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Yoga, well-being and transcendence: An interpretative phenomenological analysis.

Abstract

Yoga is thriving in the West, but how much is known about the relationship between the practice and overall well-being? The purpose of this empirical study was to explore this relationship from an experiential, qualitative perspective. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five men living in the UK who practise yoga regularly, and the resulting verbatim transcripts were subjected to an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). We identified four interrelated experiential themes for our participants: yoga has significant personal meaning for the men in how it relates to their overall well-being; the mind-body connection inherent in their practice; the transformative and stabilising effect of the practice in their lives; and the enhanced sense of physical and emotional awareness they experienced as a result. These themes provide insights into how the men make sense of and relate yoga practice to their overall self-esteem and sense of self. The findings are discussed in relation to current issues within health psychology.

Keywords

Yoga, well-being, transcendence, interpretative phenomenological analysis, IPA, interpretation, health psychology

Introduction

Research on yoga falls broadly into two distinct categories: yoga studies, which developed from the study, translation and interpretation of classical yoga philosophy and the classical yoga texts; and contemporary empirical studies within clinical and health psychology. In the West, yoga studies has its roots in philology during the British colonial era and the post-colonial academic fields of Indology and Hindu and South Asian studies. It has now developed into a flourishing academic field both in the West and in South Asia.

Images of yoga poses (*āsana*) can be traced back to around 2500 BCE, with textual mention around 500 BCE (Chapple, 2008). Two of the most notable yogic texts include the *Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali*, a series of Indian aphorisms dating from around 400 CE, and the *Hatha Yoga Pradīpikā*, a Sanskrit manual on *hatha* yoga written by Svāmi Svātmārāma in the 15th century. The *Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali* were revived during the 19th century and introduced to the West by the Indian Hindu monk Swami Vivekananda. Notable Indian yogic scholars of the 20th century included Tirumalai Krishnamacharya, together with his son T.K.V. Desikachar, and two more of his students, B.K.S. Iyengar and K. Pattabhi Jois, who developed the *Iyengar* and *Ashtanga* schools of yoga respectively.

Classical yoga philosophy forms one of the major orthodox schools of Hinduism. Feuerstein (1996) describes the ontology of classical yoga as having three major foci: *Īśvara*, (Lord), *puruṣa* (spirit) and *prakṛti* (matter). Traditional yoga practice was originally a meditation method. The physical postural yoga (*āsana*) practised by millions of people across the world today has little in common with spiritual dimensions of Hinduism or the classical yoga philosophy outlined in the *Yoga Sūtras*.

One reason for this is the broad semantic field of yoga, coupled with a range of possible meanings for the term 'yoga' in Sanskrit, which has enabled the practice to be reinvented across time (White, 2012). This has resulted in differing interpretations of the *Yoga Sūtras*, with some scholars describing yoga as separation of *puruṣa* (*spirit*) and *prakṛti* (*matter*), and others suggesting that the goal of yoga is to unite these two contrasting elements (e.g. Whicher, 1998). Despite the commercialisation of yoga in the West and its reinvention as primarily physical fitness, Feuerstein (2003) describes the practice as essentially a spiritual tradition which seeks to bestow happiness and inner freedom upon its practitioners. For further discussion of the evolution of yoga into the modern world, see De Michelis (2004), Singleton (2010) and Syman (2010). The practice of yoga described in the studies that follow refers to physical postural yoga (*āṣana*), with some reference to meditation or breathing as part of the practice.

Yoga is practised by many thousands of people across the UK (Harnan, Cooper, Poku & Woods, 2013), while a 2012 study by *Yoga Journal* reported that over twenty million Americans practise regularly, spending \$10 billion a year on related classes, clothing, travel and equipment (Schrank, 2014). Benefits of yoga can include enhanced mood and well-being, personal growth and development, stress relief, and enhanced bodily awareness and physical functioning. (Belling, 2001).

The physical benefits of yoga should not be underestimated, within the context that only 40% or less of the UK population currently achieve the recommended target of 30 minutes or more of moderate activity on at least five days per week. A large body of literature within health psychology supports the idea that exercise may improve psychological well-being, both in terms of acute conditions such as depression, and

everyday factors such as mood, response to stress and body image (Scully, Kremer, Meade, Graham & Dudgeon, 1998).

