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## 'How Yoga Are You?': Exploring the Contemporary Practice of Yoga in the United States

Olivia McLaughlin

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'HOW YOGA ARE YOU?': EXPLORING THE CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE OF  
YOGA IN THE UNITED STATES

by

Olivia McLaughlin.

A thesis submitted to the Graduate College  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
Sociology  
Western Michigan University  
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# 'HOW YOGA ARE YOU?': EXPLORING THE CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE OF YOGA IN THE UNITED STATES

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Western Michigan University, 2016

In 2015, in the United States, 21 million Americans claimed to be regular practitioners of yoga. Yoga has long been studied by psychologists, therapists, and medical scientists for its ability to affect positive change in people's lives, particularly in regards to mental and emotional health and well-being. Within the field of sociology, yoga has gained an increasing amount of attention for its ability to help treat chronic eating disorders among women, becoming extremely popular within the subfields of sociology of the body and gender. Additionally, the cultural impact of the transmission of yoga has fascinated social scientists interested in studying globalization, commodification, and appropriation. Yet, the discipline currently lacks a broad understanding of people's experience with modern, contemporary yoga; how individuals perceive of its impact in their lives, how they create meaning out of the practice, and how social interaction effects, and is effected, by the practice. Using a symbolic interactionist perspective, this thesis takes a qualitative approach to the study of yoga, using theories related to symbolic boundaries, rituals, and gender to provide a description of how modern Americans experience the "ancient" religious tradition.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Yoga was first introduced to the Western world in 1893 at the Parliament of the World's Religions by Vivekananda (Alter 2006; Strauss 2006; Goldberg 2015). Vivekananda was well-known for his ability to foster interfaith dialogue and, upon realizing the west's interest in esoteric and transcendentalist thinking, managed to adapt traditional Hindu ideas and religious practices to befit the interests of his western audience, all in an effort to establish Hinduism as a world religion and promote Indian nationalism in the colonial era (Alter 2006). In 1896, Vivekananda published *Raja Yoga* (1896), a treatise that introduced his model of yoga based on an adaptation of Pantanjali's *Yoga Sutras* (Strauss 2006). *Raja Yoga* became instantly successful and is credited for being highly influential on our contemporary practice of yoga in the western world (Alter 2006; Strauss 2006).

Since then, yoga has become a fitness sensation (Prichard and Tiggemann 2008), a holistic health practice (Goldberg 2015), a pop culture fad (Demeter 2006), and an increasingly widespread topic of interest in academia (Field 2016), and the current 21 million Americans who claim to be regular practitioners only continues to grow (Cramer et al. 2016).

While the physical (Broad 2012; Field 2016), mental (Daubenmier 2005), and emotional (Douglas 2011; Ross et al. 2014) health benefits of the practice have been continuously touted within both academia and the medical community, social research on yoga in the western world remains limited to conversations about body image

(Tiggemann and Williamson 2000; Prichard and Tiggemann 2008), eating disorders (Daubenmier 2005; Dittmann and Freedman 2009; Douglas 2011), and cultural appropriation (Askegaard and Eckhardt 2012; Ramachandran 2014; Maddox 2015; Vats 2016), commodification (Demeter 2006; Laverance and Lozanski 2015), and other issues related to the western “perversion” of an eastern tradition (Smith 2007). As such, social research is missing descriptions regarding how peoples’ general experience with yoga in the United States; why people practice it, what it means to them, and how they perceive of the benefits of yoga in their life.

What is Modern Yoga?

The practice of yoga has had a rich and tumultuous history. Although some practitioners and gurus will argue that there is a traditional and authentic approach to yoga, historians point out that these claims are misguided and only serve to further complicate the already complex evolution and transmission of yoga throughout history and across continents (Strauss 2006). Researchers and historians of eastern traditions overwhelmingly agree that the yoga we practice now is the result of a transformation of numerous spiritual and religious practices that took place over the course of hundreds of years and under the influence of both eastern and western individuals (Alter 2004; Singleton 2010; Jain 2014; Goldberg 2015). According to Jain, attempts to create an “original” or “authentic” yoga practice only encourage an “inaccurate, homogenizing vision of Hinduism” (2014: p. 444). Attempts to establish individual definitions of “true

yoga” become problematic for the contemporary practice, given the diversity in beliefs and motivations held by modern practitioners.

Most individuals in the western world currently practice some form of *hatha* yoga (Alter 2004; Broad 2012). Hatha yoga, meaning “sun and moon”, emphasizes synchronization of movement with breathing and teaches practitioners to focus on the embodied experience (Douglas 2011). In this thesis, I utilize de Michelis’ definition of modern or contemporary yoga: “forms that have evolved mainly through the interaction of western individuals interested in Indian religions and a number of more or less westernized Indians over the last 150 years” (2005: p. 2). Lea expands on this definition, to further distinguish between two different types of modern yoga: “‘meditational yoga’ (which focuses upon meditation and concentration techniques), and ‘postural yoga’ (which places a stress upon physical practices)” (2009: p. 75). According to Strauss (2004), hatha yoga is the most popular type of modern yoga because it is essentially devoid of any spiritual or transcendental undertones, implying that western practitioners are solely motivated to practice for physical reasons.

After yoga’s introduction at the turn of the century, pockets of European-Americans throughout the western world dedicated themselves to the practice. It was not until the mid-twentieth century did the western world experience the “yoga boom” (Ivtzan and Jegatheeswaran 2014; Goldberg 2015). Presently, a person looking to practice yoga in the United States is presented with a menu of different styles and studios to choose from, depending on the benefits they are seeking to gain from the practice. For example, people looking to relax before bed can utilize techniques from yoga nidra (sleep

yoga); those looking to lose weight and burn calories, may find Bikram yoga, or hot yoga, more appealing. Much of the existing literature on western yoga has been concerned with commodification and appropriation of yoga, especially in regards to whether or not the exercise-based practices, like Bikram, can be considered “authentic” (Jain 2014). Other authors point out that these concerns are largely unwarranted, arguing that every culture in every age has constructed its own meaning and version of yoga (White 2012). Still, researchers maintain that practitioners in the western world over emphasize the asanas, or poses, and take little interest in the embodied “yogic experience” (Strauss 2004; Smith 2007; Lewis 2008; Singleton 2010; Goldberg 2015).

Smith, for instance, argues that “the practice and tradition of classical yoga as a technique to enable embodied transcendence is of little concern to most Western practitioners” (2007: p. 27), implying that western practitioners are only motivated by fitness purposes. Alternatively, Wilson and Spencer (1990) demonstrated that, like “classical Indian yoga”, western yoga provides practitioners an opportunity to cultivate spiritual growth and transformation and that it is the spiritual experience of yoga is growing for western yogis, not the physical one. The wide variety of yoga styles offered in the western world, suggest that there may be individuals searching for more than just a “yoga body”.

## Purpose and Research Questions

Despite the popularity of yoga in the United States, there is much we still do not understand about practitioners' individual experience with yoga and, further, much of the research that does exist often presents different and opposing views. Although there have been a number of studies conducted on yoga, much of what exists lacks an in-depth analysis of the importance and meaning of yoga in the western world, how practitioners interact with the symbols associated with it, and finally, the perceived impact it has on their lives.

While many findings suggest that yoga can be used as a way for people to form healthy relationships with their selves (Phillips 2005; Prichard and Tiggeman 2008; Ross et al. 2014), other researchers point out that its location within the exercise and fitness world may actually have negative effects on practitioners relationship with their self (Ghandi 2009; Laverence and Lozanski 2014). Further, academics have mainly been interested in studying yoga as it pertains to the female experience and, consequentially, have produced very little knowledge about gender within a yoga context. As such, in an effort to produce a general picture of yoga in the United States, my questions for this thesis remain broad. I ask:

1. How do modern Americans experience western yoga?
2. What do practitioners perceive as the benefits of yoga?
3. How is gender accomplished in a yoga setting?

## Summary of the Following Chapters

As I have mentioned, the purpose of this thesis is to explore yoga within the United States, the ways in which practitioners interact with the symbols and meanings associated with the practice, and how social interaction both impacts, and is impacted by, their practice. Further, I am interested in exploring how we might theories related to rituals and gender to the study of yoga so as to better understand practitioners' experience with modern yoga.

This thesis will be organized in the following manner. In Chapter II, I will introduce the conceptual framework I use to guide my analysis. I will give an explanation of the sociological theories and existing literature that is relevant to the present study, starting with an overview of symbolic interactionism, the larger framework that guided the entirety of this thesis. In Chapter III I will focus on the methods used to collect and analyze the data for this study. I will also detail the process through which I recruited participants and describe the setting where I conducted participant observation. Chapters IV through VI will engage with the empirical data I gathered. Here, I will address some of the major themes that emerged during my interviews with practitioners and apply different sociological concepts and theories to my findings. Finally, I will offer concluding remarks and recommendations for future research, and consider potential limitations to my research design and analysis. Following the empirical chapters, I offer the Appendices which provide a various documents that detail recruitment procedures, HSIRB protocol, and demographical information from my participants

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I will outline the social theories and concepts relevant to my analysis of yoga in the United States. I chose to approach this study from a symbolic interactionist perspective as it provides the best lens through which to explore microsocial encounters involving gender, boundary making, and embodiment—all of which proved to be are relevant to participants’ experience with modern yoga. After outlining the tenets of this perspective, I discuss concepts related to symbolic boundaries, including authenticity claims and distancing. As symbolic interactionism posits that individuals interact with objects in light of the meaning they have assigned to them, this perspective provides a starting point from which we can better understand the importance of yoga in practitioners’ lives.

### Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionist perspectives have largely developed out of the works of George Herbert Mead (Leigh and Gabel 1992). Symbolic interactionism maintains that “the world has meaning only insofar as it becomes meaningful to its inhabitants” (Brickell 2006: p.93). Thus, people engage with the world around them based on the latent significance imbued by the object or action in question. This perspective then provides a useful framework for understanding how individuals and groups create meaning for said objects and how, further, how those meanings impact social interaction (Mead 1934).

Blumer (1969) identifies three premises that influence a symbolic interactionist perspective: humans interact with objects and actions according to the meaning assigned to them; assigned meanings are derivative of the social interactions between and among individuals and are created through the proliferation of different symbols via verbal and non-verbal interaction; and finally, meaning is established through an interpretive process in which a social actor “selects, checks, suspends, regroupes and transforms the meanings in light of the situation in which [s]he is placed” (1969: p. 5). In short, Blumer’s definition of symbolic interaction is concerned with how social interaction is impacted by the meaning we assign to objects and actions.

Objects and behaviors inscribed with latent symbolic meaning come to represent and reify certain social norms and values. For instance, the color pink overwhelmingly implies femininity, especially for babies and young girls (Orenstein 2011). Color coding based on gender, however, was not a popular trend until the mid 1950’s. Newborn children, regardless of gender, were traditionally dressed in blue—the color associated with the Virgin Mary-- to signify their innocence (Paoletti 2012). While there was never a unanimous cultural shift that proclaimed pink is for girls and blue is for boys, department stores, nursery rhymes, and social movements began to inscribe symbolic value onto the colors. As a result, pink and blue became gender markers and symbols of either masculinity or femininity (Orenstein 2011). Although the implications of symbolic meaning can be most easily understood by analyzing gendered objects, the extent to which social things can be impacted by symbols extends far beyond the norms associated



with masculinity and femininity. We see this most clearly when two different groups construct different meanings for the same object.

### *Creating Symbolic Boundaries*

Sociologists have always been interested in understanding how individuals relate to others. Lamont and Molnar (2002: p. 167) posit that the study of boundary making has been a part of the “classical conceptual tool-kit of social scientists” since Marx and Durkheim distinguished bourgeois from proletariat and sacred from profane, respectively.

Symbolic boundaries are defined as the “conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space” (Lamont and Molnar 2002: p. 168). Symbolic boundaries help individuals construct definitions of reality and make sense of the world around them. When groups struggle over definitions of reality, symbolic boundaries function as barriers that separate people into groups. This separation then enables individuals to foster feelings of membership and solidarity with the other people in their group (Epstein 1992). According to Swartz (2011), highly diverse populations are more likely to experience boundary drawing because of the wide range of similar and dissimilar beliefs. As yoga brings together individuals from all different backgrounds with different motivations and practice styles, the subject is ripe for sociological analysis on why individuals draw symbolic boundaries and how they decide who is in and who is out.

As individuals begin to differentiate themselves from members of opposing groups they begin to make in-group/ out-group comparisons (Tajfel and Turner 1985).

In-group/ out-group comparisons enable individuals to “maintain and achieve superiority over an out-group on some dimension” (Tajfel and Turner 1985: p. 16-17). In-group/out-group comparisons can affect our understanding of success, failure (Crocker et al. 1998), and authenticity (Grazian 2003; Williams et al. 2005; Hutcherson and Haenfler 2010). Taylor and Whittier (1992), for instance, shows how lesbian feminists in the 1980’s drew boundaries between themselves and straight feminist women in an effort to distinguish themselves from women they felt were “less feminist”. Although lesbians once aligned themselves with straight feminists, the inception of the gay and lesbian movement of the 1980’s re-directed the attention of lesbian activists from issues related to sexism, to issues related to homophobia and discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Roth (2004) examined similar divisions within Black and Chicana feminist movements. The new generation of feminists who did not identify with the struggle of the largely white, upper-middle class women of the second-wave began to organize separate from mainstream white feminist values, focusing more on issues specific to low income women and women of color. In both of these studies, individual’s invoked symbolic boundaries to distance themselves from people they felt were not authentic representations of their perception of the feminist movement. Additional studies indicate, however, that how we conceive of authenticity has as much to do with appearance as it do adherence to a standardized set of values (Grazian 2004).

### *Claiming Authenticity*

According to Grazian (2004), authenticity is not an objective quality that is inherent to all things; rather, it is a “shared set of beliefs about the nature of things we

value in the world” (2004: p.12). Therefore, our understanding of authenticity is based on a complex set of criteria that does not necessarily reflect a standardized set of rules. In other words, social actors base their perception of authenticity off of individual or group values, not a criterion established by experts and authorities. As such, when discussing authenticity in this thesis, I do so in an effort to understand what practitioners believe an authentic yoga practice looks like; not to evaluate the authenticity of their practice.

Existing research in the study of authenticity and boundary drawing has largely focused on music cultures/ subcultures (Peterson 1997; Grazian 2003; Fonarow 2006; Eastman 2013). In a study of Chicago jazz clubs for instance, Grazian (2003) demonstrates how style, presentation, and location contribute to the patrons’ perception of how authentic a club is. Jazz venues that were located in traditionally working-class neighborhoods were thought to be more authentic than those located in up-town tourist neighborhoods, regardless of the performers’ adherence to the jazz canon. Patrons who were interested in an “authentic experience” attended clubs that were located in ethnically Black neighborhoods in an effort to distance them from what they considered inauthentic representations of jazz culture.

Yoga has already proved a useful subject with which we begin to better understand claims making and authenticity. Maddox (2015), for example, conducted participant observation at a yoga institute in Mysore, India. This yoga institute was largely populated by western practitioners searching for an “authentic” practice. The yogis in their study traveled to India in an effort to experience a yoga that matches their perception of what “real” yoga is. Ultimately, their perception of real yoga, Maddox

(2015: p. 330), is based on a narrow conception of India, one that “spurns western aesthetics, rejects technologies of modernity, and scoffs at local Indians who seek commodified relationships with tourists.” Ultimately, the researchers demonstrate how claims of authenticity indicate one’s power of discourse (Maddox 2015; Korpela 2010). Thus, assertions of authenticity can contribute to one’s ability to maintain superiority over those they perceive as less authentic, enabling them to create in-group/ out-group distinctions (Tajfel and Turner 1985).

A symbolic interactionist’s approach to boundaries and the study of authenticity will “emphasize the contexts and interactions through which boundaries are organized, as well as the cultural repertoires and narratives on which they rely on” (Williams et al. 2005: p. 5-6; Thorne 1993). In other words, the meaning assigned to objects and actions is contingent on the context the object exists in. This is why the same object can be seen as authentic/ inauthentic or masculine/ feminine, depending on the situation.

## Gender and Yoga

How the different genders experience embodied activities, like yoga, remains under-researched. The gender studies literature that does exist, largely focuses on women’s experience with yoga, particularly as they pertain to issues related to body image and eating disorders (Dittmann and Freedman 2009; Douglas 2011). However, as there is still so much to understand about modern yoga, the study of gender in a yoga setting needs to be approached with a broader lens.

Interestingly, yoga has not always been associated with femininity. While the yoga we practice now shares many similarities with pre 20<sup>th</sup> century yoga, the gender of yoga has transformed throughout history. Before the activity was introduced to the western world, yoga was considered masculine and only suitable for men due to the challenging postures and high degree of stamina demanded by the early instructors (Strauss 2004; Goldberg 2015). As such, the sequences and postures we commonly associate with modern yoga were designed with the male body in mind, not the female body (Goldberg 2015). Yoga was not seen as a feminine practice until about the time the aerobics boom happened in the 1980's (Broad 2012). Despite the fact that many of the yoga sequences and postures we see practiced today are identical to those used when the practice was intended for men, we currently see yoga as feminine. This is because our understanding of masculinity and femininity are informed by social interaction, rather than biological truths.

An interactionist approach to gender posits that 'maleness' and femaleness' do not exist in nature. Indeed, the division of bodies into a sexual binary is not so much a reflection of a biological truth as much as it is an "outcome of the application of meaning through language" (Goffman 1977: p.319). In other words, what a culture deems "boyish" or "girlish" is not predicated on an inherent set of laws; rather, our perception of maleness and femaleness arise out of the symbolic value imbued onto bodies, objects, and behaviors. As such, sex and gender should be treated as analytically distinct categories that dictate our perception of how people should behave and appear.

For interactionists, objects and individuals become gendered through routinized social practices that both produce and reproduce normative standards, thus giving gendered meaning to things (Garfinkle 1967; Goffman 1977; Butler 1990; Brickell 2003). Feminist social researchers have shown how gender is inscribed onto products (Berg and Lie 1995; van Oost 1995; Oudshoorn et al. 2002; Laverence and Lozanski 2015) to target either men or women, thus contributing to the maintenance of gender in social interactions and institutions. Oudshoorn et al. (2002), for instance, demonstrate how appliances, clothing, and foods—to name a few—can all be associated with either masculinity or femininity, impacting our perception of what objects are appropriate for what gender. As such, the clothes we wear and the tools we use contribute to our maintenance of gender as a social construction (West and Zimmerman 1987; Lorber 1992).

Building on Goffman's notion of gender as a presentation, West and Zimmerman (1987) contend that gender is an accomplishment, enacted by individuals every day. At a very young age we learn how to contribute to the division of the sexes "and the accretion of social expectations onto those categories" (Brickell 2006: p. 94) by enacting gender on the front and back stage (Goffman 1977). In line with the interactionist perspective, West and Zimmerman do not see gender as a set of traits, but instead a series of actions both performed and negotiated with others. Quoting Goffman (1976: p. 75), West and Zimmerman (1987; p. 129) argue: "femininity and masculinity are regarded as 'prototypes of essential expression that can be conveyed fleetingly in any social situation and yet something that strikes at the most basic characterization of the individual'." In

other words, seemingly insignificant actions are imbued with gendered meaning that are capable of reflecting either positively or negatively on someone. According to Goffman (1976) and West and Zimmerman (1987), we learn to positively evaluate others as early as childhood.

### *Masculinities and Femininities*

Since the mid-1980's social research has given considerable thought to the position of boys and men in a patriarchal society (Connell 2002). Although there is no ubiquitous, cross-cultural definition of masculinity, we typically measure men against an overarching standard known as hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1985).

