awareness that competes with the self on the mat excluding the comparison of self with others. This leads to the idea of self-observer as opposed to another observer being needed for women to experience self-awareness. (Kelley, 2009, 30)

The significant aspect in this discussion is that women in particular have started to see through this consumerist influence and have found yoga a powerful tool for embodiment and empowerment.

Feminism

The body culture that exists in North American society has largely marginalized women by objectifying them, removing them from positions of power and influence, and forcing them to look for avenues of power only according to their purported worth to men. One only has to pick up any magazine or watch any television commercial to witness the objectification of women continuing today in our "liberated" society:

I turn to the social body of consumer culture in order to demonstrate how the "correct" management of desire in that culture, requiring as it does a contradictory double-bind construction of personality, inevitably produces an unstable bulimic personality-type as its norm, along with the contrasting extremes of obesity and self-starvation. These symbolize, I will argue, the contradictions of the social body—contradictions that make self-management a continual and virtually impossible task in our culture...[This has resulted in] over-determined slenderness as the current ideal for women. (Bordo, 2003, 187)

When a woman's attractiveness is her only form of power or influence, she is at a distinct disadvantage; the person who determines worth is someone else and decidedly male. In effect, women are made powerless.

Feminist studies have focused on the body due to its association with sexuality and gender. In this context it provides an opportunity to "experience the body as a site from which [one] can consciously explore and alter their relationships to power, race, class and gender" (Tate & Douglas, 2010, 3). By using Foucault's concept of "biopower", women can decentralize "points from which power is manifest, thus contesting the idea that sovereignty is the supreme expression of power" (Tate & Douglas, 2010, 4). As a result, "power is everywhere", and yoga can become an opportunity to investigate one's own relationship to power through bodily practice.

The philosophical tree of yoga focuses on the eight-limbed path to enlightenment. The first of these limbs contains the yamas and niyamas (restraints and observances) and they provide a place to begin to reflect during physical practice. The embodiment of the restraints and observances as part of the physical practice provides a context within which to measure physical sensations and utilize the power of self-observance to analyze the interactions between body, mind, and spirit.

The legacy of feminine self-objectification and low self-esteem in North American society—punctuated by disordered eating, continuous exercise, and abusive "fat talk"—has created an unhealthy cycle for girls and women. The cycle stalls them and prevents them from being truly

empowered. As feminist and social activist bell hooks states, these practices are “self-hatred in action. Female self-love begins with self-acceptance” (Klein, 2012, 28).

The internal processes and physical practices cultivated by yoga provide an opportunity to become attuned with the body that North American culture has suppressed; by embracing the body and its movements through the eight limbs of yoga, the interactions of mind, body, and spirit free the corporal individual. These processes strive to embody the cultural and social processes of yoga (Tate and Douglas, 2010). Yogic practice is an opportunity for practitioners to “learn that their embodied experience is valid and true, but that it is part of the vast trans-cultural production of yoga” (Tate and Douglas, 2010, 9).

Yoga offers an opportunity for women to gain control of their bodies, uniting body, mind, and spirit. Where the dominant consumer culture has psychologically, physically, and spiritually made women disconnected prisoners in their own bodies, distanced from their minds, they may find that yoga “is a pathway to cultivate self-love, allowing us to shift [their] sense of validation inward, as opposed to the standard practice of measuring one’s worth based on external definitions” (Klein, 2012, 38-39). Yoga offers women a way to break free so that they are no longer prisoners of the cultural expectation of slenderness.

Grounded Research: Making Connections

As an illustration of an identifiable culture as well as self-awareness that yoga creates in North America, the author conducted a grounded research study (Nielsen, 2013). The study population included eight women between 24 and 47 years of age of differing ethnic background living in rural Northern Alberta, Canada. Participants were asked if they recognized a “yoga culture” and if so, how they would define it. Their answers were predominantly affirmative regarding the presence of an identifiable yoga culture, and their responses varied in terms of the definition of and their identification with this culture. They overwhelmingly recognized the marketing manipulation of corporations and gender-biased advertising as superficial and manipulative. Some of the participants recognized that the culture had polarized representations of yoga in North America. One representation of yoga culture is promoted by corporations, branding, and media, as in the case of companies such as Lululemon. They recognized the tremendous presence of ego in television and print ads, serving consumer culture and its physical appearance-related expectations of society in general and women in particular. “It’s almost like a trend,” one participant remarked, “a trendy thing to do...Everyone is trying to do it...Lululemon, logos, organic, doing it just to do it,” and in turn sell products and create consumer brand loyalty (Nielsen, 2013).