Contemporary empirical studies on yoga within clinical and health psychology have tended to focus on benefits of the practice for a particular physical or psychological condition (e.g. arthritis or depression) or within a specific context or participant group (e.g. older adults, low income women who are survivors of domestic violence).

Research methods have tended to be quantitative and designed to examine the physical benefits of yoga in a randomised controlled trial (RCT). Several recent meta-analyses into yoga and well-being have also been context-specific. For instance, a systematic review of RCTs into the physical and psychosocial benefits of yoga in cancer patients and survivors indicated that yoga interventions resulted in considerable reduction in psychological distress (Buffart, van Uffelen, Riphagen, Brug, van Mechelen, Brown & Chinapaw, 2012). Meanwhile, a meta-analysis into the effects of yoga on physical functioning and health-related quality of life in older adults suggested that yoga may be superior to conventional physical-activity interventions (Patel, Newstead & Ferrer, 2012).

A comprehensive research report into the therapeutic effects of yoga for health and well-being was recently commissioned at the School of Health and Related Research, University of Sheffield, UK, by the British Wheel of Yoga. The review of forty RCTs suggested yoga can have positive effects for many conditions, including cancer, depression and osteoarthritis. However, the report also highlighted methodological limitations, such as high drop-out rates or bias caused by lack of a blind study (Harnan et al, 2013).

Although useful as comparisons between groups, these analyses often lack detail of people's subjective experiences of practising yoga and how they feel they benefit personally. In response to this, there has been increased interest in qualitative research in this area in the last decade or so. Again, research tends to relate to a particular context. For example, a study with women who suffered from binge eating found that a course of yoga appeared to encourage a healthy reconnection to food among the women, through the cultivation of present-moment awareness (McIver, McGartland & O'Halloran, 2009). A qualitative exploration into yoga for chronic pain management found that participants were able to reframe their experience of living with pain through increased bodily awareness that came through their yoga practice (Tul, Unruh & Dick, 2011). A third study involved focus groups to examine body awareness and the conceptualisation of embodiment, finding a process of greater unity between body and self emerges through mind-body therapeutic interventions (Mehling, Wrubel, Daubenmier, Price, Kerr, Silow, Gopisetty & Stewart, 2011). The authors employed a team-based methodology to identify and code themes according to Lincoln and Guba's 'Naturalistic Inquiry' (1985), a form of qualitative data analysis.

As far as we are aware, only one phenomenological psychology study has been carried out in order to examine the experience of practising yoga. This employed a modified version of Giorgi's phenomenological method to interview yoga practitioners, combined with a hermeneutic textual analysis of the *Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali*, to examine the transformational experience of self through Ashtanga Vinyasa yoga practice (Acebedo, 2013). Her findings suggest a multidimensional transformational process takes place impacting mind, bodily, and embodied dimensions of practitioners. Her paper was a response to trends identified in the 2007 American National Health Interview Survey suggesting a significant increase in

the use of mind-body practices among US adults, while the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) acknowledged 'It is not fully known what changes occur in the body during yoga; whether they influence health; and if so, how.' (The US Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health, NCCAM, 2009). In addition, the lack of a complete explanation of the mechanisms responsible for yoga's mental health benefits was identified as a gap in the research literature in an article in the American Psychological Association's *Monitor on Psychology* (2009).

These qualitative studies identify particular processes within yoga practice and add richness to our understanding within specific contexts. As exercise and well-being are often subjective experiences, investigating these from a phenomenological perspective can provide depth and fullness to our understanding of this research area. Acebedo (2013) argues that a phenomenological analysis of yoga practitioners' experience could help 'bridge the gap' between what is known about yoga's health benefits, and identification of the mechanisms responsible for those benefits.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is an experiential qualitative approach, and has been used extensively in a range of research areas within clinical, health and social psychology (Smith, 2004, 2011). Two IPA studies have examined the subjective experience of yoga practitioners within specific contexts. The first explored participants' experience of yoga participation following stroke, identifying meaningful physical, psychological and social benefits from yoga, including greater sensation and feeling more connected (Garrett, Immink & Hillier, 2011). The second focused on women who suffered from depression. The women described how yoga served as a self-care technique for the stress and ruminative aspects of depression, and how it also served as a relational technique, facilitating

connectedness and shared experiences in a safe environment (Kinser, Bourguignon, Taylor & Steeves, 2013).