Hegemonic masculinity imposes a specific set of behaviors and traits that are considered to be socially desirable in men (Carrigan, Connell, and Lee 1985). The qualities that characterize hegemonic masculinity are: "competitiveness, assertiveness, physical strength, risk-taking, courage, heterosexuality, and lack of feminine traits" (Willer et al. 2013: p. 983). The stakes associated with achieving hegemonic masculinity are extremely high. In fact, the standards that constrain definitions of masculinity are narrower than those that dictate the standards of femininity (Willer et al. 2013; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). For example, research on children and young adults indicates that society has slowly become accepting of girls who express themselves in manners that are typically considered masculine (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). However, there is much less tolerance for young boys who enact feminine characteristics or behaviors (Kimmel and Mahler 2003; Pascoe 2007). Because femininity and other masculine identities are less socially valued than hegemonic masculinity, there is an extreme amount of social

pressure placed on boys and men to live up to the standards prescribed by hegemonic masculinity and, as such, men are highly sensitive and responsive to actions, settings, or behaviors that might call into question their masculine identity (Kimmel 1996).

According to identity theorists, gender identification motivates gender-relevant behaviors (Burke 1989). While gender is just one of the many identities people possess, it is often the most highly valued identity (Ciadlini et al. 1976; Stryker 1980). Because gender identities are so deeply held, individuals will go to great lengths to maintain them (Willer et al. 2013; Burke and Tully 1977) and act in ways that will reflect positively on them (Stryker 1980). For example, men who identify as very masculine typically behave in “a more dominant or competitive fashion” (Willer et al. 2013: p. 986) so as to effectively demonstrate their unquestionable superiority over femininity (Stets and Burke 2000). When we enact gender-relevant behaviors in front of others, our identities are either questioned or affirmed based on their evaluation of our behavior. Research shows that when people are negatively evaluated by others, they typically enact extreme versions of the behaviors associated with the identity they originally failed to convey (Willer et al. 2013; Burke 1991; Heise 2007; Burke and Stets 2009). For example, a leader who receives feedback that she does not have the respect of her nation might enact excessive displays of the characteristics commonly associated with leadership.

Men who fail to convey normative standards of their gender identity enact overt displays of masculinity in the hopes of mitigating the threats posed against them. Willer et al. (2013), for instance, found that men whose masculinity was threatened expressed more masculine attitudes than those whose masculinity was not threatened (Willer et al.



2013: p. 983). This type of identity maintenance is known as “overcompensatory masculinity.” Similarly, Macmillan and Gartner (1999) found that employed women are at an increased risk of domestic abuse if their husbands are unemployed. Researchers point out, because men are traditionally expected to support the family, women who are the primary source of income pose a threat to their spouse’s gender identity. Altogether, this literature indicates that men are attentive to their masculinity and respond to threats by overcompensating for the behaviors that originally strained their gender identity.

Even if overcompensatory masculinity allows men to re-secure their gender identities, the standards of hegemonic masculinity are so unrealistic, they are virtually impossible to achieve (Connell 1985; Kimmel 1994; Connell 1995). Nevertheless, men are expected to achieve an “esteemed masculine gender identity” (Willer et al. 2013 p. 983). As a result, insecurity, fear of emasculation, and feelings of inadequacy are ubiquitous for men. Thus, it is the fear of being seen as insufficiently masculine that perpetuates the doing of masculinity in everyday life (West and Zimmerman 1987; Griffin 1993; Kimmel 1996), necessitating that men avoid behaviors and actions, such as yoga, that are seen as feminine.

Beyond the tight leggings and pink mats, the practice of yoga itself emphasizes an aspect of the human experience that is overwhelmingly associated with femininity—the physical body. Social research has consistently demonstrated the significance of the body in displays of femininity (Goffman 1976; Cahill 1989; Latham 1995; Kilbourne 1999). Blaise (2005: p. 93), for instance, shows how “femininities were embodied [by young girls] most noticeably through twirling, sulking, slouching and curtsyng.” In this study,

young girls used physical postures and movements to communicate with, and attract attention from their peers. Here we can see that the body is symbolically linked with femininity, implying that the physical nature of yoga itself may pose a problem for male identified yogis.

### Embodiment and Interaction Rituals

In sociological research, the body is viewed as a social object that can affect and be affected by other bodies (Durkheim 1912; Goffman 1967; Collins 2004) According to evolutionary biologists, “humans, as animals, have evolved with nervous systems that pay attention to each other” (Collins 2004: p. 54). As such, the mere presence of another person can have a tremendous effect on how we experience any given situation. Attempts at understanding how our bodies impact and are impacted by our social environment are best understood within sociological frameworks that deal with the concept of embodiment.

Embodiment refers to the way individuals experience the process of being (Waskul and Vannini 2006). Many social researchers trace the concept of embodiment to theorists such as Merleau-Ponty (1945), Mead (1934), and Cooley (1902), to name a few (Waskul and Vannini 2006). While each theorist has a different understanding of how the process of embodiment unfolds, their positions can be broadly explained by Moore’s (1998: p.3) statement: “the body is infinitely more than a mere skeleton wrapped in muscles and stuffed with organs.” Indeed, Waskul and Vannini (2006: p.3) argue that the

body is an “enormous vessel of meaning of the utmost significance to both personhood and society.”

Embodiment practices are activities that encourage participants to calm their minds, move intentionally, and focus on their actions and reactions to their environment (Douglas 2011). The literature indicates that group embodiment activities are capable of impacting the way individuals relate to their selves and the people around them (Dittmann and Freedman 2009; Douglas 2011; Diamond 2012; Ross et al. 2014). Yoga is considered an embodied practice because it teaches practitioners to acknowledge the connection between the physical and mental sensations in the body (Douglas 2011; Diamond 2012;). By simply taking notice of the relationship between the breath and the body, yogis can feel more connected to themselves, others, as well as “the divine” (Dittmann and Freedman 2009).

According to Dittmann and Freedman (2009), the mindfulness techniques incorporated into a yoga class teach practitioners to become hyper-aware of themselves and their classmates. Mindfulness techniques have been found to help individuals feel strong and empowered and cultivate a sense of self-acceptance. As a result, yoga studios can often feel like safe, non-judgmental spaces for personal growth and transformation (Douglas 2011; Ross et al. 2014). Given this evidence, Ross et al. (2014) and Jindani and Khalsa (2015) argue that embodiment practices can improve personal relationships and increase self-esteem and self-confidence.

While there have been a litany of studies done on how yoga can improve one’s mental, emotional, and physical well-being, we know very little about the specific

processes that help produce these positive effects. For instance, although the focus placed on the connection between the body and mind seems to help cultivate positive emotions, it is unclear whether this process is contingent on any other factors. Are embodiment and the release of positive emotions automatic then, or are they resultant from the combination of an increased awareness along with some other characteristic of yoga?

In his thesis *Interaction Ritual Chains* (2004), Collins explores how physical co-presence impacts micro-encounters and emotional processes. This idea has analytical roots in Durkheim's (1912) concept of *collective effervescence* or, "the collective expression of heightened emotion" (Diamond, Bartlett, and Lewis 2015: p.1). In ritual spaces, the excitement of being with others who share a common mood and mutual focus of attention causes emotions to intensify, resulting in increased feelings of group membership and identification with sacred symbols. For Durkheim (1912), this phenomenon is most easily brought about in religious rituals because attendees are likely to share a mutual respect for symbols and values. During the ritual, participants become energized by their awareness that the people around them are mutually engrossed in the same object or activity as they are. As a result, their emotions are intensified, creating "a sense of intersubjectivity within the group" (Collins 2004: p. 36).

According to Collins (2004:p.47) interaction rituals are "a fine grained flow of micro-events that build up in patterns of split seconds and ebb away in longer periods of minutes, hours and days." Simply put, they are events that facilitate a series of emotional processes capable of impacting its participants both immediately and well beyond the interaction ritual. Although rituals can involve formal ceremonies, formalities are not

crucial (Durkheim 1912; Collins 2004). The rituals themselves however, do require four ingredients, all of which act as variables “with causal connections and feedback loops among them” (Collins 2004: p. 47). According to Collins, the necessary ingredients for an interaction ritual are group assembly, barriers to outsiders, shared mood, and mutual focus of attention. As part of the feedback loop, each ingredient impacts the other, especially the latter of the two; shared mood and mutual focus of attention.

The mutual focus of attention that develops from group interaction is “the center of the interaction ritual” (Collins 2004: p. 47). Because mutual focus of attention and shared mood constantly feed back upon each other, they are considered the most important ingredients. According to Collins (2004: p. 48): “ number 3, the mutual focus of attention and number 4, the common mood, reinforce one another. As the persons become more tightly focused on their common activity, more aware of what each other is doing and feeling, and more aware of each other’s awareness, they experience their shared emotions more intensely, as it comes to dominate their awareness.” For instance, spectators at a sports event are typically more excited at half time than they were when they first arrived at the stadium. This is because as the interaction progresses participants become increasingly engrossed in the activity, getting “caught up in the rhythm and the mood of the talk” (2004: p. 48). When this happens, participants share “moments of intersubjectivity” (2004: p. 48).

Collins predicts four outcomes of an interaction ritual: group solidarity, *emotional energy* (EE), symbols that represent the group, and feelings of morality. Emotional energy is conceived of as a continuum where feelings of “confidence, elation, strength,

enthusiasm, and initiative in taking action” (Collins 2004: p. 49) are on the high-end and “depression, lack of initiative, and negative self-feelings” (2004: p.108) are on the low-end. Unlike short-term or *dramatic emotions*, emotional energy is long-lasting and pervades all social interaction. Thus, when individuals are pumped up with EE during an interaction ritual it continues to impact proceeding interactions, especially when the outcomes produced during the interaction are strong.

Interaction rituals are the most successful when a formal ceremony takes place, although it is not required (Collins 2004). When there are “stereotyped formalities” (2004: p.49) present (“recitation of verbal formulas, singing, making traditional gestures, wearing traditional costumes”) (2004: p. 49), they “contribute to the core process of intersubjectivity and shared emotion, which is to say, the experience of collective consciousness and collective effervescence, insofar as they contribute to a mutual focus of attention” (2004: p.49). In other words, if stereotyped formalities do not distract participant from the activity they are meant to be focused on, the ritual is likely to be more successful and produce high amounts of feelings of membership, EE, identification with symbols, and feelings of morality. If the participants are not aware of each other’s consciousness, then the ritual is “merely ‘formal,’ an empty going through of the forms, even a dead ceremonialism” (2004: p. 49).

As was briefly mentioned earlier, bodily presence can dramatically increase the collective consciousness of the ritual group. According to Collins, “ritual is essentially a bodily process” (2004: p. 53). Research shows that when humans come together in a shared location, “there is a buzz, an excitement, or at least a wariness when human bodies

are near each other” (Collins 2004: p. 53; Goffman 1967; Heider and Warner 2010; Cottingham 2012;). In Collin’s observation, the rituals that work are the ones where people are gathered in large numbers, for instance, at a New Year’s Eve celebration. As the clock counts down, their excitement increases and they begin making more noise at each other as they wait for midnight. As this progresses, the group begins to synchronize their actions and expressions as if they were in conversation with one another. Collins refers to this as *rhythmic synchronization*: when people “automatically mimic and synchronize facial expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements of another person and, consequently, to converge emotionally” (Hatfield et al. 1992: p. 153). Collins refers to this emotional convergence as *entrainment*.

The majority of research on entrainment and interaction rituals focuses on large group assemblies such as sporting events and concerts (Fox 2006; Heider and Warner 2010; Serazio 2012; Cottingham 2012; Faure, Appleby, and Ray 2015). In particular, researchers have been interested in exploring the role of the the first ingredient, physical co-presence, in stimulating emotions that extend well beyond the context of the interaction ritual. Von Scheve et al. (2014: p.5), for example, found that attendees of the World Cup displayed an “emotional resonance” as a result of rhythmic synchronization and emotional entrainment that took place over the course of the tournament. According to this study, the EE produced as a result of the repeated rhythmic synchronization persisted even once the tournament ended, promoting “solidarity in everyday, mundane contexts” (von Sheve et al. 2014: p.5).

Sporting events provide a rich setting for researchers to explore interaction rituals because of the high levels of emotion already produced in athletic contexts (Fox 2006). Additionally, they easily meet the requirements stipulated in Collins' list of ingredients. The fans' mutual focus of attention (the game) and common mood (excitement for their team) stimulate group excitement that is only further provoked by the group assembly (the presence of the mutual fans as well as the opposing team's fans) who are all gathered in a set location (stadium, arena, etc.) In this context, rhythmic synchronization takes the form of collective physical gestures, organized chants, and increased bodily contact. In Cottingham's (2012) study on Steelers football fans, he found that the emotional energy produced around the team was so intense, excitement and group membership persisted outside of the contexts of games and into the "mundane" interactions of everyday life (von Scheve et al. 2014: p.5). Many participants felt so inspired and excited by their team, they organized weddings, funerals, and parties as Steelers events, even incorporating the team's colors and symbols (Cottingham 2012). According to this study, the emotional energy that enabled this behavior was produced as a result of the entrainment that developed from the collective cheers, organized physical gestures, and integration of group symbols during the football games (Cottingham 2012). As such, physical co-presence was key in producing the emotional energy required to keep fans engaged once the game had ended.

Some have criticized Collins for leaving some concepts in his theory ambiguous. For instance, some researchers argue that it is not clear if all of the four ingredients listed by Collins are required for a successful interaction ritual. Collins himself addresses the



question of whether or not physical presence is necessary, and although he is willing to consider how technological advancements may enable long-distance entrainment, the existing literature on interaction rituals has maintained the importance of physical co-presence (Heider and Warner 2010; Cottingham 2012; Wellman et al. 2014). Indeed, Durkheim (1912), Goffman (1967) and Collins (2004) spoke about the body and its impact on society.

Researchers have additionally questioned the degree to which a successful ritual requires a shared mood. Heider and Warner (2010) challenge this assumption in their study on Sacred Harp Singing. According to Heider and Warner (2010), participants do not need to arrive at the interaction ritual in the same state of mind. For instance, some singers would show up to events feeling sad, others excited, and others tired; yet, after the interaction, all would leave feeling impassioned and connected to their co-participants. As such, Heider and Warner argue that a shared *consciousness*, or shared goal, is far more important than shared mood.—as was originally suggested by Durkheim (1995).

Similarly, Wellman et al. (2014) demonstrated how sacred symbols need not always be “sacred objects” (Durkheim 1912; Collins 2004). In a study on mega churches, the researchers illustrated how the pastor served as the sacred symbol for the interaction ritual. Senior pastors in particular were the “most powerful membership symbol in the megachurches” (Wellman et al. 2014: p.664), so much so that interviewees often brought him up without being prompted. Interviewees discussed their senior pastor a total of 270 times and used emotional language when discussing him. While interviewees were insistent that their pastor was not their object of worship, the

researchers point out, “in the same breath they would announce the unique spiritual power of the pastor to deliver the word of God, even referring to him as God’s ‘mouthpiece’” (2014: p. 664). As such, the group symbol for these mega churchgoers was a person, not an object or visual icon.

Because emotional entrainment relies on the connection between the physical and mental experience, activities that encourage practitioners to recognize the link between the body and mind may provide a fruitful context for further exploration on social interaction and embodied practices.

## CHAPTER III: RESEARCH METHODS AND SETTING

In this section, I outline my research process in detail, including information related to recruitment, sampling, data collection, coding procedures, and quality assessments. Because I utilize qualitative methods, it is necessary to begin by providing a justification as to why these techniques are best suited for my thesis.

### Justification For Qualitative Field Research

Research that seeks to understand individuals' experience with yoga should be approached from a qualitative perspective. Methods that do not require the researcher to immerse herself in the practice will not provide comprehensive insight to the social interactions and processes that occur in a yoga setting. This is because "by its very nature [yoga] is not oriented towards texts" (Sjoman 1999: p. 59; Smith 2007). As such, researchers interested in yoga will necessarily engage with the bodily practice and attempt to experience it in the same context as the practitioners they are studying.

Denzin and Lincoln (2008: p.4) assert, "Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world," enabling her to gather information on a variety of experiences that contextualize the lives of the individuals in the study. Qualitative researchers often utilize participant observation and in-depth interviews, as I have chosen to do with this thesis.

I selected qualitative research methods because I wanted to ask practitioners questions that cannot be sufficiently answered in a survey. I wanted to know how what

brought individuals to yoga, the details of their practice, their experiences since cultivating a regular practice, and how they made sense of its role in their lives. By approaching these questions from a qualitative perspective, I was able to gather more in depth information about the social phenomena I explored. Although both qualitative and quantitative researchers seek to illuminate the participant's experience, interviews and participatory observation can sometimes provide the best way to explore others' point of view (Denzin and Lincoln 2008).

Because it is easier to provide rich descriptions of social interactions and processes with qualitative research, quantitative methods would not have been appropriate for the purposes of my study. I wanted to provide an in depth analysis of how gender is accomplished in yoga, how yoga affects individuals, and how practitioners experience modern yoga. As such, qualitative methods were the most appropriate to help me address these topics.

## Research Design

In this section, I describe how I interviewed practitioners and observed at yoga studios. Sample methods largely consisted of snowball and purposive sampling using message boards at yoga studios or Facebook groups and other social networking sites for yogis. The majority of interviews were conducted in person, although some had to be conducted over the phone, and lasted between forty-five minutes to an hour and a half. Observation was conducted at two different studios in the Midwest over the course of

about two months in the fall/ winter of 2015. I analyzed the data using an open coding process, allowing major themes to emerge on their own through the different phases of coding.

## Interviews

I first started collecting data through semi-structured interviews (For Interview Guide see Appendix A). According to Fontana and Frey (1994), the researcher's role in semi-structured interviews is to be "somewhat directive" (p. 365). To accomplish this, I prepared a short list of questions. This allowed me to be prepared and prompt participants as needed, while giving me the freedom to let the interview unfold as a conversation, free of formalities that might feel restrictive to the participant.

Semi-structured interviews were not only beneficial to the participants. Loosely structured interviews allowed me to control the direction of the conversation and also enabled me to jump in and ask questions when needed, without worrying about disrupting the progress of the interview. I found this most helpful when participants would bring up topics I had not included on my interview guide. For instance, I did not include any questions about participants' family or personal relationships; however, improvement in personal relationships was a recurring theme throughout the interviews that I did not prepare for. As such, the casual nature of the semi-structured interview process enabled me to further pursue topics I had not originally intended on discussing.

As previously stated, interviews were conducted in person or over the phone, depending on the participants availability and preference. Local interviews tended to be conducted in person, whereas long distance interviews were conducted over the phone. Had I not been able to conduct interviews over the phone, my access to male yogis would have greatly suffered. While 65% of my participants were living somewhere in Michigan, about 70% of the male participants I interviewed lived outside of Michigan. (See Appendix B for participant demographics).

Overall, I found interviews conducted over the phone unfolded more smoothly and further, the participants I interviewed over the phone seemed more comfortable and willing to share information about sensitive topics including, body image, gender identity, spirituality, and style preference. It seemed that the lack of face-to-face interaction enabled them to express their opinions and feelings more freely, without having to worry about my reaction.

### *Recruitment and Sampling*

As is customary for a master's thesis, I set out to interview 15-20 practitioners about their experiences with yoga in the United States. In total, I ended up conducting 20 interviews with sessions lasting anywhere from forty-five minutes to an hour and a half.

Yogis who qualified for the study were adult persons over the age of 18 who practiced yoga at least once a week. I was interested in speaking with adults only to avoid issues with parental consent and to ensure low ethical risk. I spoke to all genders about their experience with yoga and did not discriminate based on practice style or method.

Although yoga is a female-dominated activity, I was interested in exploring how gender is accomplished in a yoga setting. Because gender is relational (Goffman 1977; West and Zimmerman 1987; Lorber 1992) I needed to explore not only the experiences of one gender in comparison the others, but the experiences of one gender as they relate to the others. As such, it was important that I seek out yogis of varying gender identities.

### *Recruitment Procedures*

Potential participants were recruited in-person, before or after practice sessions, or through social media. Upon initiating a conversation with students and instructors, I briefly explained my research. This was beneficial for myself as well as the people I interacted with as it allowed me to begin recruiting at the onset of the conversation while respecting the privacy of practitioners who might not be interested in participating.

