Theorizing Yoga as a Mindfulness Skill

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Abstract

Yoga and mindfulness aim to achieve the same goal of quieting the mind and having participants look within. In this article, yoga practices are discussed for their potential role in mindfulness skill development. An examination of the literature provides a description of yoga and the theory of mindfulness, including the reduction of negative functioning and increase of mental health, physical health and behaviour regulation. The process through which yoga is theorized to function as a mindfulness skill is discussed along with future directions in theoretical development.

Keywords: Yoga, mindfulness, complementary, intervention, meditation;

1. Introduction

For more than twenty years, mindfulness has captivated clinicians for its potential application with mental health client populations. Mindfulness has been associated with the ability to focus attention on immediate experience and finding oneness since Kabat-Zinn’s (1985) The Clinical Use of Mindfulness Meditation for The Self Regulation of Chronic Pain. Although a great body of literature exists on yoga and its healing properties, it has only recently benefitted from empirically based studies that highlight clinical research outcomes involving the effects of yoga on mental health client populations. Such studies include Khumari, Kaur and Kaur’s (1993) Effectiveness of Shavasana on Depression Among University Students and, most recently, Mehta and Sharma’s (2010) Yoga as a Complementary Therapy for Clinical Depression. Although the two disciplines of mindfulness and yoga are unique, both share inherent similarities that are congruent in serving the mental health client population.

This article has three goals. The first goal is to define and characterize yoga, by primarily drawing upon yogic texts and the developing scholarship on the topic. Many readers may find the concept of yoga unfamiliar or resist participation due to Western misconceptions surrounding the now popularized physical practice of yoga. The second goal is to place mindfulness in the context of therapeutic skills training for mental health professionals and to expose a process through which yoga is theorized as a mindfulness skill. The paper concludes with the third goal of proposing future directions in theoretical development and an operational definition of yoga.

2. Origins of Yoga

Yoga is a word from the Sanskrit language. Written and spoken limitedly in India, Sanskrit is found primarily in popular Indian liturgical contexts such as Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism. The word yoga has varying interpretations but is most commonly understood as meaning "union" (Chopra & Simon, 2004, p. 10). Yoga is also described as yoking, which is the act of joining two people or things together in a close relationship. Yogic literature often augments this definition, declaring that the practice of yoga aids practitioners in becoming joined with the
divine or with awakening their awareness of self. The *Yoga Sūtras*, a text written by Patanjali, a Sanskrit scholar and physician in c. 400 CE, is considered to be the definitive text on yoga (Bachman, 2011, p. 1). Of note, the *Yoga Sūtras* is composed mostly of poetically written verse on yogic philosophy. Furthermore, only approximately two percent of the *Yoga Sūtras* is dedicated to the physical practice (or postures) popularly associated with yoga (Bachman, 2011; Birdee, et al., 2008). Philosophically, the *Yoga Sūtras* is congruent with the six classical Indian philosophies; each of which is an interpretation of the *Veda*-s, the ancient scriptures of Hinduism (Sharma, 1997, p. 149). This philosophy of yoga does not dictate subscription to a religion nor the worship of a God; however, yoga is used in the practice of some religions including Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism.

3. The Practice of Yoga

Physically, the practice of yoga is popularly associated with the most widely subscribed yoga discipline, Hatha Yoga (Salmon, Lush, Jablonski and Sephton, 2009). Considered classical yoga, Hatha is a yoga style that dates back to medieval India although it has evolved from its earliest traditions and now offers many postures (yoga poses) combined with deep abdominal breathing (Broad, 2012). Hatha Yoga is highly regarded in the yoga community: "according to practitioners hatha-yoga produces a state of well-being and quietness of the mind" (Stanescu, Nemery, Veriter, and Marechal, 1981, p. 1625). Hatha is a gentle, sometimes restorative style of yoga that can also be practiced more rigorously (Broad, 2012). Yoga practices are commonly performed on a mat, typically 182 cm long by 60 cm wide, which is used to prevent the hands and feet of participants from slipping. A series of postures is performed with deep abdominal or diaphragmatic breathing, which is prescribed for each movement based on inhalations and exhalations. This linking of breath to body movement is an essential part of the yoga practice which enables the practitioner to prepare for a meditative state (Salmon, Lush, Jablonski and Sephton, 2009; Stanescu, Nemery, Veriter, and Marechal, 1981).

4. Yoga in Clinical Research

Since 2005, interest has increased in validating the health benefits of yoga through clinical research. It is beyond the purview of this paper to completely investigate the research literature on this subject; however, several comprehensive reviews of clinical research exist. One such review found that yoga provided improvement in areas such as anxiety, depression, sleep concerns (including measurements of total sleep time, sleep efficiency and sleep quality), low back pain, headaches, hypertension, and stress (Field, 2011). Other reviews such as Raub’s (2002) literature review of Hatha Yoga, Khalsa’s (2004) bibliometric analysis, and Innes and Vincent’s (2006) systematic review all offer considerable insight into the many recent studies investigating the efficacy of yoga.