So although qualitative research in the areas of yoga and well-being is increasing, studies still tend to be context-specific or to address particular populations or conditions. There is therefore considerable scope to explore yoga and well-being in more detail among healthy participants, in order to examine more closely potential benefits of the practice among the general population.

Methodology

Situating IPA

Contemporary phenomenological research is a rich and diverse field which consists of multiple commitments, perspectives and emphases which draw variously from phenomenological philosophy and hermeneutic theory. Such multiplicity is reflected in the philosophical and theoretical works themselves (Heidegger, 1982; Kearney, 1994; Sandage, Cook, Hill, Strawn & Reimer, 2008).

IPA's phenomenological commitment is to describing and understanding experience, what might be called people's *relatedness* to the world; this relatedness is an engagement with events, things, processes and, importantly, other people. Thus, for IPA, experience is a form of concerned involvement by situated people:

As agents who participate meaningfully in a meaningful world, humans encounter the events of their experience as mattering; that is, participational agency is characterised by a kind of care or existential concern with the affairs of living that provides a basis for action

such as making judgments, taking positions, and engaging in cultural practices (Yancher, 2015, p.109).

In short, IPA aims to describe and understand 'things' that *matter* to people in the context of their lives and how this *mattering* is reflected upon and given meaning by the persons experiencing them. This focus means that IPA does not wish to transcend the particular, rather it wants to comprehend the texture and qualities of an experience as it is lived by an experiencing subject (Eatough & Smith, in press).

IPA is clear that understanding this concerned involvement is an interpretative endeavour and it employs the idea of the *hermeneutic circle* to tease out meaning and deepen the understanding:

The hermeneutic circle is not like a clock, with fixed and mutually exclusive points around a rigid circumference, which make it impossible, say, for it to be both 3pm and 8pm simultaneously. Instead, it is an expansive and productive way of thinking about the constitutive relationships between things, steering us away from abstract, 'either/or' thinking which strips human phenomena of contextual richness. The more circular our movements in interpretation, the larger the circle will become, embracing more contexts, more perspectives, and more possibilities of understanding (Tomkins & Eatough, in press).

More specifically, IPA employs the idea of the 'double hermeneutic' which can be understood in two ways. First, it can be described as meaning 'the researcher trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of x' and secondly it can be understood as combining a hermeneutics of empathy with a hermeneutics of questioning (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). This involves movement between *staying close* in order to understand the participant's experience as they

reflect and make meaning of it and *stepping back* to reflect and imagine other possible meanings which might shed further light on the experience. At all times, however, this movement remains firmly tethered to and grounded in the participant's experiential claims and concerns.

Hence, the primary purpose of this study is not to understand 'yoga practice' per se, rather it is to understand the men's lived experience of their yoga practice. We draw inspiration from Merleau-Ponty's (1945/2004:xii) claim that 'Man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself.' As has been noted elsewhere, this claim casts the phrase 'the rich tapestry of life' in a new light where it comes to stand for the interweaving of person and world and which is at odds with the idea of transcending the particularities of an individual life (Eatough & Smith, in press).

We consider IPA's hermeneutic orientation as one of its strengths, as it enables researchers to explicitly engage processes of critical self-awareness, reflexivity and (inter)subjectivity. This process is described by Finlay (2012) as a kind of 'reductive-reflexive dance', allowing the researcher to move between 'bracketing pre-understandings and exploiting them as a source of insight' (Finlay, 2008).

The first author's background is in mental health advocacy and person-centred counselling, working with service users in a clinical mental health setting in East London, UK. Both of these processes prioritise the lived experience of the individual as the starting point either for engagement with clinical services or as the potential for therapeutic change. His research interests include emotion, well-being, and mind-body therapies, and he is also a keen yoga practitioner. The second author is an experienced qualitative researcher, with a particular research interest in emotional experience using hermeneutic-phenomenological approaches.