In-person recruitment proved to be more challenging than I originally thought it would be and I struggled to meet the minimum of 15 participants, let alone 20. Part of the challenge was due to the fact that I was insistent on interviewing practitioners from the two observation locations, during the first half of the data collection phase. This was particularly an issue when it came to increasing my sample of male yogis. After struggling to gain access to male practitioners at my observation locations, I contacted various online yoga communities via Facebook and Instagram.

I used a Facebook Yoga for Men (YFM) group to gain access to male yogis and Instagram to gain access to yogis from the body positive community. Because of the high sex ratio in yoga, it was difficult to recruit a sufficient amount of male yogis as they were

so few in number. Although I made contact with several, only two actually followed through with an interview. Similarly, by using purposive sampling on Instagram I was able to reach out to practitioners who did not fit the stereotypical profile of a yogi.

According to Field (2016) and Brems et al. (2015), stereotypes related to flexibility, athleticism, and ideas regarding the body type of a typical yogi, certain groups of people may not be willing to practice at a studio. Body positive yogis often identified as plus-sized or curvy and were readily accessible on Instagram, given the recent increase of athletes and fitness oriented individuals who use the site for self-promotion (Hutchins 2011; Reichart Smith and Sanderson 2012; Reichart Smith and Sanderson 2015).

As soon as practitioners expressed interest in participating in my study, I asked for their email address and sent them a standardized response thanking them for their interest in the study and requesting that they read the informed consent document. Should they still be interested after reading the consent form, I asked them to return it signed. The informed consent document I sent was approved by Western Michigan University's HSIRB and (See Appendix D).

Upon returning the signed document, the participant and I agreed on a time and place for the interview and scheduled a meeting. All of the in-person interviews took place in a coffee shop while the interviews conducted over the phone took place in my apartment. Conducting phone interviews in my apartment allowed me to put the call on speaker phone so I could record the conversation, while assuring participants that the conversation was in private. Participants who expressed interest but did not respond to



my initial message were sent a follow-up email. (A list of these messages as well as the recruitment flyer can be found in Appendix C).

### *Sampling Techniques*

It was my goal with this study to interview as many non-normative yogis as possible. As such, I sought out participants who did not fit the yoga profile of white, female, thin, and in excellent health (Park and Siegel 2015). In other words, I wanted a sample that was diverse in terms of race, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity. In an attempt to diversify my sample as much as possible, I utilized non-probability sampling techniques. According to Singh (2007), non-probability sampling methods are ideal for exploratory studies such as mine, because they allow the researcher to select participants based on availability, access, and particular characteristics (Singh 2007). In this study, I used snowball sampling and purposive sampling to select participants.

Snowball sampling is used to recruit participants through via recommendations from individuals who have already participated in the study and then using their recommendations to gather additional participants (Babbie 2011). Throughout the interviews and conversations with potential participants, I took note of people they recommended who might be interested in participating. I also had a question at the end of my interview guide where I asked participants if they knew anyone who might want to speak with me. Snowball sampling proved helpful when I was no longer able to attend yoga classes and recruit in person via purposive sampling.

In addition to snowball sampling, I used purposive techniques to contact potential participants. Purposive sampling is used to gain access to a specific population (Babbie 2011). Purposive sampling is sometimes referred to as selective or judgmental because it is a method used to select participants based on a certain characteristic. In this case, the characteristic being sought out was involvement in yoga. I used purposive sampling techniques while conducting participatory observation at the two yoga studios I attended and by contacting the Facebook administrators of the YFM group and various instagram yogis. Out of the three female instagram yogis I contacted, only one responded and accepted my request for an interview.

### *Informed Consent*

When a participant expressed interest in participating in the study, I sent them my informed consent document and asked them if they had any questions about the purpose of the study or the research process. Once participants had returned the document, the interview was scheduled. To be sure the participants were comfortable with the purpose and process outlined in the consent document, I began every interview by asking them if they had any questions and if they were still willing to participate. Participants seemed to appreciate my openness with the interview process and many had questions for me regarding my own experience with yoga and my motivation to choose it as a topic for my thesis. All questions were answered openly and honestly.

Before beginning, I also made sure participants understood the nature of open ended, semi-structured interviews. I allowed them to take a look at my interview guide and provided them with a copy, should they be interested in following along. At this

point I let participants know that their identities would be protected and known only to me. To ensure this, audio files and transcriptions were labeled according to their assigned a pseudonym and the date of the interview. Participants were given the opportunity to choose their own pseudonyms, however, all but one asked me to choose for them. To assign pseudonyms, I searched for popular names based on the race, ethnicity, and gender they identified with. For example, Isabella identified herself as a Mexican-American woman. To choose a pseudonym for her, I typed in “popular girl names for Mexican-Americans” and chose Isabella because it did not resemble the participants real name in any way. All participants were protected by a pseudonym with the exception of Jfindsyoga, the instagram blogger I interviewed. She wished to keep her identity known because she thought it was important that people be able to identify her as a part of the yoga body-positive community.

As an added assurance that they would be free to share stories and express their ideas, I explained to participants that I was the only one transcribing the interviews and should they have any questions about the interview or wish to see the transcribed document, they were free to contact me at any time. Out of the twenty participants I interviewed, none of them asked to see the transcription.

### *Interview Process*

As previously stated, some interviews were conducted in person while others took place over the phone. One interview was conducted using Facetime, a video chat service for iPhones that is similar to Skype.

Interviews that were conducted in person were scheduled in coffee shops. While there was three interviews that took place on a college campus, our actual meeting place was set for a coffee shop near the dining hall at the university. Interviews conducted over the phone or on Facetime took place in my apartment so that I could put the call on speaker and record the conversation without attracting the attention of others. Participants I met with in person were allowed to pick the meeting place. Both in person and phone interviews were recorded on two devices in the event of a technological malfunction. Once I was assured that the session was successfully recorded, the file on the back up recorder was deleted. The audio from the primary recorder was also deleted, once I had finished transcribing the interview.

To restate, interviews were conducted in a semi-structured fashion. After asking about their socio-demographics (See Appendix B), I began with questions that were interesting, yet easy to answer. These questions were meant to establish rapport between myself and the practitioner. For instance, I began by asking participants when they started practicing yoga. In this introduction section, I also asked participants to explain how they first became interested in yoga. This portion of the interview gave me insight about their personal history with yoga and the context of which they were introduced to the activity.

The next section of the interview focused on yoga within a broader context. Here I asked participants their thoughts on yoga's popularity in the United States. I also asked

them if there were certain types of yoga they enjoyed more than others. I also asked participants why they thought more women practiced yoga than men. These questions prompted practitioners to consider yoga within a social context. This section ended by asking participants what they thought the “ultimate goal” of yoga is and to explain what they key to a successful practice is. This prompted informants to go into detail about the importance of yoga in their lives.

The third section dealt with the particularities of participants’ yoga practice. Participants were asked to describe their practice space, what they liked about their studio, what they disliked, and if they found themselves incorporating parts of their yoga practice into their lives outside of the studio. I also asked them to discuss what the most challenging part of yoga is for them and what it would be like if they could no longer practice.

Following this section, I inquired about issues related to exercise and embodiment. Here, I asked participants to tell me about their health and fitness practices and their relationship with their body. This portion of the interview allowed participants to get into detail about issues related to body image, weight loss, and fitness goals. Further, it encouraged practitioners to think about the more personal aspects of their practice.

Before asking participants if they had any closing remarks, I inquired about religiosity and spirituality. To start, I asked practitioners about their religious identity; if they practiced a religion or considered themselves at all spiritual. I then asked if those beliefs related to their yoga practice. Next, I asked if concepts like the “divine self,” “enlightenment” or “transcendence” were at all meaningful to them. I included these

topics to allow participants to speak about the non-physical components of their practice and encourage them to tell me about how their own beliefs impact, or are impacted by their yoga practice. Closing questions included: “is there anything I didn’t ask you that you think I should ask other participants?”, “is there anything else you would like to add?” and, “is there someone you could recommend that might also like to participate in this study?”

Initially, I stuck to my interview guide very closely. As I became more comfortable with the data collection process, however, most interviews began with the introduction questions and evolved from there, free from the interview guide. As it turned out, most participants were interested in talking about the topics I was seeking to investigate (gender, the self, and transformation) and did not need to be prompted by me. Consequentially, I found it more useful to allow the participants to dictate the course of the interview.

### *Participant Information*

Using the aforementioned sampling procedures, I ended up interviewing 20 practitioners; twelve women, seven men, and one transgender individual. Thirteen participants were recruited using purposive sampling (either recruited via Facebook or at the observation locations) and seven were recruiting through snowball sampling methods. Participants who were recruited by snowball sampling were recommended to me by participants I had already spoken to or from friends or acquaintances who knew I was conducting a study on yoga. Most of the participants I recruited from snowball sampling were men, recommended to me by the Facebook YFM group administrators.

Most of the participants who were recruited at one of the yoga studios I observed at came from the Health and Wellness Studio (HWS). Out of the ten I interviewed from one of the observation sites, only one came from San Culpa Yoga (SCY).

After contacting the two administrators from the YFM group, three participants were recommended as potential participants. Although several months have passed since I asked the administrators to help me recruit male participants, I still receive the occasional email from a male yogi interested in participating.

Of the yogis interviewed, thirteen lived in the state of Michigan. I interviewed one participant from Colorado, one from Georgia, and five from Florida. All five of the participants from Florida were recruited from the YFM page, most likely because the administrators of the Facebook group are also co-owners of a YFM studio in Florida.

The education level of the practitioners I spoke to range from high school diplomas to PhD's. Two participant that earned high school diplomas had some college credits but did not earn a degree, three were working toward a bachelor's degree, eight had earned a bachelor's degree, four had earned a master's degree, and three had PhD's. Participants' level of occupation included part-time, full-time, retired, and not employed. Those who were not employed were working toward their bachelor's degrees and categorized their occupation as "student."

While only fourteen participants originally started practicing yoga at a studio, all 20 were members at a studio by the time of our interview. Further, thirteen had taken some type of instructor training course. Only seven of the thirteen who had undergone

teacher's training course actually taught classes. Participants' age ranged from 22-68 with the majority of participants falling between 24 and 30 years old. Five participants were over the age of 50 and only one was younger than 24 years old.

In terms of race and ethnicity, the majority of my participants were white, as was expected. When asked to identify their race/ ethnicity, thirteen identified as white, two identified as Mexican- American, one identified as Philippine, one identified as African- American, one identified as "mixed-race, Black and white," one identified as Arabic, and one identified as "super white." When I asked participants to describe their political orientation, twelve identified as liberal, two identified as conservative, one identified as fiscally conservative and socially liberal, one identified as socially liberal and religiously conservative, two reported having no political orientation, and one identified as an "intersectional feminist", and one identified as independent.

In terms of annual household income, six reported earning less than \$30,000 a year; five earned between \$50,000 and \$73,000; seven earned over \$80,000; and four preferred not to give an answer. Further, seventeen identified as straight, two as gay, and one as queer in terms of sexual orientation.

Of the twenty participants I spoke with, one requested a follow-up meeting and another texted my cell phone to elaborate on a question they felt they did not answer adequately. I contacted four participants via email with follow-up questions.

### *Data Analysis*



Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and assigned a pseudonym before the audio file was deleted and the transcript was coded. Interviews were coded using grounded theory, following the principles of grounded theory analysis discussed by Charmaz (2006). Grounded theory was useful for this study because it allowed patterns to emerge from the interviews as the project evolved. It also enabled me to begin the analysis phase of the study from the perspective of my participants. Approaching the material without preconceived expectations of potential codes enabled me to “remain open to exploring whatever theoretical possibilities can be discerned in the data” (Charmaz 2006: p. 47).

To start, I read through each transcript once, taking notes in the margins of interesting points and sections. After the first reading of the transcripts, I reviewed my notes in the margins and jotted down my thoughts. Note taking, or memo writing, was very important throughout the coding, analysis, and writing process. According to Charmaz (2006), memo writing is “the pivotal step” (p. 72) between data collection and writing; however, I utilized memo writing throughout most of the analysis process. Journaling my thoughts helped me connect and compare patterns in participant’s transcripts and helped stimulate self-reflection. After journaling some thoughts after the initial read-through, I began the second phase of analysis.

The second read-through of the transcripts was much like the first as I continued to look for patterns and recurring topics I might have missed initially. Following this stage, I compiled a list of topics, informed by the notes I took, that seemed to recur throughout the interviews. This list included the tentative category headings, beauty and

the body, east and/or west, meditation/ mind-body connection, masculine/ feminine, exercise/ fitness, and personal information/ background information. In this section I was attempting to begin categorizing participants' experiences with yoga and their ideas regarding the practice in the western world. This process helped me reduce the data and begin to consider major themes.

To help categorize the data, I created a Microsoft Word document with six different sections, titled according to the six category headings I compiled after the second read-through. I then went through each interview a third time and indicated the transcript number and page number where each topic appeared. For instance, if Informant 3 discussed body image on page five of the transcript I typed "Informant 3: p. 5" under the heading labeled "beauty and the body." I indicated the transcript number and page number where each topic could be identified for all twenty interviews. By the end of this phase I had added the category "personal transformation" to the list of topics.

Next, I read through the list of topics and their corresponding citations. After this phase, my original six categories were reduced into five different color codes: "long-term transformation" (pink), "immediate benefits" (purple), "gender" (orange), "real yoga/ us-them" (green), and "personal/ background info" (yellow).

After this process, I created another document with the new coding titles and copy and pasted in sections from the interviews into their corresponding category. This allowed me to begin organizing the data for the drafting stage and allowed me to compare how statements from participants differed in the same category. Once I had established the final codes, I reviewed my field notes and organized them in the same manner. My

field notes were typed into the document in italics. This helped me keep my own thoughts separate from participant statements.

### Participant Observation

Participant observation was an important component of my thesis. Participant observation put me into direct contact with the practitioners and provided valuable information regarding context that proved helpful during the interview process.

Participating with other yogis also helped me to better understand the various elements involved in a person's practice and experience (Nevrin 2008).

By the time I began the observation portion of this study, I had cultivated my own yoga practice for approximately five years. My familiarity with yoga studios helped me understand appropriate studio etiquette and allowed me to take part in the class without disrupting the other students. Because it would have been in appropriate and awkward for me to take notes during the class, field notes were recorded immediately after class. Further, note taking during observation sessions can “deflect attention from the behaviors being observed to the process of recording” (Snow and Anderson 1987: p. 1344).

The objective of participant observation was not to examine individual techniques or practices. Instead, I was interested in the physical environment, the style of yoga, the overall composition of the group of students, the pedagogy of instructors, and the way students related to one another before, during, and after class.

### *Observation Locations*

Observation sites were chosen based on location convenience and the style of yoga practiced; it was my intention to identify two studios that appeared different from the other in style and purpose so as to ensure a complete and exhaustive understanding of the environments I studied. The names of the studios were assigned a pseudonym to protect the identities of the individuals who practiced there.

The Health and Wellness Studio (HWS) was chosen based on its integration of a variety of holistic practices and emphasis on healing and total body well-being. This location includes classes that explore the chakras (Sanskrit for “wheel,” referring to the seven main energy centers in the body), muscular strength, and anxiety and depression, to name a few. Class descriptions included language like, “inner radiance,” “meditative awareness,” and “positive being.” This studio integrated mantra chanting, yantra (symbolism), and an explicit emphasis on “ancient philosophical teachings of Yoga.”

The lobby of HWS was quiet, except for a small fountain on the front desk. There were a few cushioned seats, decorated with pillows and a throw blanket in the front room along with a rack of handmade soaps, lotions, and HWS apparel for sale. Candles and plants were on almost every flat surface in the lobby and on the back wall there was an inspirational quote about loving life. There were two different studio rooms in HWS, a large room and a small room. Each studio had a small altar in the front of the room with a stereo, candles, incense, and various other objects such as a small gong, Tibetan singing bowl, and sometimes a stack of fliers advertising a new class or workshop.

Either one-by-one or in small groups, students would file into the classrooms and set up their mat and other supplies such as a block and bolster (large pillow). More often

than not, students would have to be encouraged to scoot their mats closer to one another in order to make room for the incoming students. Practitioners were often hesitant to impede on their classmate's personal space and would have to be told to "get comfy" or "don't be shy" by instructors, in an effort to make students sit closer together.

Once the class started, instructors would often play music and lit incense or candles. The room was dimly lit throughout the entire practice and almost completely turned off during the resting posture at the end. When instructors did play music it was soft and varying. The most common genre I heard, however, was some type of eastern style of music one would expect to hear from a movie in a scene depicting India or the Middle East. Although the instructors would clarify the names of the poses in English, they first used traditional Sanskrit to refer to the postures and sequences.

Classes typically evolved in a similar fashion no matter who was teaching the session; however, each instructor did things their own way and tailored the class to fit the students' needs. First, students went around the room and introduced themselves, the instructor then made any announcements about events at the studio. Next, we began with a breathing exercise led by the instructor. After a few moments of "centering the breath" we then began to incorporate the body, slowly. At this point the instructor turned the music on and began leading us through sequences.

Once the majority of class time had passed the instructor would slow us down by bringing us onto the mat where we would take gentle poses in a seated position or lying flat on our backs. After transitioning us into *savasana* (corpse pose), the instructor initiated a sequence of chanting, the gong, or Tibetan singing bowls to stimulate sound

vibrations that were meant to stabilize the body. Students were invited to stay in their resting posture for as long as they wished but most students left the class when the instructor said something like, “thank you for sharing your time with us. Namaste.”

The second location was chosen based on its contrast to the Health and Wellness Studio. The San Culpa Yoga Studio’s (SCY) approach to yoga was largely focused on physical fitness. Whereas the previous studio offered a “holistic approach” to yoga, this studio focused more on exercise and bodily health. Courses at this studio had names such as “Sculpt,” “Yoga Fire,” and “Power Flow.”

The SCY studio smelled like sweat and cleaning products and, upon walking in, you could feel the humid air coming out of the studios where hot yoga was being practiced. At the front desk, there were a number of products for sale ranging from yoga mats, to bathing suits, to water bottles, and beach towels. On the left side of the desk was a basket of mats and weights that were available for students to use and even further left was a wall lined with cubbies where students could store gym bags and other personal belongings. Above these cubbies more bathing suits, blouses, and exercise apparel was on display for sale.

The classrooms at San Culpa were empty with hard wood floors and mirrors lining three of the four walls. Similar to HWS, instructors at SCY also played music; however, the way the two studios utilized music could not have been more different. Over the course of the two or three weeks I observed at SCY, I began to refer to it as “dubstep yoga” to my friends and family because of the high volume and intensity of the

music. The tracks instructors chose at SCY had a quick tempo and a heavy bass line, reminding me of music one might hear at a dance club or aerobics class.

Similar to the Health and Wellness Studio, students at SCY were often pressed to move their mats as close to one another as possible to make room for everyone in the class. Contrary to HWS, however, the progression of the class at SCY yoga did not differ from teacher to teacher as they did at the HWS. All hot classes were identical and, after interviewing one of the instructors, I learned that the teachers there were required to memorize a script for each class. Classes at SCY began with a short breathing exercise where we were instructed to lay flat on our backs and begin stretching our muscles. The remaining ninety minutes were arguably the sweatiest minutes of my life every time I went to a hot class at SCY.

Although I had been to hot yoga before, I had never attended a class that was so physically challenging. For instance, half way through the class, the instructor turned up the music and called out for us to prepare for our “abs and arms appetizer.” This “appetizer” was meant to cool us down after the first half of the practice and prepare us for the remainder of the class. Following this portion we were invited to take a water break.

In contrast to HWS, San Culpa Yoga did not use the traditional Sanskrit names or the English translations of the poses. Instead, they had their own terms such as “root to rise” instead of mountain pose or “fighter stance” instead of warrior pose. Similar to HWS, however, the instructors at SCY ended the class in a resting posture and sent the students off by saying, “Namaste.”

### *Data Collection and Coding Procedures*

Field notes were taken either by hand or recorded in an audio file on my cell phone, depending on what time I had attended the class and how much time I had between my commitments. Notes that were recorded on my phone were transcribed and the file was named according to the date and observation location.