In opposition to the superficial, trendy, logoed, branded yoga culture produced by consumer culture, there is the nurturing and grounding component of the actual physical yoga practice. This beneficial facet assists in the development of the spiritual and mindful embodiment of yoga culture. A number of participants recognized that the actual practice of yoga established and honed within them the tools and practices to assist spiritual and mental self-awareness. One reflective participant in the study provided the following observation about the practitioners in yoga classes,

you can find like-minded people striving to be better yogis and people who don’t do it don’t get it. Anyone who practices yoga is a yogi...striving to be better and whatever better means to them...bringing peace...not skinnier, not more flexible, or the perfect body syndrome, [but realizing that] I am who I am. (Nielsen, 2013)

This mindset was of great value to many of the participants personally as well as collectively in their yoga practice.

In addition to the awareness and acceptance of self that these study participants felt yoga culture embodied, they also stated that they observed a lack of ego within the sustaining, disciplining yoga culture. The emphasis in yoga culture that is a part of many studios throughout North America is that of self-care, body acceptance, self-love, compassion, and non-judgment (Nielsen, 2013). Just as Klein reveals, “yoga provided the practice that rooted the things feminist sociology had taught

me. It is one thing to intellectualize self-love and acceptance. It's another to embody and practice it, especially after spending decades learning, practicing, and perfecting self-loathing" (Klein, 2012, 32).

In recognizing the self-regulating capacity of yoga practice, these study participants were working to distinguish between the dichotomized yoga cultures; by not "buying into" the hype, they have intentionally or unintentionally been challenging the oppressive patriarchal constructs of North American consumer culture.

The women interviewed as a part of this study consistently saw yoga as a part of their identity, confirming that it was more than simply exercise. "I inspire others through my own experience and realizing my own imperfections but that is how you know...it's a lifestyle—a journey; it's a practice, a sense of being inside myself—it's about me." This journey of self-inquiry and embodied experience described by these women, the "living tradition" of yoga rooted in 5,000 years of history, continues to change and evolve as must happen in the human experience. "Yoga is a living tradition of self-inquiry and embodied experience that has always been associated with diverse ideas, beliefs, and techniques" (Walker, 2012, 25).

Conclusion

North American consumer culture has long contributed to the objectification of the female body (Spiropoulou, 2013). An Eastern tradition that historically excluded women is yoga. What is most interesting in the North American tradition of yoga is the fact that women have not only been able to practice yoga, but constitute a majority of contemporary practitioners; the North American tradition of yoga has been created from a tradition all of its own. In this analysis of North American yoga, an integrated approach to the phenomenon has been used to amalgamate a number of perspectives. From this diverse strategy, one can see how North American yoga is a very unique and powerful phenomenon that holds opportunities for women in particular to gain power over their bodies despite North American consumer culture. Understanding the multidisciplinary nature of this phenomenon assists in understanding what North American yoga culture has to offer women as a tool for empowerment and embodiment. By analyzing yoga's integrative nature, the opportunities for learning, understanding, growth, and empowerment become apparent.

An analysis of yoga culture as it exists in North America from an interdisciplinary perspective provides an opportunity to understand the significant tool it can be for female empowerment. By analyzing the influences of history, psychology, and consumer culture, as well as embodiment and feminist perspectives, the unique opportunities for personal empowerment are confirmed. An interdisciplinary approach and its worth in analyzing yoga and female empowerment are confirmed in Walkers' words:

In light of this knowledge, modern trends that find common ground between asana practice, somatic psychology, Buddhist mindfulness, and Vipassana meditation and even ecstatic dance are more in line with the actual tradition of cross-cultural exploration than the imagined pure and ancient lineage many pretend to be protecting. I am all for teaching Patanjali as an important historical reference point. But I find that what gives yoga depth, substance, transformational power, and juiciness today is rooted in a much more eclectic and life-affirming aesthetic. (Walker, 2012, 25)

It is doubtful that the ancient yogis, the authors of the Vedas, or Patanjali himself could have foreseen the transformation of yoga as a mental practice to an embodied experience that would pose such mental and spiritual possibilities for women. It is also surprising to realize the possibilities yoga has in its capacity as a tool for feminist consciousness and body image awareness (Klein, 2012). Through this interdisciplinary approach of analysis, a tool for awareness has been presented where one can separate the dominant consumer culture's construction of yoga from the yoga of embodiment and empowerment. This yoga of legitimization can provide opportunities for women to fully embody their experience and empower them to take control of their daily lived

experiences.

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