The aims of this study are therefore to conduct an in-depth IPA study into participants' subjective experiences of practising yoga and how they feel this relates to their overall sense of well-being. The study will examine the experience of practising yoga as a phenomenon in its own right, so not within the context of another condition, and with healthy participants. The study aims to further our understanding of some of the mechanisms within mind-body therapies, such as yoga, as potential interventions in treating physical and psychological disorders. Finally, the study forms part of the wider trend within health psychology of focusing on holistic approaches to health, well-being and flourishing through exploring the relationship between mind and body.

Method

Participants

We made initial contact with potential participants opportunistically. Our intention was to recruit a purposive sample relevant to the research question (Willig, 2001), and a sample size normative for IPA (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). Our intended sample size was between four and six participants, and relative homogeneity was aimed for in terms of IPA's sampling commitment (Smith & Osborn, 2003). We therefore purposively selected candidates on the basis of age, gender, ethnicity, socio-demographic status and geographical proximity, and who had practised yoga for some time and identified a link between their practice and their overall well-being. It was felt that, as men are under-researched in this area, it would be useful to focus solely on them. We included one specific exclusion criteria during recruitment, that yoga teachers themselves should be excluded as their experience of practising yoga

would not be homogenous to the overall sample. The sample therefore consisted of five Caucasian males between the ages of 37 and 61 (mean age 47.4), all of whom lived within London, UK, at the time of recruitment. They had practised yoga for between just over four and 35+ years (estimated mean 16.1 years).

Ethics

The study has received ethical approval through the research institution according to guidelines prescribed by the British Psychological Society (1998). This process detailed the aims and objectives of the research, what participation in the research would involve, and information about consent, confidentiality, and duty of care towards participants. Prior to commencing the interviews, we provided information sheets and consent forms for participants, detailing the nature of the research and their right to withdraw, and we provided a debrief form on completion of the interview with the researchers' contact details. We ensured confidentiality by the fact that unedited transcripts were only seen by the first author who conducted the interviews. We ensured anonymity by removing all identifying data from the interview transcripts and extracts and by adopting the following five pseudonyms for the study: Bruce, Ewan, Karl, Mike and Russell.

Data collection

The first author carried out the interviews and analysis, supervised by the second author. We devised a semi-structured interview schedule consisting of ten open questions, such as *'How does practising yoga make you feel?'* and *'How would you describe this feeling in a physical or emotional way?'* We added probes to elicit more detailed responses where necessary (see Kvale, 1996), such as *'How does it feel to experience that?'* and *'Why do you think that is?'* We therefore designed the

interview schedule to fully explore the research question, while facilitating trust and rapport between researcher and participants (Smith, 1995). Specifically, the interview process was designed to be flexible enough not to dictate resultant themes in any way, and there were times when we would veer off the interview schedule completely, following a point that was particularly important to a participant, in line with IPA's idiographic commitment. Interviews were audio recorded, lasting between 1hr03mins and 1hr20mins (mean duration 1hr13mins).

Data analysis and interpretation

The first author transcribed the recorded interviews verbatim and these formed the body of data for the analysis. We then performed a case-by-case idiographic analysis upon the data, followed by a cross-case comparative analysis, adapted from steps described by Smith, Jarman & Osborn (1999), and Smith & Osborn (2003). The resultant analysis and interpretation was therefore a joint product of participants and researcher (the 'double hermeneutic'). The process was iterative, but also flexible and creative (Smith, 2007).

We recorded initial reflective thoughts immediately after the interviews themselves in a research diary. We then conducted the research process in line with systematic steps outlined by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) as follows: initial noting of exploratory comments against the transcript; noting and listing of emergent themes, which sought to capture the psychological essence of participants' accounts; numeration and clustering of themes; abstraction and subsumption; and a final table of super-ordinate themes for the first participant. Through this hermeneutic process, we organised themes contextually and functionally into three main groupings based on a) *what* yoga means to the participant, b) *why* it means what it does, and c) *how* it

means what it does, which helped to organise the data into super-ordinate themes. We then applied the identical analytic process and conceptual framework to the other four participants' data, again to comply with IPA's idiographic commitment. The comparative analysis was designed to reflect prevalence, convergence and divergence, commonality and nuance between the five participants (Eatough & Smith, 2008). The findings were written up in the form of the narrative account that follows, including verbatim extracts from participants to support each theme.