In my field notes I indicated the location, class name, instructor name, and as many facts about the make-up of students in the class as I could remember. I also described the sequence of poses we did and the recorded details about the music and props used by the instructors. Information about props was only pertinent to field notes taken after a class at HWS since instructors at San Culpa did not utilize objects like incense or gongs. I also took notes about interactions that were exchanged between participants before, during, and after the class and reported on the language used by instructors. For instance, the observation that HWS used English and Sanskrit to call out poses while SCY used their own terms was realized while transcribing field notes after a session of hot yoga at SCY one evening.

As was stated previously, I was not observing classes for the purposes of evaluating students' ability to successfully achieve a particular posture. I did however, observe classes to witness interactions that took place during the interim of poses. For example, I made it a point several times to keep my eyes open when the rest of the class was instructed to keep theirs closed so that I could observe how the other students were engaging with the instructor's prompts. Additionally, I paid attention to how students



related to practitioners positioned next to them to try and understand how someone else's practice might impact others around them.

Coding procedures for field notes were far less detailed than those conducted on interview transcripts. After an initial reading of the transcribed field notes, I compiled a list of codes that were distinct from the codes used to analyze the interview data. However, many of my reflections after class matched information shared with my by participants. When these sections were identified in the field notes, I extracted them from the transcripts and entered them into the appropriate category in the Microsoft Word document used to organize my interview data. This information was entered using italics so that I could contextualize my field notes with the statements from participants while keeping the data separate.

Codes specific to the observation notes were underlined with colored gel pens and included: "student/ instructor interactions" (purple ink), "sensory data" (neon green ink), "fitness/ exercise language" (neon orange ink), and "spiritual/ transcendental language" (pink ink). Sensory data refers to information that could be gleaned from the five senses; touch, taste, smell, sight, sound.

### Assessment of Quality

Qualitative researchers are likely to encounter questions regarding objectivity, generalizability, and validity when drawing conclusions from their data. As such, it is necessary to address these issues before presenting the findings of my study.

Reliability of data should be considered by any researcher, regardless of method and design. However, establishing reliability can be a complicated process for researchers using qualitative methods as there is no single way to measure the quality of these studies (Mays and Pope 2000; Guba and Lincoln 2005). Researchers largely agree that the best way to establish quality in qualitative designs is to first ensure transparency regarding how the data were collected (Meyrick 2006; O'Reilly and Parker 2012), as I have done above. Barbour (2001) however, argues that qualitative methods are often so complex, outlining the research process alone is not a sufficient check for quality. In this section, I show how purposive sampling, respondent validation, and feminist-based researcher positioning were used to ensure the quality of the data collected

Unlike quantitative data, qualitative research does not aspire for statistical generalizability (Harding and Gantley 1998). Instead, qualitative research aims to “reflect the diversity within a given population” (Barbour 2001: p. 1115; Kuzel 1992). In the past, convenience sampling was considered the best way to assure quality in methods of qualitative sampling as it allowed researchers to access individuals who belonged to groups that otherwise might have been difficult to contact (Barbour 2001).

While this method assures access to participants it does not give the researcher very much control, often leaving her “at the mercy of any selection bias inherent in pre-existing groups” (Barbour 2001: p. 1115). Mays and Pope (1995) posit that purposive sampling offers the researcher more control, allowing them to search for outliers or deviant cases that enable them to illuminate “the exception to prove the rule” (Barbour 1999: p. 40). In convenience sampling, participants who might diversify or complicate

the data could be discounted because they do not belong to the specific group or population being targeted in convenience sampling.

For instance, after four months of data collection I had only interviewed two men, both of whom practiced the same type of yoga at HWS. These men had very similar backgrounds shared similar stories regarding their practice. The yoga practiced at HWS, however, is very different from yoga practiced at SCY. Because men were already less likely to respond to my requests for interviews than women, limiting my sampling to the observation locations was already proving to be problematic. Using purposive sampling, I contacted members of a “yoga for men” Facebook group who came from a variety of different backgrounds and practices, thus enabling me to diversify and increase my sample of male identified yogis.

In addition to assuring a diversified sample, qualitative method experts have pointed out the importance of assuring that the thoughts and feelings of respondents are being accurately portrayed. Researchers refer to this as participant verification (Rager 2005), informant feedback, or respondent validation (Morse et al. 2002), to name a few. Harper and Cole (2012) posit that participant verification can improve the “accuracy, credibility, and validity of what has been recorded during a research interview” (p. 510). Some researchers argue that member checking should happen at the end of the project when the data has been analyzed, to allow the participants to review the work for authenticity (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Others find it more useful to allow participants to verify their views, feelings, and experiences throughout the data collection phase (Creswell et al. 2007).

To establish participant verification, I allowed practitioners to check the data for authenticity throughout the interview. After restating and summarizing my understanding of their response, they were asked to determine whether or not I was correctly communicating their views. If participants disagreed, I asked them to repeat their response in different terms or comment on what I misunderstood about their original statement. This process serves to decrease prevalence of incorrect data and incorrect interpretation of the data, “with the overall goal of providing findings that are authentic and original” (Harper and Cole 2012: p. 511; Moustakas 1994), thus improving the validity of the study. Additionally, there were four occasions in which I emailed participants and asked them to clarify a section of the interview that did not make sense when I sat down to review it and one incident in which a participant texted me to restate their original statement. Because I made it clear to participants that they were able to contact me at any time with questions or feedback early on in the interview process, the participant who reached out to alter their statement felt comfortable restating their self.

### *Feminist Methods*

As Griffin (2012) points out, it is not uncommon for researchers with a background in feminist studies to engage in “identity-based research.” Identity-based research is often called into question because the extent to which researchers who study “the same” are able to critically analyze a population they are a part of can be compromised.

According to Harding (2004), research from a feminist standpoint “requires that the subject of knowledge be placed in the same critical causal plane as the objects of

knowledge” (p. 136). In other words, feminist researchers will privilege the experiences of her participants and acknowledge them as partners in the research process (Harding 1986). Treating participants as the experts helps to ensure that I am adequately and respectfully representing their experiences. Additionally, to avoid bias and cultivate a sense of transparency between my own experiences and my findings with this research, I will explain the circumstances that brought me to study yoga in the section that follows.

### *Researcher Positioning*

According to McCorkely and Meyers (2003), positioning oneself within their research can help facilitate reflexive examination of your relationship with the participants and with the locus of study. As such, my researcher positioning statement was influenced by field notes, interview notes, and memo writing (journaling) in which I reflected on how my own perspective may have impacted my understanding of the social world.

Because I am both practitioner and researcher, my analysis provides an interesting take on the interactions I am not only observing, but also taking part in. Because I have been a yogi for almost five years, I have an in depth understanding of how yoga studios function and how practitioners discuss the activity.

I first started practicing yoga when I was in college. Like a few of my participants, I was introduced to the activity in a physical education course. Truthfully, I only signed up for the class because Relaxation Techniques was full and I was determined to avoid any team sports. Unlike my participants, however, my life was not

changed when I started practicing. I finished the pass/fail class by attending the minimum number of classes required and did not take advantage of the free classes at the yoga studio down the street that were offered to us by the studio owner—my course instructor.

Months later I found myself wanting of another exercise activity to add to my routine and went to Target and purchased a DVD titled, “Yoga for Weight Loss”. For about three months, one of my housemate, Lili, and I turned on the video every day and practiced with the skinny, blonde hair, blue eyed instructor who was poised on her yoga mat in the backyard of what resembled a Beverly Hills mansion. Fortunately for us, we were forced to expand our horizons when the DVD was somehow lost or destroyed following a Christmas party at our home.

With the DVD gone, Lili and I drove to downtown Tacoma, WA and spent \$150 on a 60-day yoga membership at Inhale Yoga (all yoga studios mentioned in this thesis are assigned pseudonyms). For about half of a year I attended the hot yoga class at 5:45 in the morning, five times a week. Also unlike many of my participants, my initial experiences with yoga were not healthy. In addition to spending almost two hours in a 107 degree room every weekday morning, I was clocking in at least an hour a day at the gym and achieving below-average grades in terms of my diet and nutrition. In reflection, the yoga studio I was attending became a catalyst for extremely unhealthy eating /exercise habits and influenced a year-long attempt to achieve body and appearance goals that were unattainable and sometimes harmful.

Once my surplus of student loan refunds wore out, so did my membership, forcing me to start practicing yoga on Youtube. It was here that I began to accept the

limitations of my body and focus on “finding what feels good.” Like many of my participants, I was able to move past the physical motivations to practice and settle comfortably in a newfound appreciation for the mental and emotional benefits.

Unfortunately, the six-month binge at Inhale Yoga was not so easy to shake and I spent countless hours in the following months attending a physical therapist to correct the damage the practice had inflicted on my knees. Postures like *virasana* (hero) and even *virabhadrasana I* (warrior one) are still unavailable to me without props or assists from instructors, and will most likely remain that way. However, just as my commitment to an intense yoga practice got me into physical therapy, my commitment to a *different* intense yoga practice got me out.

Embarking on this thesis, it was never my plan to study yoga. Although I had a lot to say on the subject, I never considered it as a subject for research largely because it is such an integral part of my non-academic, non-professional, non-stressful life. My motivation to look into yoga as a potential research topic was initially born out of a conversation I had with a fellow graduate student of sociology, and further developed over the course of a few emails back and forth to a friend I attended undergraduate university with.

The first chain of emails with my undergraduate friend was largely spent ranting and raving about a male graduate student who had asked me if I, “felt weird doing yoga as a sociologist, knowing how damaging things like cultural appropriation are?” In the office, later that day, I explained the interaction and added, “No, I don’t feel weird.

Funny how you don't ask little Johnny Karate who just earned his yellow belt if he feels weird appropriating the ancient tradition of martial arts.”

At the time, I did not have the knowledge of yoga, nor the literature, to back up any argument to protest. Throughout the thesis process, I have learned to better articulate my contention with positions similar to my male colleague's. When he asked me that, however, I had little to no response. Of course, I had a laundry list of things to say; however, calling another student misogynistic for shaming women who had found a way to celebrate their bodies in a healthy way, while leaving male-dominated eastern body practices (like martial arts) unquestioned did not seem like a good start to a new academic career. So, I moved forward with the interaction and turned it into an area of study.

While some may critique this study as biased given that I am a dedicated yoga practitioner studying other yoga practitioners, the degree to which I was immersed in the field is the exact approach feminist researchers value (Harding 1986). In other words, my previous experiences and first-hand knowledge about the practice of yoga put me in a prime location to turn toward the field as an area of study. Further, I believe my rocky-past with yoga gave me a keen and critical perspective on the practice. Simply put, my relationship with yoga has been tumultuous and I can recognize the problems and pitfalls of the modern practice; yet, I still believe yoga has the potential to affect positive change in people's--especially women's-- lives.

According to Griffin (2012), feminist studies can be categorized into those who research “the same” and those who research “the difference” (Griffin 2012: p. 333).



Having practiced yoga for quite some time but not belonging to the ethnic group responsible for its existence, it is difficult to discern whether or not I am researching the difference or the same. As such, it is important that I do not downplay my personal experience and the credibility that comes along with that; however, it is important that I take care not to claim a particular knowledge about Indian culture and yogic philosophy.

By acknowledging my personal relation to the subject (yoga) as well as my relation to the object (the sociocultural history and context of yoga), I am able to avoid making essentialist truth claims while moving yoga-based research forward within the discipline of sociology.

## CHAPTER IV: CREATING MEANING WITHIN YOGA

Participants judged other yogis based on their practice style and motivation to practice yoga. Those who were only interested in the physical components of the practice wanted to distance themselves from those who were interested in the spiritual components, and vice versa. Participants felt that one's commitment to either yogic philosophy or physical fitness indicated whether or not they were practicing yoga the right way. Participants assigned symbolic meaning to the activity and drew symbolic boundaries between other practitioners based on their opinions of how yoga should be practiced. Generally, however, the majority of participants agreed that a successful yoga practice could not be measured in either authenticity or physical achievements. Rather, if you showed up to the mat, took time to pay attention to your body and your breath, the practice was successful. First however, I would like to spend time discussing some of the reasons why my participants started practicing yoga.

### Why Yoga?

A large portion of this thesis is devoted to understanding why individuals choose yoga over some activity or exercise. Specifically, I wanted to know why westerners have taken such an interest in an Eastern religious tradition that requires a huge amount of mental and physical energy, and often times a huge amount of cash. Although some researchers argue that westerners are only interested in the physical components of yoga (Smith 2007), the majority of practitioners I spoke with thought of the physical benefits

as complementary to the mental and emotional benefits of their practice. Even nonspiritual practitioners thought of yoga as more than just an exercise. Overwhelmingly, participants were motivated to maintain their yoga practice because of the positive impact it had on their mental and emotional sense of well-being. Practitioners I interviewed discussed feeling “high” and energized after a yoga class and felt that their practice stimulated long-term healing and an improved sense of self.

To better understand what motivates individuals to begin practicing yoga in the United States, I first asked participants how they came to yoga and what made them want to sign up for a class. Many participants (40%) had multiple reasons for looking into yoga. Participants’ motivations can be categorized into three groups; physically motivated, mentally/ emotionally motivated, and socially motivated. Of the 20 participants I interviewed, 35% explained how their initial interest in yoga was related to the physical body; 45% were encouraged by their social surroundings; and 30% were motivated by mental/ emotional reasons.

Within each of these categories, participants’ motives can be further grouped into several subcategories. Half of the physically motivated participants were interested in weight loss, one was seeking an alternative method of exercise, and two were hoping to treat a physical injury or chronic condition. A little over half (5) of the socially motivated participants became interested in yoga due to an external source such as an advertisement, college course, or news and the media and four were brought to yoga by a significant other—all of whom were male participants introduced by a female partner or family member. Mentally/ emotionally motivated participants were looking for a way to

relax or treat stress and anxiety. For 85% of participants, however, the reason they decided to begin practicing yoga was different from their motivation to maintain their practice.

While many practitioners reflected the existing assumption that westerners only practice yoga to get in shape (Smith 2007), many more of them began practicing yoga for social, emotional, and mental health related reasons. The diversity in their reasons for practicing is also reflected in the diversity of the time they spent practicing. While some individuals devoted an hour once a week to the practice, others devoted one to two hours per day, seven days a week. The wide variety in consistency and style of practice indicates that there is no single type of western yogi.

#### 'How Yoga Are You?'

Participants in my study engaged in symbolic boundary drawing between themselves and other yogis they viewed as illegitimate practitioners. Participants used words like “true,” “real,” “authentic,” and “classical” to differentiate their practice style from those they viewed as “less authentic” or “fake.” Those who were only interested in the physical fitness aspect of yoga often talked down to or dismissed practitioners who were interested in Eastern philosophy and religion. I refer to these physically focused participants as nonspiritual practitioners. Alternatively, those who were committed to yoga’s spiritual roots believed that physically motivated practitioners were not real yogis and criticized them as being appearance driven and undedicated. I use Jain’s (2014) term,

Hindu origins practitioners to refer to this group of participants. According to Jain, the Hindu origins position is concerned with postural yogis who refuse to acknowledge the practice's Hindu roots.

Hindu origins participants believed that practitioners who did not attempt to engage with yogic philosophy were not real yogis. Although many Hindu origins participants practiced physically intense forms of yoga themselves, these participants believed that athletic based practices were synonymous with a refusal to engage with the spiritual practice of yoga. These participants said things like, "that's not real yoga," or "that's not what yoga's about" when describing their perception of nonspiritual practitioners' practice style and motivation to practice. Further, several Hindu origins practitioners perceived of athletic based practitioners as cultural dopes who were only practicing yoga because they were interested in following the latest trend.

Hindu origins practitioners such as Skyler, a transgender instructor who came to yoga through their energy healer, believed nonspiritual practitioners were only interested in "instant gratification." According to them, nonspiritual practitioners were only interested in keeping up with the most recent exercise trend in Cosmo. When I asked Skyler why they thought yoga was so popular in the United States, they believed it had to do with American's obsession with fitness and thinness. Multiple times throughout our interview, Skyler expressed frustration with how people in the United States "don't give a flying flip about yogic philosophy or know that it even exists" and criticized studios that perpetuate unrealistic appearance standards. As they explained:

I feel like the type of yoga that is popular, exercise yoga, wasn't created to help you look inwards. Its model is designed to help you look outwards and fit whatever the idea of the week is that people should look like. And that's not at all yoga. The yoga that is popular right now—it just isn't sustainable. It's just exercise. It teaches you to burn up, not to have a fire in yourself—to be both the fuel and the thing being heated.

Hindu origins practitioners like Skyler often criticized nonspiritual practitioners for being caught up in the “fad” of yoga.” Barbara, a doctoral student and administrator at a large university, also believed that practitioners’ preoccupation with “stylish yoga” led them to practices that were inauthentic and driven by consumerism and appearance values and explained how she stopped attending SCY because they were always trying to sell her expensive exercise clothes and spa and beauty products. Her studio, she explained, was minimally decorated with candles, eastern artwork, and wall art of an inspirational quote. For Barbara, SCY’s clothing display was an indicator of the studio’s appearance and consumerist values; values she believed were in opposition to the true purpose of yoga. For many Hindu origins practitioners, the emphasis that physical fitness studios place on weight loss and the body indicate a lack of engagement with authentic yoga. Taylor, a middle-aged Hindu origins participant and studio owner, shared with me:

Some people go to yoga for that short high of it—the ‘oh, I lost ten pounds, look how cute I am in my lululemon’s’ and you go there and perpetuate that. You look in the mirror and think about how great you look and then you become a yoga instructor because that would be the next cool thing to do. You get in that cycle and it feeds itself.

This participant believed that nonspiritual practitioners were only interested in the “short high” that comes with doing what is cool or trendy. Additionally, she felt that those who were only interested in the physical component of the practice were inherently less in tune with their inner self and only preoccupied with their outward appearance. She went

on to distinguish these practitioners from those who were driven by the spiritual components of yoga:

There are some people that go to yoga and come to understand that there are other things at work here. You can do yoga in your \$100 pants in front of the mirror, in a heated room and look at yourself and see how many calories you burned, or, you can have a slow and focused, inward practice. Those are the people that end up seeking out teachers and studios that are more about actually understanding the yoga sutras and the study of yoga.

The nonspiritual practitioners, however, were less concerned with authenticity and more concerned with distancing themselves from what they believed to be “the typical yogi.”

Nonspiritual practitioners believed spiritually driven practice styles were easier than athletic based practices, characterizing them as illegitimate due to their lack of physical intensity. It was not uncommon for nonspiritual practitioners to poke fun at one participant called the “stereotypical peace and love yogi.” When I asked Jane, for instance, to tell me about a new studio she was trying out she said, “oh it’s a very much a different crowd. It’s like the people you would think are ‘yoga’---they’re just the people you would expect to be in a yoga class.” When I asked her to tell me more about the other practitioners she explained: “I don’t want to call them hippies but--- (*pause*)—like this one woman makes her own scarves and sells them and wears these cover up things, like if you saw them on the street you might not think they were hippie right away but in that class it totally comes off that way.” Much of the nonspiritual practitioners based their understanding of whether or not someone was a hippie dippy yogi on the amount of physical fitness in their practice.

Overall, nonspiritual practitioners were more concerned with physical fitness than the Hindu origins practitioners and several referred to yoga as part of their workout

regimen. Erin, a college student and power yoga instructor compared the athletic intensity of her class to slower and less active styles of yoga. When I asked her to tell me about the class she teaches, she told me she plays electric and EDM (electronic disco music) because, “it’s a work out, it’s not supposed to be calm and peaceful. Yoga’s meant to get out anger and aggression and frustrations while getting your work out in. It doesn’t have to be like that hippie stuff.” Similarly John, another nonspiritual practitioner, said: “some people talk about love and life and they dig that hippie stuff but that’s not my cup of tea. For me it’s an exercise program.” Overall, nonspiritual practitioners made it a point to distinguish themselves and their practice style from what they perceived to be “hippie” yoga by focusing on the exercise component of their practice.