5. Clinical Application of Mindfulness

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) is often incorporated in the introduction of mindfulness into contemporary psychology (Bishop, et al., 2004). Mindfulness has been successfully integrated into dialectical behavior therapy (Linehan, 1993) which is an intervention used as treatment for borderline personality disorder, suicidal behavior and self-harming behavior. It utilizes mindfulness skills as a training exercise for clients to improve affect tolerance. Although dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) has its roots in cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), a separate model of mindfulness exists for cognitive therapy practices, known as mindfulness-based cognitive therapy. This mixed-methods intervention utilizes both mindfulness and cognitive therapy and benefits those diagnosed with major depression as is indicated in a reduced rate of relapse (Teasdale et al., 2000). Hayes and Feldman (2004) use mindfulness for emotion regulation and psychological distress in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). The bulk of work that occurs in mindfulness skill practices, as prescribed by the above counselling paradigms, requires awareness to the *here and now* or current experience (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Bishop, et al. (2004) agreed upon sustained attention as an operationalized definition of mindfulness, where mindfulness participants regulate the focus of their thoughts or attention. Salmon, Lush, Jablonski and Sephton (2009) comment in their
extensive literature review, *Yoga and Mindfulness: Clinical Aspects of an Ancient Mind/Body Practice*, that yoga is overlooked in existing mindfulness literature.

6. Theorizing Yoga as a Mindfulness Skill

Yoga practitioner Sat Bir Khalsa (Broad, 2012) described yoga as "a kind of mindfulness" (p. 102). In comparing Bishop, et al.'s (2004) operationalized definition of mindfulness to the underlying philosophy of yoga and its practices of *quieting the mind*, it can be hypothesized that the two are closely related and that yoga may be used interchangeably with mindfulness skills or exercises.

Mindfulness skills rely on meditation and an intense focus to evoke the quieting of the mind by bringing concentration to the present moment (Bishop, et al., 2004; Brown and Ryan, 2003; Hanh, 1976). Yogic philosophy in like manner describes a three-stage process wherein this quietness of the mind is achieved. In the first stage, a yoga practitioner, similarly to mindfulness, focuses their attention (Bachman, 2011). In the second stage, a yoga practitioner turns the focus inwards on themselves (Bachman, 2011). Mindfulness describes this as an awareness of "what actually happens to us and is us at the successive moments of perception" (Thera, 1972, p. 5). The third stage in yoga is "full participation" (Bachman, 2011, p. 236), akin to that described by mindfulness as *immersion* or deep mental involvement (Marcel, 2003). Another substantive commonality between mindfulness and yoga is apparent in the focusing of such attention. Segal, Williams, and Teasdale (2002) described non-judgment as a tenet of mindfulness practice. Non-judgment relies on the practitioners’ ability to acknowledge their thoughts, feelings and sensations but without dwelling on them and allowing them to pass. In comparison, yoga prescribes *continuous focus*, which addresses distracting thoughts that may bring the yoga practitioner’s attention away from the breath. The practitioner would simply allow the thoughts to pass and then revert their attention back to their focus, the breath (Bachman, 2011). Breathing is an additional similarity in both disciplines. It is fundamental to both mindfulness and yoga practices as outlined by Salmon, Lush, Jablonski and Sephton (2009). Mindfulness skills, described by Kabat-Zinn (1990) as mindfulness meditation typically emphasize breathing as the practitioner's primary focus. While yoga also prescribes meditation through breathing, it introduces movement with the breath. This syncing of the breath with movement is the foundation of yoga, a skill that yoga practitioners use comparably to mindfulness. In yoga, movement is purposeful and draws the practitioner's attention to breathing. The suggested outcome, according to yoga texts, is the ability to bring focus, or to use the body movement to quiet the mind.

7. Conclusion

Yoga could be a complementary activity for clinicians already practicing mindfulness. Theorizing yoga as a mindfulness skill may prove to be a more engrossing activity for client populations who participate in the breathing and observing prescribed by mindfulness but may not feel engaged through the traditional mindfulness skills or exercises. The introduction of yoga into such clinician mindfulness training could be an alternative to the practices already popularized, the movement combined with breathing in yoga could give participants a sense of being active, more easily drawing their attention away from their thoughts. This idea of *quieting the mind* through physical activity is congruent with how yoga practices were described earlier in this paper. Clinicians could take advantage of this new mindfulness skill to make the benefits of mindfulness more accessible to their clients. However, some difficulties of initiating yoga for clinicians exist for direct practice; varying yoga disciplines exist, research is required to fully conceptualize the utilization of yoga in future directions of mindfulness practice and informing a yoga practice that is appropriate for direct practice.

References