Findings

As discussed, our hermeneutic explication of the data revealed themes clustered around points of reference based on *what* yoga means to participants, and *why* and *how* it means these things. This became a useful lens through which to begin to view the data, and enabled us to begin to move from the chaos and ambiguity of the raw data to some kind of interpretative thematic structure. We were therefore able to identify four super-ordinate themes from these initial groupings.

Our most significant finding was just how much their yoga practice means to the participants in our study: *yoga has significant meaning*. The men describe a relationship between their mind and their body that seems to be inherent in their practice: *yoga as a mind-body connection*. Our participants feel that practising yoga facilitates some kind of change in themselves, but it also represents an important form of stability for them in their lives as well: *transformation and stability*. And lastly, yoga enhances both their self-awareness and awareness of a cluster of interrelated physical, emotional and other issues: *yoga as awareness*.

The first theme conveys *what* yoga means to our participants, with the remaining three themes representing *why* and *how* this is the case. In this way, the significance of yoga for the men can be described as an ‘umbrella’ theme, which sits above the other three but is also interrelated to them all. Moreover, although these four super-ordinate themes are conceptually distinct from one another, what will become apparent is that there is also considerable overlap between the themes, and there is differentiation, and sometimes confusion and ambiguity, in how they are expressed by participants. This thematic structure is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

[Figure 1 about here]

Figure 1: Thematic Structure

The meaning and significance of yoga

A core narrative running through participants’ accounts is just how much yoga means to them and how important they feel it is to their overall well-being. All participants described how yoga is a profoundly meaningful experience for them, something which, in a sense, lifted them up out of their ordinary existence. Yoga is seen as indispensable, essential, even fundamental to their lives, their well-being, and their sense of selves. The depth of feeling bound up in this sentiment is illustrated by Ewan and Russell:

‘... it's a significant role ... I can't kind of underestimate what it does do for me...’ (Ewan)

'I couldn't imagine that I wouldn't be using my yoga practice throughout the rest of my life. It's become important, an important, an essential aspect of, of maintaining my physical and mental health.' (Russell)

Ewan's assertion captures the profound importance of yoga for him, while Russell shares the same sentiment by the fact that yoga will be a lifelong relationship in maintaining his well-being. Other participants echoed this depth of meaning ('... *it's massively important to me...*' – Karl).

Participants view their practice as something cherished and very valuable in their lives. All respondents stressed the importance for them of practising yoga regularly. This is poignantly captured by Mike:

'I often make people laugh because I would run to my yoga class...'

'... going to these classes, is a, an important part of my life now ... it's something I do now and I want to do and I don't want to lose.'

[stress is participant's own]

Attendance at class was especially important to Mike as he worked from home, so it was seen as a precious and valuable component of his week: '*... it's very much one of the elements, the main components of my well-being now.*' The significance of attendance was salient to other participants too: '*I usually try and build anything that I'm doing around it ... it's really earmarked in, in my week...*' (Bruce). This cherished aspect to yoga is most powerfully captured by Ewan:

'... I've got kind of, you know, old school feeling about it and that's what I like...'

'... that's why I like it, it's, it's simple, it's, it's a, a huge... I find I'm quite reverential of it, I, I, you know, I, I respect it...'

The 'old school feeling' suggests a feeling of nostalgia, comparing feelings of fondness for yoga with a sense of affection for something from his past, something personal, perhaps a cherished childhood sentiment. On the other hand, yoga is elevated to something that is bigger than the self, something to be revered and respected. A similar sense of reverence was suggested by Karl, describing his dedication to daily practice:

'... for me, the whole kind of synchronising was quite important, so I've made the decision to kind of embrace, you know, that kind of challenge of practising on a daily basis...'