Nonspiritual participants were also concerned with how others’ perceived of them and their yoga practice. Throughout our conversation, John made it a point multiple times to distance himself from the spiritual-driven yogis, referring to himself as “an average Joe.” As he explained:

Just so you know, I’m not one of those yogis that comes home and makes a kale shake. I come home and I eat ice cream. I’m a typical human being—I don’t eat organic food. People in yoga really go overboard with this type of stuff but that’s just not my cup of tea.

When I asked John if he spent time looking into the history and/or philosophy surrounding yoga he answered, “Nope. I don’t feel I need that.” It was important to this participant that he not be perceived of as the type of yogi that would be concerned with those subjects because, as he explained, “when people do look into that, they talk about it and just sound so hypocritical, like they think they are on a higher moral plane than the rest of us and I just don’t want to get to that point.” When I asked Erin if she practiced



any styles of yoga that were not fitness oriented, she laughed and said, “hell no, I don’t have time for that type of yoga... I’m not one of those hippie- dippy yogis.” For nonspiritual practitioners, yoga was simultaneously an activity they dedicated their lives to and a label they sought to distance themselves from.

*Symbolic Boundaries: The “Right Way” to Practice Yoga*

Nonspiritual yogis and Hindu Origins yogis engaged in boundary work by distancing themselves from their counterparts or by making claims regarding the authenticity and legitimacy of others’ practice. While the Hindu origins practitioners were concerned with reflecting their understanding of “ancient yoga,” in their own practice, the nonspiritual practitioners were concerned with not being aligned with them. Although both types of practitioners engaged in symbolic boundary work, only the Hindu origins participants were concerned with authenticity. Desire to distance themselves from spiritual yogis used by nonspiritual yogis and the aim to establish authenticity by Hindu origins practitioners serve as mechanisms to create symbolic boundaries.

According to Lamont and Molnar, symbolic boundaries are, “conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space” (2002: p. 168). Symbolic boundaries amongst nonspiritual and Hindu origins participants dictated who and what was acceptable yoga. Symbolic boundaries were used to create “us and them” narratives that allowed practitioners to identify those who adhered to their definition of yoga and those who did not.

Groups construct “us and them” narratives, also known as in-group/ out-group comparisons (Tajfel and Turner 1985), to differentiate themselves from groups and they do not see as successful as their own (Rosenberg and Kaplan 1982). Participants evaluated the authenticity of someone’s practice based on multiple factors including style, setting, and atmosphere. Ted, a physically motivated yogi I recruited from a yoga for men Facebook group, even had opinions on what type of flooring was most appropriate for yoga; carpet or hardwood. According to Swartz (2011), groups that are highly diverse, such as the yoga community, often share a variety of differing ideologies and opinions, thus making them prime spaces for exploring symbolic boundary making.

Among my participants, symbolic boundaries were constructed according to the meaning one assigned to yoga as an activity; either spiritual or physical. Participants believed that a practitioners’ understanding of yoga and their practice style indicated something about who they were as both a yogi and as an individual. This was illustrated during my interview with John who spoke of distinguishing the spiritual practitioners from the nonspiritual practitioners:

I had a teacher once who asked us at the beginning of the class, ‘how yoga are you?’ You can learn a lot about someone just by asking them that, you know? Because that day, all we were doing was exercise and how people answered that question let her (the instructor) know who was there to get in a good workout and who wasn’t. Depending on how they answer, you can tell right away what people are into.

John felt he could learn a lot about other practitioners, both on and off the mat, just based on how they answered that question. This interaction also enabled John to draw symbolic boundaries between him and other practitioners by providing him with the tools to identify others who may or may not share the same values in yoga as him. Here, we see

how the in-group/out-group comparisons enable individuals to positively evaluate their own group. John felt the practitioners who were not there to “get in a good work out” needed to be identified because in his mind, non-physically motivated yogis were not there for the right reasons. Because there are so many different styles of yoga in the United States, the yoga community is bound to hold differing and opposing views regarding the “correct” way to practice yoga.

How practitioners interact with cultural symbols affects how authentic someone appears by members of other groups. Barbara, for instance, charged San Culpa yogis with inauthenticity because their studio displayed athletic apparel and gear for sale in the front lobby. According to Barbara, the yoga studio was not a place for consumerism. Although the HWS that Barbara attended sold a few items with the studio’s logo, the eastern-style artwork, inspirational quote, and candles indicated that the studio was the home of “real yoga”. Participants believed yogis who practiced for nonspiritual reasons were only interested in “dressing the part to appear cool” (Widdicomb and Wooffitt 1990). Unable to convey their authenticity, they were labeled as posers (Yablowski 1968; Fox 1987).

Participants also established authenticity by discussing yoga within a global and historical context. Sharing information about the practice in other parts of the world and in different time periods was a way for Hindu origins practitioners to emphasize their dedication to the practice and display their knowledge of its history. In “*How Edge Are you?*” Williams et al. (2005) demonstrates how members of the straightedge subculture share information online about events and other straightedgers around the world to “enhance their involvement” and “make it clear that authentic straightedgers are those

involved directly in a face-to-face scene” (Williams et al. 2005: p. 77). This type of information sharing among subcultural online communities enables individuals to establish their commitment to the group. Similarly, several Hindu origins participants I spoke with brought up their knowledge of Sanskrit, the yoga sutras, and Hindu scripture multiples times, as a way of connecting their own personal practice to the broader context of yoga.

### *Problems with Authenticity*

To review, authenticity is not a measurable quality and it is not within the scope of this thesis to identify which of my practitioners were more or less authentic. Hence Grazian writes that authenticity is a “shared set of beliefs about the nature of things we value in the world” (2004: p. 12) and, as a set of beliefs, it is not something that can be proven or disproven using social science and it is not my intention to attempt to do so. I do attempt, however, to analyze participants’ assessment of authenticity and identify the problems with claims of authenticity in yoga.

The Hindu origins practitioners I spoke with shared a set of beliefs regarding the meaning of yoga that differed from the nonspiritual practitioners’ beliefs. Thus it can be said that they had differing understandings of what made an authentic yoga practice (Grazian 2004). Whereas the Hindu origins practitioners privileged the transcendental, philosophical, and spiritual components of the practice, the nonspiritual practitioners did not, preferring instead to prioritize the athletic components of the practice. Because the two groups shared differing “beliefs about the nature of things [they] value in the world” (Grazian 2004: p.12), one perceived of the other as being less credible.

Interestingly, many Hindu origins practitioners also practiced physically active styles of yoga. As such, it seems as though Hindu origins participants criticized nonspiritual practitioners of being less authentic according to the outward appearance of their practice space. Similar to Grazian's (2003) study on authentic jazz clubs, authenticity claims were not based on adherence to some standardized jazz canon. Instead, a venue was deemed authentic if it fit a number of criteria from location, to architecture to the appearance of the other patrons.

Interestingly, practitioners' ideas regarding what made a practice authentic were based on what Jain calls an "inaccurate, homogenizing vision of Hinduism" (2014: p. 444). Hindu origins participants spoke about "traditional" or "ancient" yoga as if there was a universal understanding of how yoga was meant to be practiced. However, scholars point out that it is impossible to determine whether or not modern practice styles reflect how yoga was originally practiced as much of what we know about the ancient practice of yoga is the result of "a mistaken historical understanding" (Jain 2014: p. 444; Singleton 2010) According to Jain, practitioners who maintain that there is an authentic or correct way to practice yoga play into Orientalist<sup>1</sup> views of the East. Still, Hindu origins participants believed that nonspiritual practitioners were not authentic yogis given their lack of engagement with eastern philosophy and emphasis on physical fitness. Interestingly, both Hindu origins participants and nonspiritual participants agreed that part of practicing yoga "the right way" involved an awareness of the connection between the body and the mind.

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Said (1978) coined the term *orientalism* to refer to essentialist and racist depictions of "the East" by Western scholars (Jain 2014).

## Embodiment as Successful Yoga

Regardless of their motivation to practice yoga and the meaning assigned to the activity, all participants agreed that yoga was not just about the poses and that a true yogi was one who sought to connect the body and the mind. Even participants who were more interested in the physical practice felt that if you took time out to listen to your body and become more aware of the physical and mental sensations you would have a successful practice. Practitioners overwhelmingly felt that by taking time to practice yoga and focus on their selves, they experienced better relationships with their loved ones and had healthier relationships with themselves, both mentally and physically. Participants felt this was accomplished by focusing on the breath.

When I asked participants how to have a successful yoga practice, the majority said that all you needed to do is show up and make time for yourself. Many participants came to this realization overtime and explained how they first had to overcome their desire to focus on all the challenging, “cool” poses. Isabella, for instance, was always very athletic and came to yoga because she thought the poses looked cool and would be physically challenging. Overtime however, she said she realized it was less about the physical shape and more about the mindset:

If I can show up and challenge myself in a new posture by trying to go a little deeper into that place of relaxation, that’s a successful practice--just coming to see something from a new perspective or learning something new about your body. If I learn something new and just feel really good afterwards, that’s a successful class for me.

Although Isabella can be considered a Hindu origins practitioner, her idea of a successful practice had nothing to do with authenticity. Barbara, another Hindu origins practitioner, expressed something similar when I asked her what the ultimate goal of yoga is:

It's just an ongoing practice. It's taken me a while mentally to get around to that. I used to think if I do this pose or that pose then something good will happen but that's a catch 22. It's not about what might happen; it's just about the practice itself—being present in that moment, doing the practice and not thinking ahead or behind. If I'm in the present every time I do yoga then I've mastered it.

Even though Barbara is a Hindu origins practitioner, like Isabella, she did not measure success in yoga by how authentic her yoga practice was. It did not matter if she used the Sanskrit scripture correctly or if she practiced Hindu chanting. Instead, she considered her practice successful if she just made time to come into the present and pay attention to her body and mind. Interestingly, the nonspiritual participants I spoke with felt the same way.

Despite the fact that the nonspiritual practitioners were largely motivated to practice yoga by physical reasons, these participants measured the success of their yoga practice in the same way the Hindu origins practitioners did. Erin, the nonspiritual practitioner who thought that nonphysical yoga was not a good use of her time explained:

The whole point of yoga, at least for me, is to have time to myself to find those places where I am resistant in my body because that translates into my life and shows me where there are areas of resistance off the mat. People don't expect that permeability with yoga when they go into it but they find pretty quick that other things happening in their life show up in their yoga practice.

Even though Erin considered yoga a part of her workout routine, she did not measure success in the amount of calories burned. John, one of the nonspiritual practitioners who was the most opposed to “hippie dippy yoga”, also appreciated the chance to connect his

mind and body, explaining, “even though I was mainly going for the physical stuff, the mental and emotional benefits were an added surprise benefit.”

Overall, nonspiritual practitioners and Hindu origins practitioners felt that if they made time to pay attention to how their bodies were feeling, they were practicing yoga successfully. Instead of measuring success by their ability to attain the perfect asana shape or appropriately incorporate ancient Hindu scripture, participants felt a practice session was successful if they took time out of their day to listen to their bodies and take note of how they were feeling. As such, participants measured success in yoga by their ability to engage in an embodied activity.

Yoga and other meditative practices can be considered embodied activities because they encourage individuals to actively connect the experience of the mental and emotional self with that of the physical body (Daubenmier 2005; Nevrin 2008; Douglas 2011). Social researchers posit that mindful yoga, in particular, “can be a powerful tool through which we encounter our inner lives and begin to understand its effect on our embodied experience” (2011: p. 85). When individuals cultivate a regular mindfulness practice, they typically report improved relationships with themselves (Ditmann and Freedman 2009; Strauss and Northcut 2014) and the people around them (Ross et. al 2014). Similarly, practitioners I spoke with felt more confident, had better relationships with their friends and family, and felt happier and healthier because they took time out of their day to practice yoga and focus on the present. One of the most poignant findings from this study is arguably the amount of female identified practitioners I spoke with who felt that yoga improved their sense of self and their perception of their body.



Several women I spoke with felt that yoga had helped them to repair harmful relationships they had cultivate with their bodies. Jfindsyoga for instance, explained how yoga help her overcome an undiagnosed eating disorder. Jfinds is a well-known social network blogger who belongs to the body positive community and teaches yoga in the hopes of helping plus sized women appreciate their bodies. At first she was only practicing yoga to lose weight; however, once she cultivated a regular practice and became more in tune with her body, she explained, her experience and motivation to practice changed:

The next thing you know I had a huge mental shift. It was like I didn't care about losing weight anymore. I started to actually like how I was feeling and savasana actually felt good! I just wanted to do more yoga because I liked how I felt.

Once Jfinds started practicing yoga as an embodied activity rather than as solely a workout, she began to relate to her body in a more positive way and as a result, was able to overcome her eating disorder. Similarly, Molly struggled with anorexia and depression for years before coming to yoga and shared stories about how she attempted suicide on three occasions. This participant felt that yoga had literally saved her life because it taught her to appreciate her body for what it could do as opposed to what it looked like.

Existing sociological research suggests that women who practice mindful yoga become more accepting and less critical of their bodies (Dittmann and Freedman 2009). According to Dittman and Freedman (2009) and interviews with my participants, the breath work in yoga is the key element in helping practitioners link the body and the mind so as to help create a space for observation and acceptance.

*'It's in the breath'*

Participants often struggled to describe what it was about yoga that had such a positive effect on their mood and their relationship with themselves. Several participants said things like, “there’s just something about it” or, “I don’t know how but it just helps” when trying to describe the effects of their practice. When I asked participants what made yoga different from other activities, the majority felt that the act of moving and breathing with others made them feel more in tune with their bodies and their selves.

Participants believed that the prana (breath) was what helped them stay focused on the present and improve their mood and physical well-being. Ted, a nonspiritual practitioner, explained how the addition of the breath to the movement was key in yoga, distinguishing it from other types of physical activity:

When we’re incorporating that physiological work, what’s happening with your body is your bring in the breath and that starts the mindfulness aspect ... We talk about being present as if it’s all a mental thing and it’s not. The breath work that we do is about bringing the body into the present.

By focusing on the breath as well as the postures, participants felt more connected to the present moment and to their bodies. Nonspiritual participants and Hindu origins participants alike said things like, “it’s all about the breath” or, “the breath is the key to yoga,” when explaining how they were able to focus on the present and their own wellbeing. According to Kraig, a 67 year-old yoga instructor who has been practicing for about three years, the breath work is the way to master yoga:

Well, the way you master yoga is just by learning how to breathe. I think the breath is what connects the physical body to the mind because if you’re really focusing on the breathing then that is going to calm the mind down and allow

you to relax the body and it's going to allow you to adapt the asanas to fit you and what you need at that time.

Even for experienced yogis this can be challenging because, as Skyler explained, “the most challenging part is avoiding holding a pose. I try to never hold a pose and always breathe in the pose...if you find yourself holding a pose, you are holding your breath and you have now left yoga.”

### Chapter Summary

In this chapter I discussed participants' opinions on how yoga should be practiced. Although participants had opposing views about this and what made someone a true yogi, practitioners largely agreed that a successful yoga practice was one that emphasized the connection between the mind and the body. Further, participants used the breath as a way to facilitate that connection.

Participants who were considered Hindu origins practitioners emphasized the importance of the spiritual practice of yoga and criticized those who mainly focused on the physical fitness aspects of yoga. Hindu origins practitioners drew symbolic boundaries between themselves and their counterparts by making authenticity claims and disparaging physically oriented practice styles. Conversely, nonspiritual practitioners were not interested in the transcendental or spiritual practice of yoga. These practitioners actively engaged in symbolic boundary making by distancing themselves from practice styles and studios they considered “hippie dippy.” These participants described “hippie dippy” yogis as practitioners who incorporated Hindu scripture and eastern philosophy.

Despite the symbolic boundaries between these two types of practitioners, the majority of participants I spoke with felt that a yoga practice successful if they were able to focus on connecting the mind and the body. In other words, while claims of authenticity and practice styles were used to construct symbolic boundaries, neither of these had an effect on participants' perception of a successful practice. Participants largely agreed that if practitioners were practicing embodied yoga, they were doing yoga correctly.

Finally, participants pointed out that the successful accomplishment of yoga was dependent on the breath work. Practitioners emphasized the importance of focusing on the breath when attempting to come into the present moment and stay in tune with their body and felt that the time they spent focusing on the breath helped improve their mood and relationships.

## CHAPTER V: GENDER IN A YOGA SETTING

Overall, I found that the doing of gender cannot be avoided in a yoga setting. Although the social sciences are largely in agreement that the gender binary is a socially constructed tool used to confine individuals into pre-designated categories, the social world itself is still largely impacted by the gender binary. And while the practitioners I spoke with were more or less aware of this constructed binary, they overwhelmingly agreed that the standards associated with masculinity and femininity could not be escaped in yoga. Indeed, many felt that men did not practice yoga because it was perceived as feminine, and this made them uncomfortable. This sentiment was echoed in interviews with male identified yogis I spoke with. Overall, I found that there is a general understanding that men do not wish to practice yoga and those who did, found ways to negotiate the feminine space by engaging in displays of masculinity.

### Men in Tights: Why Men Won't Do Yoga

Participants were aware that women practice yoga at higher rates than men. Practitioners discussed how normative gender roles contribute to the high sex ratio in yoga. Several participants felt that men avoided yoga because it appeared to share too much in common with other highly feminized activities like ballet or gymnastics. Several participants made comments about how these activities might threaten men's sexuality. Others thought men were apprehensive to try practicing because, in general, males are underrepresented in yoga media and advertising. Because the symbolic objects

representative of yoga in the west embody traits associated with femininity, yoga is “off-putting to your average guy,” as one male yogi explained.

Much of participants’ opinions on why men are not interested in yoga had to do with physical appearance. Some participants felt that men were more interested in spending their time on activities that would build their muscles and make them stronger and faster. Jane, for instance, explained a time when she attempted to convince her husband to come to a yoga class with her. She had recently read a story about a football player who practices yoga and presented it to her husband hoping it would convince him to try it out. Her reasoning was, if this masculine football player feels secure enough with his gender identity to practice yoga, so should her husband. Instead, he declined Jane’s invitation because he did not want to wear tights (yoga pants). She explained:

There is no football player out there getting made fun of for wearing tights! Do they not realize that football players wear tights every Sunday? They obviously just don’t see them as tights then, right? Because they’ve got the pads and all this armor---but if you put on just tights and a shirt then it’s too girly. I think it’s like, a stigma thing.

Although it is common for football players and yogis to wear tight clothing, men who wear tights in a football stadium does not hold the same symbolic meaning as men who were tights in a yoga studio.

According to Lunceford (2010), clothing acts as a strong symbol of one’s gender because factors that make up one’s physical appearance (hair style, posture, wardrobe) indicate cultural norms of masculinity and femininity. Due to socially constructed norms that dictate acceptable representations of masculinity and femininity, men can maintain their masculinity while wearing tights on a football field but not in a yoga class. This is

because humans interact with objects depending on their symbolic value (Blumer 1969). Further, objects like clothes hold different symbolic meaning in different settings. As such, men who wear tight pants as part of their football uniform represent hegemonic masculinity, while men who wear tights during yoga represent femininity. Because masculinity must be constantly maintained, anything that could be seen as feminine poses a threat to one's masculinity and must be avoided. In Thomas' case, the inability to avoid the femininity of yoga motivated him to seek out masculine spaces.

Thomas is a co-owner of a men's yoga studio and the administrator of an online yoga social networking site for men--the same site I recruited several participants from. When I asked him to tell me why he decided to start a yoga for men (YFM) group, he told me a story about a time he was shopping for yoga supplies in a Target: "I was just trying to get a yoga mat and they were all pink and purple or really brightly colored". After realizing this, he thought to himself, "There have to be more people like me doing yoga. This can't be the only lens to see yoga through. So I went home and started the page and....next thing you know it erupted from there." Because the only yoga supplies available came in pink and purple, Thomas felt the need to seek out other masculine yogis.