Again, yoga is seen as something profound, but Karl wants to incorporate it into his life with open arms.

These descriptions illustrate the significant personal meaning yoga has for participants in terms of their overall sense of well-being. This link is nicely summarised by Bruce and Russell, who describe a sense of feeling nurtured and cared for through their practice:

'... whenever I come out of the yoga class I always feel like I've given myself something...'(Bruce)

'Yeah, self-nurturing, nurturing myself, that's what it feels like.'(Bruce)

'It feels like a really positive thing to be doing for my body. It feels like I'm pampering myself, actually... yoga practice. It feels like I'm concentrating on me. I'm prioritising myself. It's a way of really taking care of myself and

looking after myself. So, there's a mental health aspect to that, as well. It feels really, it's a lot about self-care...' (Russell)

Participants make a clear connection between the nurturing aspect to yoga and their overall well-being. Moreover, this sentiment is seen as unique to yoga (*'I don't feel I get that nurturing during the rest of my week...' - Bruce*). The relationship being described here is dynamic and reflexive; the men's dedication to their practice is a way of taking care of themselves, and through this they feel nurtured. The men get back what they put in. Not only does this nurturing feel good, Russell makes the direct link between this and his overall self-esteem:

'... there's a link to, I guess, self-esteem and, yeah, there's an overall sense of, of well-being in that as well... because, almost, by focusing, concentrating on yourself, you are improving your own sense of self, I think...'

This connection to self-esteem is an example of the important personal meaning of yoga made manifest; in this last extract, we see a suggestion of some of the aspects and mechanisms within yoga that may interact with self-esteem to produce the sense of well-being described. These aspects and mechanisms are explored in the super-ordinate themes that follow.

'Bringing it all together': yoga as a mind-body connection

All participants felt some kind of 'mind-body connection' happening through their yoga practice which was instrumental to perceived benefits in terms of their well-being. Yoga is seen as more than just a physical workout, involving a sense of mental focus and concentration that benefitted participants' mental health in a

number of ways. Although all participants referred to this mind-body connection, there were differences in the way they described this:

'I think it's the fact that I engage my mind and my body at the same time...'

(Mike)

'... but that is exactly what it is, bringing it all together... health, body, mind...'

(Ewan)

Ewan's statement captures this theme perfectly, in the sense that yoga engages all the components of his well-being in one place – his health, his body and his mind.

Russell describes this as a direct correlation: *'So, your mental health is being maintained through maintaining your physical well-being'*. Bruce describes the same idea differently:

'Well, I suppose the two are interlinked... anyway... What's going on in here... [his mind] ... is going on ... in your muscles and everything else...'

Again, participants are expressing the same idea in distinct ways. Russell's comment is more conceptual, talking of mental health and physical well-being; Bruce suggests the same idea in relation to physiological structures of mind and muscle. Participants sometimes struggled to articulate exactly what this mind-body connection was:

'I don't know, no, I don't know what the connection is...' *(Mike)*

'I don't know what it's doing but it's doing something...' *(Ewan)*

It is as if there is a sense of mystery around this theme: while participants acknowledge the existence and importance of this mind-body connection, they struggle to understand or describe it. Yoga is being described as beyond the men's

ordinary comprehension or experience, as if there is something abstract or mystical about the practice for them. Sometimes, a greater sense of clarity was obtained through further questioning, as Karl explains:

'... yoga can be a very intense workout and, but it has all these different components as well...'

'... the combination of the physical side... as well as the spiritual and, mental side, so to me it's kind of like, you know, a great opportunity to kind of create a balance of all these different components...'

Interestingly, Karl was the only participant for whom the spiritual dimension to yoga was important. In fact, some of the other participants were put off by any suggestion of this, describing preconceptions of yoga as a *'pseudo-religious cult thing'* (Russell). What seemed more important to participants was the connection they identified between the physical practice and the mental focus required at the time, as Mike illustrates:

'It's like, you establish a connection between your body and your mind. Very rarely do I manage to think about other things while I'm doing my, while I'm doing yoga, while I'm practising... It makes me concentrate on, on yoga only...'