It is not irrelevant that certain objects such as tight pants or yoga mats are considered either masculine or feminine by participants (Oudshoorn et al. 2002: p. 472). Feminist social researchers have shown how gender is inscribed onto products (Berg and Lie 1995; Oost 1995; Oudshoorn et al. 2002; Laverence and Lozanski 2015) to target either men or women, contributing to the maintenance of gender in social interactions and

institutions. Male identified yogis I spoke with discussed repeatedly explained how the lack of male representation in yoga dissuaded them from beginning their practice sooner.

For my participants, certain yoga objects and supplies embodied specific gender codes (Oudshoorn et al. 2002: p. 474) and dictated what was appropriate for a certain gender. The gender imprinted on yoga objects had such an effect on Thomas, for instance, he felt the need to create a virtual community for other male yogis to connect and discuss their own experiences with yoga; experiences that came from a lens that was not feminine.

#### *Negotiating the 'Feminine Energy'*

Participants recognized yoga was perceived as a feminine activity. This posed a problem for male identified yogis because of the characteristics of masculinity. While it is difficult to undermine and challenge displays of femininity (Carrigan, Connell, and Lee 1985; Connell 1985; Willer et al. 2013), masculinity is “not [as] easily attained... and must be continually pursued in the face of threats and challenges” (Willer et al. 2013: p. 984; Gilmore 1990). Simply, men are required to continuously defend and maintain their masculine identities and the yoga studio is no exception. As such, male identified yogis had to find ways to manage their masculinity in the feminine space and did so by enacting displays of athleticism and heterosexuality during classes. Additionally, male yogis segregated themselves from female yogis “after hours.”

Male identified yogis enacted excessive displays of masculinity before, during, and after yoga classes. One of the way men accomplished this in yoga was through



excessive displays of athleticism and strength. San Culpa yoga, for instance, provided a variety of different athletic equipment for students to utilize during class. Students so rarely took advantage of this equipment, I did not even realize the studio offered dumbbells and strengthening bands until my second week observing there when I noted a group of four or five men using weights in the back of a vinyasa class.

While other students would follow along with the instructor during the class, this group of men added various cardio activities such as push-ups, sit-ups, and jumping jacks to sun salutations. Instead of moving from *kumbhakasana* (high plank) to *bhujangasana* (cobra) and into *adho mukha svanasana* (downward-facing dog), this group of men would stay in high plank and use the weights to do dumbbell pushups. When it came time to reverse the sun salutation, they would do the same, pausing to complete a short rep of pushups when transitioning from *kumbhakasana* to *adho mukha svanasana*. These men also utilized the strengthening bands in a *virabhadrasana II* (warrior 2) sequence, most likely to add resistance to the posture, making it more challenging.

Male practitioners who enacted overt displays of athleticism and strength during yoga show how masculinity must be continuously maintained “in the face of threats and challenges” (Willer et al. 2013: p. 984; Gilmore 1990). Because yoga is seen by outsiders as soft and not physically challenging, it seems that these male yogis sought to increase the physical intensity of their own practice in an effort to dispel those myths. This notion is supported in the interviews with masculine identified participants who repeatedly explained how “yoga will kick your butt.”

When I asked Kraig, why he thought there were more women in yoga than men, he explained:

Well, I have never let that sort of thing bother me but I do think that men don't find it—(pause)—they don't think it's as physically challenging as it is. They'd be more likely to continue to run or lift weights or do something along those lines, you know? But I'll still tell my guy friends all the time how much hot yoga will whip you into shape.

Because Kraig knows that his male friends do not consider yoga challenging, he feels the need to tell them how physically intense it is. By continually insisting that yoga is as difficult and physically demanding as running or lifting weights, Kraig is able to maintain his masculinity despite the threat that participating in a feminized activity poses to his gender identity.

The behavior from the men at SCY is comparable to that of the male cheerleaders in Bemiller's (2005) study on males in female dominated activities. In "Men Who Cheer" (2005), Bemiller demonstrated how male cheerleaders boasted about their strength and physical prowess to collectively establish their masculinity in the female dominated sport. Similarly, the male yogis from SCY added weights to their vinyasa to increase the intensity of the practice and display their athleticism, thus protecting their strongly held masculine identities. Some men, however, chose to assert their heterosexuality, rather than their physical prowess, in an effort to secure and defend their gender identities.

Out of the seven male yogis in this study six were brought to yoga by their female partners and some made a point to highlight this during interviews. Additionally, several practitioners in the sessions I participated in took time to point out during class introductions that they were only there because their girlfriend made them come along.

Classes at HWS always started with the instructor asking the students to go around the room and tell the class their name, what they wanted to work on that day, and how long they have been practicing yoga or why they decided to start. Several male yogis established their heterosexuality and thus, their masculinity, by explaining to the class that they were there because a girlfriend, wife, or some other female partner who made them attend. These practitioners always emphasized the fact that they had never been to a yoga class before and were just there to try it out. As previously stated, this was echoed in participant interviews.

When I asked Ted, Thomas' business partner, to tell me how he came to yoga, he explained how he never wanted to go and would bicker about the subject with his wife. In Ted's mind, "it was a thing that was just for women", after some convincing however, he agreed to go to a class accompanied by his wife. By attending with his female partner, Ted was able to establish his heterosexuality and maintain his masculinity despite the threat the female dominated space posed to his gender identity. At this point in the conversation Ted made a point to explain to me that he was not "a homophobic or anything like that," he was simply worried about being the only guy in the room. [need compulsory heterosexuality research here] After cultivating a regular practice, Ted explained, he was no longer worried about being the only guy in the room.

For Ted, it was important that I see him as a straight man who was originally opposed to yoga because when men participate in female activities both their gender and sexuality are called into question (Suitor and Reavis 1995). Because athletics have

always been “a male domain in American culture” (Griffin 1993: p. 82), participation in a female athletic activity presented a threat to Ted’s masculinity.

Like Thomas, Ted sought out opportunities to practice yoga and relate to other yogis, removed from the female dominated environment. As an instructor and co-owner of a studio, much of Ted’s confidence in yoga stems from the countless hours he has spent practicing; however, Ted also spends most of his time now (along with Thomas) instructing courses designed for men, in a studio designated for men. A short glance at their page indicates few differences in YFM’s approach to the practice. As such, it seems the group serves more of a social purpose than an instructive one.

When I interviewed Brandon, the instructor of the yoga for men class at HWS, I asked him how he taught the men’s class different from his mixed gender classes. He explained:

Well I do teach it differently but it’s not fundamentally different. We might focus on more of the places where men are tighter than women like the lower back and hips. But (*long pause*), how do I say this without sounding totally inappropriate? (*laughs*) It’s just like a bunch of guys hanging out so the humor is a little different than in mixed classes. Also, I wouldn’t say that I go out for drinks with my mix gender classes after every session either.

The yoga for men group at HWS was known for congregating at the brewery down the street, after most of their sessions. Interestingly, this was not common for any other class at this studio.

The YFM class at the Health and Wellness Studio was the only exception to the other mix-gendered classes. There were not special courses set aside for women’s empowerment or the female body. Clearly, male practitioners felt the need to organize

special courses and events to cultivate a sense of group unity. All-male groups provide an opportunity for boys and men to “develop a sense of solidarity around their identities” (Griffin 1993: p. 82) and establish an emotional connection with others, something that masculinity does not value outside of an athletic context (Messner 2005). Because masculinity is as much a collective process as it is an individual process (Connell 2002), it was important for male yogis to develop a relationship with other men. Participating in YFM groups, enabled male practitioners to exercise their masculinity and engage with other men who were seeking reprieve from the female-dominated environment.

#### Fragile Masculinity in Female Dominated Spaces

Identity theory suggests that people possess multiple identities. According to identity theorists, individuals strive to maintain identities that are deeply held (Burke and Tully 1977) and socially valued (Cialdini et al. 1976; Willer et al. 2013). Deeply held identities, such as gender (Cialdini et al. 1976), are questioned or threatened. Those who argue that gender is the most strongly held identity and, as such, when someone’s gender identity is questioned or threatened, it is likely that they will display extreme versions of the behavior associated with their gender identity (Burke 1991; Heise 2007) in an effort to “recover their identity” (Willer et al. 2013: p. 986).

Male practitioners who felt threatened by the female-dominated space enacted behavior that was not just compensatory, but overcompensatory (Willer et al. 2013). Overcompensatory displays of masculinity enabled male practitioners to mitigate

potential threats to their masculinity; men who did calisthenics in the middle of a vinyasa flow could avoid accusations that they were not stronger than female yogis just as men who segregated themselves from female practitioners could establish their dominance by removing their self from the women's practice. When we examine in more detail male practitioners' aversion to practicing with women and their need to display their strength and prowess, the tenuousness of masculinity is highlighted.

Beyond feeling uncomfortable participating in something seen as "girly" or feminine, male yogis I spoke with were uneasy with the possibility that other women in the class might be "better" than them. Although practitioners eventually cultivated an appreciation of mindful yoga, many male participants were preoccupied with perfecting challenging poses. Specifically, they were concerned with perfecting these poses in front of "younger, prettier women that can put their ankle behind their head" as one male yogi explained. For some male yogis it was difficult to avoid becoming frustrated when they were not able to come into a pose that others around them (women) could.

Kraig recalled feeling frustrated when he first started practicing because the woman next to him was, "halfway down on the floor with her head tucked between her knees and I could get *maybe* the tips of my fingers halfway down my shin. It's like 'wow, what am I even doing here. It's just really hard to come to if you are male and especially if you are an older male.'" Other men I spoke with explained how there are just some poses that men will never be able to get to because of the differences between the male and female body and this was discouraging to men. According to Ted:

Women's hips are going to be more open so most women will come into a yoga practice and half pigeon will be immediately available to them in some kind of way. But for guys, we come into it and we are like 'what? You are asking me to do what? I can't do that.' And then this idea of the practice remaining meditative is just completely out the window... it's just about making the practice more available to guys so they can do it. But you know, if I walk into a room and see this girl that can pull her ankle up and around her head then, you know, that's just something I'm never going to explore and it kicks guys out of it; it's intimidating. We don't like to fail in front of women and that's what it feels like to a lot of guys when they can't get the poses.

Kevin, a university professor who came to yoga to deal with the stress of academia, agreed:

We just have these raging egos and big, thick bodies so yoga doesn't play into our wheelhouses like it does for women so instructors need to take time to make it accessible to men. Women are naturally going to be able to put their legs behind their head very quickly and we can't do that right away. It's that simple. We need to be spoon fed.

When I asked him to explain what he meant by "wheelhouses" he continued:

Just that it plays into their already established skill sets with all the crazy postures and the legs behind the head. Women are naturally going to be able to do that very quickly and in general, most women come from dance backgrounds or ballet backgrounds and gymnastics backgrounds. So you have this girl next to you who has been doing these crazy moves since she was four on the gymnastics mat. She's going to get really good at yoga, really quickly. It just is part of their skill set.

These male practitioners claimed yoga was easy for women and were embarrassed when female yogis in the class were able to come into a pose easier than they were.

Men who claimed that women were able to achieve the challenging postures easier than men relied on stereotypes and false generalizations about the contemporary and historical practice of yoga. In reality, only one of the women I interviewed came from a gymnastics background. While she admitted that yoga did come naturally to her, other female practitioners who practiced advanced yoga had been doing so for many years, dedicating countless hours to their practice. Further, male participants were not the

only ones who felt nervous their first time coming to yoga. Intimidation was a recurring theme throughout several interviews with female yogis. In other words, women—as well as men--- felt intimidated by the one person in the room who was able to put their ankle behind their head.

Finally, male practitioners' supposition that yoga sequences and postures cater to the female form is based on a misunderstanding of the historical context of yoga. Until recently, yoga was only practiced by men; specifically, upper-class male priests (Strauss 2004). It was not until the early 20th century, when yoga became popular in the western world, that women started participating in the activity. As such, the sequences and postures we commonly associate with modern yoga were designed with the male body in mind, not the female body (Goldberg 2015). More to the point, the female participants did not downplay others' achievements in yoga by disavowing others' hard work or making claims about inherent physical limitations. These statements from male participants demonstrate the need to maintain dominance in order to satisfy the demands of fragile masculine identities.

*Fragile masculinity*, like hegemonic masculinity, is a type of masculine identity characterized by men's disavowal of something that does not allow them to maintain their dominance, causing them to experience frustration, embarrassment, or shame, etc. Men who spoke of the importance of all-male yoga groups and refused to acknowledge the possibility that certain female practitioners were more advanced than they exhibited fragile masculinity because they used stereotypes associated with yoga to justify female yogis' ability to practice the more advanced poses, rejecting the notion that some women



may be more experienced and stronger than themselves. The male practitioners who conducted overcompensatory displays of athleticism at SCY also displayed fragile masculine identities. These male practitioners were able to avoid accusations that they were not living up to normative standards of masculinity such as strength, dominance, competition, and aggression by using the weights and strengthening bands during their practice, clearly communicating to the others in the room that they were superior in strength.

In general, male yogis who were uncomfortable practicing around women claimed that yoga did not come naturally to them as it did for women, in an effort to rationalize their inability to perform as well as the female yogis. This allowed the male practitioners to placate the strain on their masculinity as a result of women's dominance in the yoga studio. Since superiority over femininity is crucial to the maintenance of masculinity, advanced female yogis threatened male practitioners' gender identity and revealed their fragile masculine identity.

As far as I can tell, academic definitions for fragile masculinity are either incomplete or lacking empirical support. The idea that masculinity is fragile has been considered by the existing literature (Lemon 1995; Heath 2003; Joseph and Black 2012); however, researchers who have attempted to cogitate on the topic have done so without adequately conceptualizing the term, mainly approaching the matter with too broad or too discrete a lens.

Lemon (1995), for instance, broaches the topic of the tenuous nature of masculinity, however, they do so within the purview of identity crises, arguing that

modern men are “confused about what it means to be a man, and are attempting to push beyond the rigid role of prescriptions of traditional concepts of masculinity” (Lemon 1995: p.62). Lemon (1995: p.64) demonstrates how social and cultural movements such as the women’s liberation movement, gay and lesbian movement, and “the communication revolution and the rise of popular culture” may have facilitated the inception of numerous anti-feminist, men’s liberation movements. While this clearly demonstrates that there is tension between masculinity and femininity, it does not consider what this tension might look like when it surfaces during microsocial interactions wherein men do attempt to “push beyond the rigid role” of masculinity (Lemon 1995: p. 65).

Heath (2003: p.423) takes a similar approach to fragile masculinity, arguing that “masculinity is now more fragile as many race and class-privileged men struggle to reestablish their positions of authority.” Similar to my finding about the male practitioners who created male-only yoga spaces, Heath demonstrates how men who attempt to challenge normative gender standards will ultimately seek out alternative ways to establish their masculinity by emphasizing their role as provider and leader in their home-life. Again, however, their analysis of how men “deal with a fragile masculinity” (Heath 2003: p. 435) fails to provide a definition for what exactly fragile masculinity is so that we might understand it outside of the context of their research. Likewise, Joseph and Black (2012: p.486) limit their understanding of fragile masculinity to intimacy and sexuality, arguing that straight men who “feel uncomfortable around women, unattractive to women, and rejected by women in the sexual marketplace” fall within the “fragile

masculinity category” because they feel frustrated by their lack of success in the face of women. While this touches on the idea that masculinity and gender is relational (Goffman 1977; West and Zimmerman 1987), it fails to account for the fact that masculinity and the assumption of male dominance exist in everyday interaction and are not limited to sexual interactions.

## Chapter Summary

Gender is inescapable. Even in environments that focus on the embodied experience, gender is always being accomplished. In this chapter, I discussed four main findings regarding yoga and gender: 1) the doing of gender in a yoga setting is largely enabled by normative assumptions regarding masculinity and femininity; 2) these assumptions are further intensified by the gendered meaning imbued into certain objects (Oudshoorn et al. 2002), actions, and behaviors; 3) in an effort to manage their masculinity in the female dominated space men sought out male-only spaces and/or engaged in overcompensatory masculinity (Willer et al. 2013); 4) these enactments were fueled by fragile masculinity, a concept that has yet to be concretized within sociological research on masculinities.

These findings emerged out of data collected during interviews with male identified and non-male identified participants alike, who felt that yoga was synonymous with feminine, an assumption that was only exacerbated by the high sex ratio of female

identified practitioners. These findings were also supported by the behavior I observed at both yoga studios wherein men engaged in displays overcompensatory masculinity (Willer et al. 2013) as a result of fragile masculinity.

## CHAPTER VI: YOGA AND INTERACTION RITUAL CHAINS?

In this section, I will demonstrate how yoga is an interaction ritual (Collins 2004). More specifically, I will show how moving and breathing with others intensifies the activity, facilitating the ritual outcomes of group solidarity, emotional energy, relationship to sacred objects, and standards of morality. First, however, I will analyze the “ritual ingredients” of yoga, demonstrating how the practice fulfills the requirements of Collins’ ritual model.

### Yoga: An Interaction Ritual

Durkheim (1912) and Collins (2004) have both theorized how rituals unite people. Collins sees interaction rituals as either formal or informal gatherings where emotions are produced and carried into subsequent, everyday interactions. According to Collins, there are four ingredients required to stimulate a successful interaction ritual.

First is group assembly, where people come together in the same space and affect one another by their physical co-presence. At both of the studios I observed at, physical co-presence was assumed. Yogis were encouraged to position their mats as close to their neighbor as possible, in order to pack an optimal amount of students into the studio, while still leaving enough space for students to stretch out. At the HWS especially, this often meant that some students were positioned perpendicular to one another or that the whole class was arranged in the form of a circle, allowing space for more students to set

up inside of the circle. At SCY however, yogis were positioned in neatly arranged rows so that every student could face the mirror. As such, physical co-presence was initiated in two ways: the first and most obvious, students practiced in the same room; second, students were constantly reminded of the presence of others either by their reflection in the mirror or by the circular/angular arrangement of the students that forced them to either face, or orient their bodies toward another student.

The second requirement for an interaction ritual is a barrier to the outsiders. Every classroom in the yoga studios I observed at had a door that was shut at the start of class. In this context, I see the classroom itself, rather than the entire yoga studio, as the barrier to the outside. At both studios there were signs and reminders placed along the walls and in the bathrooms indicating that students should not attempt to join a class once it has started. While some studios and instructors were accepting of students who came late and left early, some encouraged students to stay for the duration of the class, even if they were not physically able to complete it. Students who were tired or sore were encouraged to take *balasana* (child's pose) or *savasana* (corpse pose).

This served two functions: objectively, the door was to remain closed to keep the classroom warm and help circulate the accumulation of body heat throughout the room; ritualistically, the closed space indicated they were taking part in a formal gathering that should be taken seriously. Additionally, it gave “participants a sense of who is taking part and who is excluded” from the ritual (Collins 2004: p.48). Opening the door to leave early or arrive late was presented as “disrespectful to the students around you,” as several instructors explained. By insisting that students acknowledge the importance of keeping

the door shut, instructors ensured that the first two ritual ingredients were satisfied; group assembly and barriers to the outside.

Third is mutual focus of attention, where ritual participants pay attention to the same thing, in this case the *vinyasa* (flow of poses) and the breath. According to Collins (2004: p. 48), when people join together and “focus their attention upon a common object or activity, [they] communicate this focus to each other and become mutually aware of each other’s focus of attention.” As was discussed earlier in the thesis, the breath helps practitioners remain aware of how their bodies feel in the present moment; however, the breath also provided students with something to focus on as a collective. Students were repeatedly encouraged to forget everything else in the room except for their breath and then use their breath to guide their movements. Some instructor referred to this as “mirroring the breath with the action.” Thus, students not only learn how to come into the physical posture, they also learn how to breathe in the posture. For instance, in a typical sun salutation, you are taught to inhale as you transition into *tadasana* (mountain pose) and then exhale into a forward fold. Because all of the students, for the most part, are following the same sequence of poses and taught to inhale and exhale depending on the posture they are in, everyone is focused on moving and breathing as a group.

Once ritual participants are able to cultivate a mutual focus of attention, they will begin to mimic each other and synchronize their actions, eventually leading to emotional entrainment wherein there is a “buildup of emotion through bodily feedback” (Collins 2004: p. 59). Existing research indicates that entrainment only adds to the production of emotional energy and increases the likelihood that it will carry over into situations

outside of the ritual (Collins 2004). Focusing on the breath helped participants synchronize their movements with the others in the room. When all of the students are able to accomplish this, the entire room ends up not only moving together, but also breathing together. Many students used emotional language when describing their experience with rhythmic synchronization in yoga. Participants felt that this aspect of the practice helped them be more intentional with their movements, both on and off the mat. Sara, for instance, told me that the unified vinyasa helped her realize how her actions impact the people around her explaining, “there is just something so profound about moving and breathing together.”

The fourth ingredient is what Collins refers to as “shared mood.” Shared mood is concomitantly the fourth and final ingredient, and the product of the previous ingredients. This ingredient stipulates that ritual participants “share a common mood or emotional experience” (Collins 2004: p. 48) and, as a result, produces feelings of “exhilaration, even ecstasy in the sense of being taken out of oneself and into another, larger, collectively defined space” (Heider and Warner 2010: p. 89). Participants I spoke with, however, were able to experience the “shared emotional/ cognitive experience” (Collins 2004: p. 48) as a result of yoga, despite the fact that many of them did not arrive to their class in the same mood.

The check-in time at the beginning of every HWS class indicated that some students arrived feeling excited and ready to move around, others however explained that they came to deal with feelings of depression or sadness because they had just gone through a break up, failed an important test, or were struggling with a roommate or



family member. As such, shared mood is not as important as shared *consciousness* (Heider and Warner 2010). Contrary to Collins, Heider and Warner (2010: p. 89) posit, “It is not necessary that everyone present experiences the same emotional response.” Similarly, students need not have identical mental, emotional, and physical reactions to a certain pose. Molly, for instance, described having an intense emotional experience in *rajakapotasana* (pigeon):

I can actually pin point the moment in my life when it just hit me like a ton of bricks that I’m finally okay with myself. You know, I starved myself and tried pretty much everything to fit into a certain body type and I’ve never liked myself but for some reason that day in pigeon was like a come to god moment, I guess. It was the first time I was able to come into it and I just stayed there for the rest of the class, in one position because I just started crying. It was like I was finally starting to get control over my anxiety and my depression because I didn’t hate myself anymore. I loved myself. It was an amazing moment.

According to Heider and Warner (2010: p. 89) however, “a room of tear-streaked faces is not an index of identical emotions.” Jim, for example, had a similar experience in class one day where he began to feel very emotional about his family and started to “tear up.” Other participants explained instances when they began crying because they experienced a release of negative emotions. Thus, ritual solidarity does not require “unanimity of individual feeling” (Heider and Warner 2010: p. 90). The Sacred Harp Singers in Heider and Warner’s study all reacted differently to a text or musical passage; similarly, a certain pose or sequence may “sharpen the grief felt by those who have recently lost a loved one, but others may experience joy at having been healed” (2010: p. 89). Because “the world has meaning only insofar as it becomes meaningful to its inhabitants” (Brickell 2006: p.93), poses can hold different meanings for different practitioners. In agreement with

Heider and Warner (2010), I find the idea of “collective consciousness” originally suggested by Durkheim (1912) more effective than shared mood (Collins 2004).

Based on my observations and interviews with practitioners, yoga provides an excellent setting to explore the function and process of interaction rituals, stipulated by Collins (2004: p.76): “by shaping assembly, boundaries to the outsider, the physical arrangement of the space, by choreographing actions and directing attention to common targets, [yoga] focuses everyone’s attention on the same thing and makes each one aware that they are doing so.”

#### Ritual Outcomes: Getting High on Yoga

Now that I have demonstrated how yoga fulfills the necessary requirements to be considered an interaction ritual, I will use Collins’ theory to analyze the effect of yoga rituals in producing the four outcomes predicted by Collins (2004: p.49): group solidarity, emotional energy, respect for group symbols, feelings of morality. Since “interaction ritual theory gives the most fine-grained picture of how emotions are transformed in the process of interaction” (Collins 2004: p.103), I will begin by discussing emotional energy and yoga.

In most of the classes I observed at, instructors discussed emotions and actions in terms of energy. Teachers would often tell students visualize themselves as a ball of energy and think of all of their emotions and behaviors as reflections of that energy. As such, many of the practitioners I spoke with already had a colloquial understanding of

Collins' (2004: p. 106) perception of emotional energy: a long-lasting, underlying tone or mood. All of the yogis I spoke with felt they had experienced long-term emotional transformation as a result of their yoga practice. Specifically, participants said they felt more confident with themselves since practicing yoga and believed themselves to be, "in general just a better person," as Jim explained. In line with Collins' definition of EE, participants also described feeling stronger, more capable, and more appreciative of their bodies and their selves. As such, yoga rituals produce emotional energy on the high-end of the continuum, causing participants to experience improved self-esteem and high levels of confidence. This proved to be true for Catherine, a full-time nurse and part-time graduate student, yoga helped her gain the confidence she needed when she first started working at the hospital. She explained:

Being a nurse, there are a lot of people that expect you to be the expert right away and there is a lot of positive self talk that you have to do. I really needed to learn to become my own cheerleader and yoga helped me do that. Sometimes I might have to force myself to keep going but I know I will be able to be a more productive nurse and a better coworker because of it. So, yeah sometimes I'd rather be sleeping but I feel like a better person because of it and it helps me start my 6am shifts feeling more present.

This is consistent with other findings that suggest interaction rituals can influence initiative taking and increase individuals' level of self-confidence (Collins 2004).

In addition to an increase in confidence and improved personal relationships, participants felt "high" or "buzzed" as a result of the high levels of EE produced during the interaction ritual. These findings reflect those presented in the study by Wellman et al. (2014). In this study, participants used addictive language to describe their experiences as members of a megachurch. According to them, the desire to produce EE was so strong attendees craved the ritual interaction as one might crave a substance such

as drugs or alcohol. Similarly, practitioners I spoke with discussed feeling “depressed,” “emotional and physically off,” or, “not right” when they missed a yoga class. For many participants, it was impossible to conceive of life without yoga.

When I asked participants what they would replace yoga with if they could no longer practice, many were unable to answer the question. Yoga was so vital to their sense of well-being, they were unable to imagine life without it (Heider and Warner 2010; Wellman et al. 2014). Thus, the emotional energy produced during yoga rituals had such a “powerful motivating effect upon the individual, whoever [had] experienced this kind of moment wants to repeat it” (Collins 2004: p. 38).

Part of what made yoga so enjoyable for practitioners was the socialization that took place before and after the class. As Jim explained:

Well since I started practicing, physically I feel stronger, which is nice and I feel better about the way I hold myself but I also like the way people treat each other after the yoga practice. Everyone is really kind and mindful and they are in like a yoga buzz. I really like the camaraderie around it and as I get to know more people it’s just a friendly place to show up to. It’s a good experience. The more I do it, the more I love it.

Here we can see how the emotional energy produced during the class spills over into the encounters outside of the studio, increasing practitioners’ desire to continue participating in the ritual and increasing feelings of social solidarity (Collins 2004; Heider and Warner 2010; Cottingham 2012; Wellman et al. 2014). Further, participants felt that yoga helped improve their personal relationships outside of the studio. Practitioners spoke about being more patient, considerate, and loving toward their friends and family members since starting their yoga practice. Existing research on yoga and personal relationships argues that yogis are able to cultivate healthier relationships with their loved ones because of the

emphasis on self-care and intentionality (Daubenmier 2005; Douglas 2011; Ross et al. 2014). Interestingly, in all of the existing studies on yoga and personal relationships, participants were engaged in group practices, not individual/ home practices. Thus, it seems as if there might be a relationship between group yoga and improved mental and emotional health (Dittman and Freedman 2009).

The studio practice often served as an acceptable substitute for when practitioners were not able to make it in to the studio; however, participants maintained that their home practice could not replace their studio practice. When I asked participants to explain how the two were different they often spoke about their home practice as if it was a chore or something that had to be done. As Kraig explained:

You know, when I practice at home I have a regular hatha or a yin where I do some things I am trying to work on... but I like doing both you know. If I practice at home for four or five days in a row then I'll start to miss the studio because you don't get that unity and community in the solitude of your own home.

For Kraig, sessions at home were suitable for practicing postures and technique; however, since it is difficult to produce EE without physical co-presence, he is not able to reap the same benefits from his private practice as he can from his group practice. Indeed, interaction rituals can be addictive for many of its participants (Heider and Warner 2010; Wellman et al. 2014 because, as Collins (2004: p. 38) explains, “the feeling of emotional energy has a powerful motivating effect upon the individual; whoever has experienced this kind of moment wants to repeat it.” As such, emotional energy and group solidarity is not a given outcome of practicing yoga; rather, it is contingent upon a group yoga practice, guided by an instructor.

When an interaction ritual is successful, participants, as well as symbols are charged with emotional significance (Wellman et al. 2014). In yoga, the instructors held symbolic importance for the ritual participants. Although symbols are typically regarded as “visual icons” or “emblems” (Collins 2004: p. 49), existing research shows that preachers and other religious leaders can become “the sacred objects of congregations and serve as representations of the group” (Wellman et al. 2014: p. 664; Collins 2004). During the interviews, participants referred to their instructors as one of the most important elements for a successful yoga class. Participants expressed said things like “the instructor could make or break the experience” when describing the importance of the yoga teacher. Catherine felt that her instructor was responsible for “facilitating a journey” and said she enjoyed the class more when she knew the instructor because she felt “connected to them.” Some practitioners were loyal to only one instructor and would attend only classes that were taught by that person.

Barbara and Dana, cultivated such a strong relationship with their instructor, Helen, at the Health and Wellness Studio, she actually became their massage therapist. Helen teaches yin yoga at the HWS, along with various other slow yoga classes, while serving as the resident massage therapist. After interviewing several students from the HWS, I noticed that she had acquired a bit of a following and that many of the students in her class very rarely missed a session. All of her students I interviewed spoke very highly of her and revered her dedication to the practice and her knowledge of Hindu scripture, Sanskrit, and the human body. At SCY, however, Helen had a very different reputation. In a second interview with Molly, a yin yoga instructor at SCY, she began telling me

about her yin certification. She explained that yin certifications were not as easy to get as the general teaching certificate that most instructors had. As such, she thought it was strange that some of the instructors at the HWS were even allowed to teach yin. When I asked her to explain, she advised me to never take a class from Helen because her teaching techniques were dangerous and at odds with Carrie's, Molly's yin instructor. When I told her I had heard from other participants that Helen was one of their favorite instructors, she became defensive and went on to explain in further detail all of the problems with Helen's teaching style and began speaking about Carrie in the same way Helen's students spoke about her.

In their study, Wellman et al. (2014: p. 664) found that mega churchgoers proclaimed the "unique spiritual power of the pastor....referring him as God's 'mouthpiece,' 'messenger,' or 'vessel'." Similarly, yoga practitioners constantly spoke about the "great energy" or "good vibes" that emulated from their instructors. Jim, for instance, did not even begin practicing yoga regularly until he was introduced to his current teacher who he believes taught him how to enjoy yoga. Throughout the interviews, participants would share quotes, stories, and advice they had received from their instructor and, those who went on to teacher training, often modeled their classes after an instructor they admired.

According to Collins (2004), group symbols are the vessel that help carry emotional energy across to other situations. Indeed, several participants spoke about situations in which they recognized one of their classmates outside of the studio and how exciting it was to "be like, 'hey, I know you'," as Maria explained. Thus, instructors were

the symbols that “humans use to talk and to think with” beyond the ritual space (Collins 2004: p. 107; von Scheve et al. 2014).

As a group symbol, instructors helped dictate the morals and values of the group, contributing to “their standards of right and wrong” (Wellman et al. 2014: p. 665). This is where students fostered a sense of what was “good yoga” and what was “bad yoga.” Erin, for instance, explained that she could tell if a class was good or bad right away by simply understanding who the instructor was. Similarly, Molly based her opinion on the credibility and effectiveness of the yin yoga taught at the HWS on her impression of their instructor in comparison to the standards taught to her by Carrie, her instructor.

Another criterion that seemed to indicate standards of right or wrong in yoga was one’s relationship with the Namaste philosophy. Yogis in this study either identified or did not identify with the Namaste philosophy depending on how the symbol was used by their studio. While some found the philosophy extremely valuable and enlightening, others felt it was offensive and a misrepresentation of Indian culture. Feelings of morality and standards of right and wrong also extended into the physical postures themselves. For instance, when I spoke to Ted, he explained how some instructors reject certain posture sequences:

In the yoga community, you’ll hear certain people saying you shouldn’t do this or do that. There are a lot of things that certain groups of yogis frown upon in terms of sequencing and putting different postures together and it just all has to do with style. For example, they’ll say you shouldn’t do a close hip and then an open hip, like when you are moving from warrior one to warrior two. But I’ll do that. I’ll just do it right so that you are engaging the hip and making sure you are mindful.

Indeed, feelings of morality in yoga had much to do with teaching and practice styles.

Some practitioners were not as dismissive of dissenting opinions, however. Recall



Molly's vehement warning against Cynthia's class, demonstrating her opinion on "what one ought to do" (Wellman et al. 2014: p. 665).

## Chapter Summary

In this chapter I attempted to demonstrate how yoga can be considered an interaction ritual. Interviews with practitioners indicate that group yoga produces high levels of emotional energy that stimulate feelings of social solidarity, identification with symbols, and feelings of morality. For many of the participants, the EE produced in yoga spilled over into proceeding social interactions and impacted their relationship with their self, as well as others. Additionally, the emotional energy produced motivated practitioners to keep returning to the practice so that they could repeat the interaction ritual and produce more emotional energy (Collins 2004).

Rhythmic synchronization in this interaction ritual took place on two levels: practitioners synchronized their breath with their movements and then synchronized their bodies with those of the others in the room, adding to the intensity of the ritual and stimulating entrainment. Contrary to existing literature (Collins 2004; Hatfield et al. 1992), observations and interviews with participants indicate that entrainment need not rely on "automatic" or "unconscious" rhythmic synchronization. As we have seen in yoga, entrainment can be stimulated via voluntary rhythmic synchronization were ritual

participants are not only consciously aware that they are moving and breathing with others, it is the main objective of their ritual.

Overall, I found that practitioners felt positively impacted by yoga regardless of whether they were practicing alone or in a group; however, yogis also felt that their group practice yielded more intense emotions than their home practice. As such, group yoga can be considered an interaction ritual wherein entrainment is consciously enacted and emotional energy is produced.

## CHAPTER VII: CONCLUSIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

In this section I will summarize the research findings and discuss the implications of my study. Included will be a discussion about the theoretical developments resultant from my thesis, as well as an overview of potential limitations and critiques of my methodological decisions and analysis.

### Summary of Research

The purpose of this study was to explore individuals' experience with yoga in the United States. Specifically, I wanted to understand individuals' motivation to practice yoga, their perception of how it impacts their life, and the degree to which people experience the practice different from others. This was important because very little research has been done to better understand the relationship between yoga and social interaction and, further, although both gender and yoga are popular areas of research, almost no literature has been dedicated to exploring the role of gender in shaping someone's experience with yoga. I sought to address these issues by answering these research questions:

4. How do modern Americans experience western yoga?
5. What do practitioners perceive as the benefits of yoga?
6. How is gender accomplished in a yoga setting?

With these questions in mind, I analyzed the experiences of twenty practitioners living in the United States in conjunction with my own experience, recorded in field notes taken after participating and observing at two yoga studios.

These data were collected using qualitative methods, specifically, semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Over the course of seven months, I interviewed twenty practitioners and conducted observation at two studios. Participant observation took place at two yoga studios located in the Midwest. The locations were chosen based on information taken from their website. Interviews were conducted either in person, over the phone, or on a video message system and lasted between forty-five minutes to an hour and a half. Although I had an interview-guide that I used as an aid, participants were allowed to direct the interview and change the course of the interview however they saw fit.

In this thesis, I illustrated how modern yoga practitioners draw boundaries between themselves and yogis they see as illegitimate. To demonstrate this, I presented two categories of practitioners: Hindu origins practitioners who valued the Eastern traditions associated with yoga; and non-spiritual practitioners who were mainly interested in the physical components of the practice. Using these categories, I showed how Hindu origins practitioners relied on claims of authenticity to distinguish themselves from the nonspiritual practitioners they saw as “less committed” or “fake” and how nonspiritual practitioners engaged in boundary drawing to distance themselves from what they called “hippie dippy” yoga. While yogis were eager to distinguish themselves from practitioners who did not reflect their idea of the meaning of yoga, in general, participants

measured the success of a yoga practice the same, regardless of whether they were a Hindu origins or a nonspiritual practitioner; a yoga practice was successful if you were able to show up and focus on your breath.

Next, I showed how gender is unavoidable in a yoga setting. Using identity theories and masculinity theories, I found that men who practice yoga must work to maintain their masculinity and assert their dominance. One way this was achieved was through overcompensatory displays of masculinity (Willer et al. 2013). In this section, I argued that all-male yoga groups make evident the tenuousness of masculinity and proposed an academic definition for *fragile masculinity*. Overall, I discovered that the feminized image associated with yoga, as well as the high sex ratio of participants, discouraged men from practicing and made already practicing men feel uneasy around their female classmates.

Finally, I argued that yoga is an interaction ritual (Collins 2004). The physical assembly, studio, breath work, and objective to move and breathe with others represent the four ingredients required by Collins (2004) for a successful interaction ritual. Once I demonstrated how yoga met the necessary conditions, I explained how yoga produced emotional energy, group solidarity, sacred objects, and feelings of morality—the ritual outcomes presented in Collins’ theory. In this section I argued that entrainment, an outcome of rhythmic synchronization, need not be an “unconscious” or “automatic” process as has been previously suggested (Collins 2004; Hatfield et al. 1992). On the contrary, I found that entrainment can arise from voluntary synchronization wherein

ritual participants are not only aware that they are synchronizing their actions, they also actively attempt to do so.

### Theoretical Development

To analyze peoples' experience with yoga in the United States I utilized several concepts and theories. The overarching framework that guided the entirety of my analysis, however, was the symbolic interactionist (SI) perspective. According to Blumer (1969), symbolic interactionism maintains three premises: humans act toward things based on the meanings they ascribe to those things, objects and actions derive meaning from social interaction, and meaning is established through an interpretive process in which a social actor "selects, checks, suspends, regroupes and transforms the meanings in light of the situation in which [s]he is placed" (1969: p. 5). In this study, SI helped me understand the process by which people create new meanings out of an old tradition and how those meanings impact, and are impacted by, social interaction. Despite existing literature that argues modern Western yoga is a vapid exercise trend (Smith 2007), I found that yoga practitioners create their own meaning for the activity and imbue a variety of social and personal values into the practice—some of which are physical and some that are transcendental. As many participants were concerned with "how yoga" they appeared, SI also helped me understand how conflicting symbolic values can result in boundary drawing.

In addition to symbolic interactionism, theories on gender identity, masculinity and femininity were used to analyze the data. West and Zimmerman's (1987) concept of doing gender, wherein they posit that gender is a routine accomplishment each individual is held accountable to, informed my understanding of the social pressures faced by men to adhere to the normative standards of masculinity. Further, theories on gender identity and masculinity helped me understand the lengths male yogis went through to display their male dominance. The notion of overcompensatory masculinity, posited by Willer et al. (2013), provided an empirical framework from which I was able to develop my own definition of fragile masculinity, the notion that masculinity is such a precarious identity, when faced with threat, it can cause individuals to lash out against that which compromised its dominance.

Finally, I employed Collins' *Interaction Ritual Chain* (2004) theory to show how yoga can positively impact its practitioners. Collins' theory posits that physical co-presence, barriers to the outside, mutual focus of attention, and shared mood combine to create an interaction ritual where positive emotional energy is produced, along with social solidarity, sacred symbols, and feelings of morality. This framework helped make sense of how group embodiment practices can have such dramatic, positive effects on people's mental and emotional well-being. Additionally, it highlighted the significance of moving and breathing together and helped illustrate the difference in participants' experience with group yoga and private yoga. This thesis also helped contribute to the existing empirical studies that are at odds with some of Collins' positions. Like Heider and Warner (2010), I found the fourth ingredient, "shared mood," was not as useful as

Durkheim's concept of "shared consciousness." Further, I demonstrated that entrainment can take place when rhythmic synchronization is conscious and voluntary; it need not occur when participants are unaware that they are mimicking each other.