Mike's thoughts about this appear to clarify as he talks: moving from the abstract third person, *'you establish a connection,'* to the first person, *'It makes me concentrate on, on yoga only.'* Bruce elaborates this point, *'I suppose with the yoga, it's, it's, it's like, it's interesting because my, my mind is quite calm and my body's working very hard...'* He adds that this mind-body connection in yoga is the opposite to how things normally are: *'... out of the class it's probably, my mind is working*

really, really hard and my body isn't working that hard... Universally, participants found the calming effect from yoga beneficial, as Russell explains:

'... because yoga practice, requires the level of mental focus that it does, that allows me, enables me to, to switch off, or remove myself from, ruminating about problems.'

'... [it] has great mental health benefits as well... because it takes you away from worries and concerns and... you're really forced to, kind of, be in the moment with your body.'

This is an example of how themes overlap, with a connection to the well-being described in the previous theme. But the detail here also helps to explain it; Russell identifies the precise mechanism at play – the mental focus required in yoga facilitates his well-being by enabling him to overcome rumination. Ewan identifies a similar correlation between his practice and his overall well-being:

'... in periods when I'm doing a lot of practice, there seems to be less emotional issues...'

'... when my body's feeling right, everything else is feeling right...'

This is another example of 'bringing it all together.' Ewan summarises the mind-body correlation as *'... the physical ability to cope with the emotional crap...'* This last comment suggests a sense of emotional resilience against daily hassles that comes through Ewan's practice; it is as if his physical practice allows him to transcend his day-to-day state of mind. Karl describes the same relationship but in the other direction, adapting the practice to his state of mind:

'Yeah, to kind of find out what, what is best for my body, you know... So if you're quite en, energetic, kind of doing something that is quite, you know, you know, kind of, sympathetic to my energetic level at that stage or, if I'm feeling a bit, you know, fragile, then maybe doing something that's a bit more restorative...'

This is an illustration of how the mind-body connection can work. Yoga is described as something fluid and flexible, adaptable to his emotional needs, an example of how the physical practice can engage with his emotional sense of self.

Transformation and stability

Throughout the interviews, all participants described aspects of themselves or their lives that they were seeking to change or address in some way. And yoga was seen to facilitate this process: something that helped to address an issue, something that helped to respond to a need, something that moved their lives forward in some way. The role that yoga plays in participants' lives can therefore be described as *transformative* and *dynamic*. This transformative aspect to yoga was felt in four key areas of participants' experience: the emotional self; the physical self; the self in relation to others; and a general narrative around yoga and life transitions.

As described in earlier themes, participants reported how yoga enhanced their overall well-being through a direct effect on aspects of their emotional self. Picking up on the mind-body dimension, Mike describes the calming, restorative effect that yoga has on his mind:

'Whenever I, I feel a bit more upset or agitated, for whatever reason, it may be related to work, or my personal life, yoga makes me feel satisfied with myself, it makes me go back to a, a state of calm...'

Use of the term 'whenever' suggests a universal power of yoga to restore him to a more favourable state of mind. Other participants described a similar effect:

'Yes, I mean, it's, it's definitely positive, but it's, I, it's kind of my medicine, if you like.' (Ewan)

'... I know that I'm gonna get the mental health benefits from it...' (Russell)

During the interview, Ewan described his experiences of suffering from social anxiety; by referring to yoga as his 'medicine', his practice represents a form of therapeutic coping strategy, a kind of therapy. Similarly, Russell's comment is a bold assertion of the mental health benefits that he knows he's going to get: it works. Similarly, Bruce described how his practice helped with low mood:

'... it gives my mind a rest and can, can break the, kind of, downward spiral, break the negativity...'

Bruce describes the therapeutic effect of yoga as something that interrupts the downward flow of his mood. For Karl, the same effect is witnessed at times when he *doesn't* practise:

'... I have tendencies of, when I don't do yoga on a regular basis, to get quite depressed...'