As such, this study contributes to existing literature by 1) presenting a theoretical framework for understanding the symbolic value of modern, Western yoga, how those values differ from person-to-person, and what can happen when conflicting values interact; 2) adding to the existing literature on authenticity claims and symbolic boundary making, providing a starting point for future researchers to begin asking questions about western claims to authenticity in eastern practices; 3) initiating conversations about masculinity in a yoga setting and exploring how hegemonic masculinity reacts to female dominated spaces; 4) contributing to the growing literature that examines yoga broadly, outside of the context of eating disorders, chronic depression, or post-traumatic stress; 5) furthering discussion on interaction rituals, rhythmic synchronization, and entrainment, outside of a sport or religious context; 6) considering how group embodiment practices may impact practitioners more intensely than private embodiment practices.

### Limitations and Recommendations

Although I feel that I have presented a near complete picture of my practitioners' experience with contemporary yoga, there are a few limitations to this study which may result in critiques regarding my method of data collection and sampling techniques. Here, I will address these concerns and offer some responses to them along with



recommendations for future researchers. Specifically, I will talk about the lack of diversity in my sample and discuss how other limitations arose out of my selection of observation sites. I will also use this section to briefly draw attention to participants who were not adequately featured in my analysis section—namely, Jfindsyoga and Skyler.

A potential critique of my study is that the lack of diversity in my sample caused me to analyze modern yoga through a white, cisgender, middle to upper-middle class lens. In other words, my sample and discussion overwhelmingly features the voices of privileged practitioners (see Appendix B for participant demographics). Although this is representative of the larger population of yoga practitioners in the United States (Park and Siegel 2015), the voices of “non-normative” yogis must be sought out and included in the literature. This came up in my conversations with both Jfinds and Skyler.

Jfinds, an “instagram famous” yogi has been featured in number of podcasts and social media blogs dedicated to African American yogis. Throughout our conversation, we openly discussed topics such as race, income, and ability in the context of western yoga. This was not common with other participants, most likely because she indicated that she also studied sociology and missed having conversations about social inequality at her current job as an early education teacher. Naively, I asked Jfinds to talk a bit about why there were not more African Americans practicing yoga. She explained: “it’s not that they aren’t practicing, they are. They just aren’t doing it in the studio. They are doing it at home.” Some of this, she continued, could have to do with how salient their minority identity would be in a yoga studio, while another part of it could be related to social physique anxiety because, “we [black women] just have bigger bodies.” Social physique

anxiety occurs when there is a discrepancy between the ideal and actual body and an overwhelming concern for how others' judge one's appearance (Leary 1992). When Jfinds first started practicing yoga she did so at a studio, however, after being body shamed by an instructor she practiced at home for a long period of time. She did not return to the studio until she started practicing to become an instructor herself in the hopes of creating a safe space for plus sized women and women of color to practice yoga. Thus, the voices of plus sized women and yogis from the "body positive" community should be included in the literature, along with the voices of people of color.

Feedback from Jfinds raises two issues with my analysis of yoga in the west: first, it implies that the people I interviewed were already more likely to have positive experiences with yoga because they fit the description of the "typical yogi" (Brems et al. 2015); second, it suggests that traditional sampling techniques will not be efficient for recruiting a racially diverse sample. This point was also emphasized to me by Skyler, a trans-identified yogi who created two classes for other trans and queer-identified individuals to practice yoga in a safe space.

According to Skyler, yoga studios can be "scary places" for individuals who do not fit in with the gender binary; especially for trans folks who might be in the process of transitioning and worried they will be "outed." As they explained, "there just isn't enough understanding in the cis[gender] community and the cis[gender] population to allow for trans folks to have a safe space in which they aren't going to be misgendered or stared at or intimidated." Because my sample is largely made up of practitioners who have gender identities that match their sex categorization (West and Zimmerman 1987)—

with the exception of Skyler, my analysis runs the risk of reinforcing the gender binary, in which “the categories ‘women’ and ‘men’ are taken as being in no need of further examination,” operating under the assumption that these categories are “given” (Connell 1985: p. 264).

Incorporating the voices of practitioners who do not fit the stereotypical image of a yogi certainly would have enriched my analysis and added depth to my discussion of yoga in the United States. For instance, while the two observation locations were chosen thoughtfully, they were also chosen on convenience. Finances, scheduling, and transportation were all factors that limited my ability to recruit from yoga studios that might have seemed more welcoming to practitioners of various racial and ethnic backgrounds, gender identities, and body types.

Both the Health and Wellness Studio and San Culpa yoga offered more than ten different classes per day, from five in the morning until ten at night. As such, I was able to attend more classes at HWS and SCY than I would have been able to at the YMCA or some other community organization, for instance. While community-based classes would have been more affordable and had the potential to produce a more diverse population from which to recruit from, classes were offered with less frequency and at times of the day that were not compatible with a graduate student schedule. I think that, in the future, I would like to repeat this study and solely observe at, and recruit from, yoga classes that are not located in a formal studio.

Financial and time constraints aside, there were other factors that limited my ability to appropriately seek out marginalized populations of practitioners. While more

research needs to be conducted on queer and transgender practitioners, as Skyler indicated, there are many yogis within those communities who feel ostracized from the rest of the yoga population and weary of practicing in public spaces, such as studios. Thus, someone interested in the experiences of trans and queer identified yogis would need to have access to a group, like Skyler's. Because normative gender standards are not so rigidly adhered to in the LGBTQ community, queer and trans yoga settings could provide fascinating and invaluable insight on the benefits and impacts of yoga for marginalized peoples. By highlighting the experiences of practitioners who differ from the image of the typical yogi, we might be able to instruct teachers on how to make the yoga studio a more welcoming and tolerant place for the large population of individuals who do not fit into the stereotype and prevent otherwise excited students, like Jfinds, from being humiliated by their instructor. As such, future researchers should consider studying yoga within non-cisgender spaces.

As a feminist researcher, I believe it would be inappropriate for a straight, cisgender woman, such as myself, to insert themselves into a practice space dedicated to serving sexual and gender minorities, like Skyler's. Because Skyler's practice space solely exists to provide a space for non-normative practitioners to practice yoga removed from normative practitioners, my privilege as a straight woman as well as a researcher could seriously threaten the sanctity of their *yoga shala* (home). However, I also believe that a person interested in studying yoga should utilize methods like participant observation when attempting to understand yoga, as any analysis of the practice should come from the perspective of someone who has been actively involved in the activity

(Sjoman 1999; Smith 2007). As such, academics who are not a part of the LGBTQ community, but are interested in researching yoga within these contexts should have 1) prior access to the group outside of a research setting/ a personal relationship with their sample or, 2) engage in extensive research on feminist methods and allyship, particularly in regards to the queer and transgender experience or, 3) work with another researcher who identifies as trans or queer so that the collection, analysis, and interpretation of the data can be enriched by the perspective of someone who has intimate knowledge of these identities.

Overall, further study in this area is needed in order to gain a better understanding of yogis who do not fit into the stereotype of the white, skinny, rich, young woman who has the privilege of engaging in physical activity without any fear of being misgendered, marginalized, or ostracized in a space that is meant for healing.

## Final Words

This study took a unique approach to studying yoga in the western world. Because much of the research on yoga has been focused on appropriation (Askegaard and Eckhardt 2012; Maddox 2015; Vats 2016), western perversion of an Eastern practice (Smith 2007; Laverance and Lozanski 2015), or the practice's ability to treat eating disorders in women (Daubenmier 2005; Dittman and Freedman 2009; Douglas 2011) we have been missing a broad picture of yoga in America; why it is meaningful to people, how does it impact social interaction, and how do social structures impact it. As a result,

there is still very little we know about how yoga interacts with larger social structures such as gender, religion, and culture.

Here, I also find it necessary to note that while not all of my participants were concerned with Eastern traditions, all of them acknowledged and respected the historical significance of the practice. Some even went as far as to spend countless hours studying Sanskrit in an effort to use the correct pronunciation of the poses and sequences. Further, while participants reacted to conflicting opinions in yoga by drawing symbolic boundaries, all of the yogis I interviewed welcomed new practitioners to their space, regardless of their motivation to practice yoga.

To conclude, by focusing on westerners' overall experience with yoga I hoped to demonstrate how individual practitioners make sense of yoga. Rather than attempt to prove whether or not yoga was being practiced "authentically" in the United States or demonstrate its effectiveness in treating mental and emotional problems, I sought to understand how individual people made sense of their yoga practice and provide practitioners with an opportunity to explain its importance in their lives.

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## Appendix A: Interview Guide

### Interview Guide

#### I. Intro Questions

1. When did you first start practicing yoga? How did you come to yoga?
2. Why did you become interested in yoga?

#### II. Yoga in the United States

1. Why do you think yoga has become so popular in the United States?
2. Why do you think it is more popular with women than men?
3. Are there certain styles or instructors you like better?

#### III. Practice Space

1. Tell me about your yoga studio, the instructors, the other students. What do you like about your practice space? Are there things about it you wish were different?
2. Do you ever practice alone? Talk a little bit about how you practice differently when you are alone
3. What is the most challenging part of yoga?
4. What is it like to practice with other people? Does other people being in the room ever affect how you go about your practice?
5. If you couldn't practice yoga anymore what kind of activity would you use to replace it? What do you think the "ultimate goal" of yoga is? What is the point of yoga?
6. What would you say is the key to having a successful yoga practice? How do you 'master' yoga?

#### IV. Exercise and Embodiment

1. What does it mean to you to be healthy; emotionally, mentally, and/or physically?
2. What kind of relationship do you have with your body and yourself? Have you ever struggled with body image issues? How has the way you relate to your body changed since you started practicing?
3. Some researchers have found that people who exercise frequently tend to be harder on themselves. What do you think about this?

#### V. Spirituality and transcendence

1. Would you consider yourself a religious or spiritual person?
2. Would you say your religious/ spiritual beliefs are in any way related to your yoga practice?
3. Are ideas like the 'true self' or 'ultimate enlightenment' meaningful to you?
4. Is the 'namaste' philosophy meaningful to you or your practice?

#### VI. Closing Questions

1. In what ways have you changed since starting your yoga practice?
2. Is there anything I didn't ask that you think I should?
3. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience with yoga or yoga in general?
4. Is it okay to email you if I have follow up questions? Would you be willing to recommend anyone to be interviewed?

## Appendix B: Participant Demographic Information Sheet

### Participant Demographic Information Sheet:

Age:

- 18-25
- 26-40
- 41-55
- 56 or older

Gender Category:

- Woman
- Man
- Transgender
- Gender non-conforming
- Gender not listed here?  
Specify: \_\_\_\_\_
- N/A, rather not say

Preferred Pronouns:

- She/her
- He/him
- They/them
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Racial/ Ethnic identification:

- Arab
- Asian/ Pacific Islander
- Black/ African American
- Hispanic
- Indigenous/ First peoples
- Latino
- African American
- Multiracial
- White
- Would rather not say
- Don't know
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Annual Household Income:

- Less than \$25,000
- \$25,001-49,999
- \$50,000-69,999
- \$70,000-99,999
- Over \$100,000

Employment:

- Yes  
Specify: \_\_\_\_\_
- No
- Retired
- Other  
Specify: \_\_\_\_\_
- Rather not say

What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- Grammar school
- High school or equivalent
- Associate's degree/ technical school (2 year)
- Some college
- Bachelor's
- Master's Degree
- Doctoral Degree
- Other professional degree (MD, JD, etc.)
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

What best describes your political orientation?

- Liberal
- Conservative
- Neither
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_
- Rather not say

Appendix C: Participant Demographics

**Participant Demographic Information (N = 20)**

<b>Age</b>	
18-25	3
26-40	9
41-55	5
56 or older	3
<b>Gender Identity</b>	
Transgender	1
Female	12
Male	7
<b>Race/ Ethnicity</b>	
Arabic	1
Black	1
Mixed Race	1
Mexican	2
Philippine	1
White	14
<b>Yearly Household Income</b>	
>\$25,000	5
\$25,000-\$49,000	1
\$50,000-\$69,000	2
\$70,000-\$99,999	3
<\$100,000	5
Rather Not Say	4
<b>Employment</b>	
Full time	12
Part time	1
Student	4
Retired	3
<b>Education</b>	
Some college	1
Trade School	1
Bachelor's Degree	11
Graduate Degree	7
<b>Political Orientation</b>	
Liberal	11
Conservative	2
Other	5
None	2

## Appendix D: Recruitment Flyer/ Follow-up

### **Western Michigan University Department of Sociology Call for Participation**

Master's student seeking participants for thesis research on people's experiences with yoga in America.

My name is Olivia McLaughlin, I am a Master's student in the Sociology department at Western Michigan University. I am conducting a research project on women and men's experiences with yoga in America. Participants will engage in an approximately 30minute to 90 minute semi-structured interview that will focus on their experience with yoga; its impacts and effects in their lives and their motivation to practice. Interviews will take place in a location of the participant's choice, however, locations can be provided if necessary. Phone and skype interviews are also possible if we are not able to meet face to face. Before each interview participants will be asked to fill out a letter of consent. Participants will be asked questions about their yoga practice: their studio, preferred style, and information about their personal background. The maximum time commitment for this study is 90 minutes.

#### **Study Qualifications- Participants must meet the following criteria to participate:**

- Be 18 years or older
- Practice yoga at least once a week
- Practice yoga in the United States
- Be comfortable discussing your yoga practice and other personal information including, but not limited to: personal relationships, gender identity, religious or spiritual identity, fitness or exercise techniques, and body image.

*If you would like more information about participating, please contact Olivia McLaughlin by email [olivia.m.mclaughlin@wmich.edu](mailto:olivia.m.mclaughlin@wmich.edu), or phone (509) 949-3304.*

Appendix D--continued

Re: Yoga Study, Follow Up

Hi \_\_\_\_, thank you so much again for speaking with me about yoga. If you are still interested, I would love to find a time that works for you to sit down and talk about your practice. I've attached another Informed Consent document and Call for Participation for you to read in case you have any other questions.

Please feel free to reach me at the phone number provided in the Call for Participation or at my email address.

Look forward to hearing from you,

Olivia |

Appendix E: Approval Letter from HSIRB

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY



Human Subjects Institutional Review Board

Date: September 29, 2015

To: Jesse Smith, Principal Investigator  
Olivia McLaughlin, Student Investigator for thesis

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair 

Re: HSIRB Project Number 15-09-21

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled “Namaste?: Embodiment and authenticity in Contemporary American Yoga” has been **approved** under the **expedited** category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note: This research may **only** be conducted exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project (e.g., ***you must request a post approval change to enroll subjects beyond the number stated in your application under “Number of subjects you want to complete the study.”*** Failure to obtain approval for changes will result in a protocol deviation. In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

**Reapproval of the project is required if it extends beyond the termination date stated below.**

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

**Approval Termination:                      September 28, 2016**

## Appendix F

### Informed Consent

Western Michigan University  
Sociology

**Principal Investigator:** Jesse Smith  
**Student Investigator:** Olivia McLaughlin  
**Title of the Study:** ‘Namaste’?: Embodiment and Authenticity in Contemporary American Yoga

You have been invited to participate in a research project titled “‘*Namaste*’?: *Embodiment and Authenticity in Contemporary American Yoga*.” This project will serve as Olivia McLaughlin’s thesis for the requirements of the Master’s in Sociology degree. This consent document will explain the purpose of this research project and will review time commitments, procedures of the study, and the risks and benefits of participating in the research project. Please read this consent form carefully and completely and please ask any questions if you are in need of more clarification.

#### **What are we trying to find out in this study?**

The purpose of this study is to find out more about American’s experience with yoga; why they practice it and how they benefit from it. This study aims to better understand the beliefs and practices of modern yogis and their experiences with the physical, emotional, and mental components of yoga.

#### **Who can participate in this study?**

Any person, 18 years or older, who has lived in the United States for the past ten years and practices yoga regularly is eligible to participate in this study. Participants who practice at least three times a week for the past 30 days will be considered “regular” practitioners. Participants must be willing to have their interview recorded to be considered for the study.

#### **Where will this study take place?**

Interviews for this study will take place in a quiet and safe location at a time and day of each participant’s choice. Participants should choose a place where they feel relaxed and comfortable speaking freely; this could be a coffee shop, home, office, etc. If participants do not have access to a location that fulfills these needs, the student investigator will provide options such as a reserved meeting room or private study room at Western Michigan University.

#### **What is the time commitment for participating in this study?**

Participants in this study will complete an open-ended interview that will last from 30-90 minutes long. At the end of each interview participants will be asked if they are willing to agree to shorter, follow-up questions later on in the data collection phase to generate or



clarify information. Follow-up interviews may be conducted over the phone or via email depending on the participant's preference. Participants can decline to be contacted for follow-up interviews without penalty.

**What will you be asked to do if you choose to participate in this study?**

Those who agree to participate will complete an open-ended interview about their experience practicing yoga. Participants will be asked a series of questions about their experience with yoga, their opinions about different styles, and additionally about the general culture of yoga in the United States. Participants will be asked to allow the student investigator to audio record the interview and will be given the opportunity to choose a pseudonym if they wish. Participants will also be given a short questionnaire to complete and return to the student investigator prior to the interview. This survey will include questions about personal demographics and other background information. Participants may also be asked to answer a few short follow up questions prior to the interview, but this is not required. If the participant was not recruited while the student investigator was observing a yoga class, they may be asked if they are comfortable inviting the student to their yoga class; this is also not required.

**What information is being measured during this study?**

This is a qualitative study which aims to understand why people choose to practice yoga, what benefits they gain, and how their practice impacts and is impacted by other parts of their life. In-depth interviews will allow participants to speak freely about their experiences with yoga and their beliefs and opinions about yoga in the United States. The information collected during interviews and from the questionnaires will be used to understand peoples' experience with contemporary yoga in America.

**What are the risks of participating in this study, and how will these risks be minimized?**

The potential risks to participants in participating in this portion of the study are very minimal. It is possible that participants might experience distress when speaking about their experiences with yoga, body image and body satisfaction. If any participant exhibits distress during the interview, or say they are unable to continue the interview for any reason, the interview will be ended.

**What are the benefits of participating in this study?**

Some participants may benefit from a sense of empowerment from being able to discuss their yoga practice in an affirming space. Those who participate in this study will be providing information that may lead to a better understanding of the impacts and effects of yoga in peoples' lives.

**Are there any costs associated with participating in this study?**

There are no costs associated with participating in this study.

**Is there any compensation for participating in this study?**

There is no compensation for participating in this study.

**Who will have access to the information collected during the study?**

Only the student investigator will have access to the information collected during the study. The student investigator will share aspects of data collected during the study with the principle investigator but no one else will know the passwords for any of the password protected security measures. This study is being conducted as a thesis and thus will be published and available at Western Michigan University Waldo Library. Results from the study will also likely be presented at professional academic conferences.

**What if you want to stop participating in this study?**

You can choose to stop participating in the study at any time, for any reason. You will not suffer any prejudice or penalty by your decision to stop your participation. At any time during the data collection phase of the study, you may ask to revoke portions, or the entirety of your interview.

The student investigator can also decide to stop your participation in the study without your consent.

Should you have any questions prior to or during the study, you can contact the primary investigator, Jesse Smith at (269) 387-3600 or [jesse.smith@wmich.edu](mailto:jesse.smith@wmich.edu). You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at (269) 387-8293 or the Vice President for Research at (269) 387-8298 if questions arise during the course of the study.

This consent document has been approved for use for one year by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in the upper right corner. Do not participate in this study if the stamped date is older than one year.

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I have read this informed consent document. The risks and benefits have been explained to me. I agree to take part in this study.

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Please Print Your Name

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Participant's Signature

Date \_\_\_\_\_