Among those interviewed, yoga is therefore being described as a form of therapeutic emotional maintenance, something that helps to maintain a sense of well-being on a

day-to-day basis, the absence of which is experienced by withdrawal symptoms. Similarly, Russell derived a real sense of reassurance and relief from potential health anxiety from knowing that he could practise whenever he needed to: '*... it means that I don't stress about my health in a way that I might otherwise do...*' So although yoga is seen as transformative, it also represents a form of *stability* for participants, something reliable they can count on in managing their mental health and sense of self.

Alongside the emotional self, all participants described how yoga helped respond to their *physical self* in some way:

'... all the work we do gets rid of a lot of, well I'm pretty damn sure it gets rid of most of the tension in my body...' (Bruce)

'I think it's an overall physical... For me, it's, it's about kind of balance of the complete body...' (Karl)

Again, while Bruce's description of ridding his body of tension points to the physically transformative aspect to yoga, Karl's comment suggests more of the sense of stability that comes from his practice, something more restorative, creating balance. Russell suggests the same idea by referring to yoga as a framework for maintaining his physical health:

'... it's a strategy, it's a technique that I can employ, to both relax and give my body a physical workout, so, to ensure the physical health of my body...'

This idea of yoga as a kind of ongoing physical maintenance was alluded to by all participants in some way, and is neatly summed up here by Ewan:

'... you don't deal with your body on a daily basis, you use your body on a daily basis, in yoga for me I deal with my body...'

This physical maintenance is otherwise unavailable to him. For other participants, yoga is a valuable physical counterbalance to sedentary work. For Mike, his practice allows him to do something 'good' to counterbalance the 'bad':

'I feel revitalised... you know, sitting at your computer all day... I feel I, I'm doing something bad to my body, when I do that, and, and I feel yoga gives me a chance to, to do something good for my body, and that, that's why I feel the whole body benefits from the practice...'

Yoga is seen as something inherently positive to counteract the negative effects of working from home.

Mike's sense of the benefits from yoga is extended to *the self in relation to others*:

'... there's a feeling of empathy ... it's definitely one the positive elements... I feel, I feel good with myself after the class and I know, or I imagine, that the other people also feel good, feel as good as I do...'

The way Mike imagines other group members feel as good as he does after class enhances his own positive feeling, indicating relationality and a shared feeling of connection. A similar sentiment is echoed by Bruce:

'... there's a feeling of trust and camaraderie and all those sorts, sorts of things...'

This comment suggests a feeling of safety and security in the yoga group, something to count and depend on, another example of yoga as a place of stability. Similarly,

other participants talked of the ability of yoga to facilitate relationships with other people:

'... when I do yoga I'm less, I'm calmer, I'm more, I'm less judgemental, I'm less snappy ...' (Ewan)

Yoga soothes aspects of his personality, making relationships easier. In a similar vein, Karl described how he felt more compassionate after practising yoga, and how for him this facilitates business relationships:

'... compassionately trying to find business solutions, you, you're kind of creating, kind of, a connection and, and building a relationship and that's what business is about...'

The transformative aspect to yoga is a theme that weaves its way through many of the accounts so far. But this quality is itself seen as something stable by participants *that accompanies them through their lives*. Russell sums up this point as follows:

'... you know, it's kind of a journey, really to, to improve the physical functioning of your body... and alongside that comes all of these mental health benefits...'

Yoga is described as a journey in itself, but also a vehicle to improve physical functioning, with mental health benefits along for the ride. For Ewan, the stabilising aspect to yoga helps him to explore life transitions, including ageing:

'... yoga is lovely in that it's a lovely space to allow that to be, and I can explore it there... That's quite important, I can explore being 47...'

There is a sense of fondness and gratitude here for yoga as an arena in which to explore being the age that he is. Yoga is a stable influence that accommodates the physical passage of time. This same sense is echoed by Karl:

'Yeah and, and it becomes more powerful when I'm going through some emotional trauma...'

During the interview, Karl recounted times in his life when he had suffered loss in the form of friends or relatives passing away, when his practice allowed him to feel more secure. For Mike, yoga is a companion to personal and physical development, involving a sense of evolution that builds over time:

'I've certainly become more and more conscious over time... more aware of, of the way I was feeling, of what was happening, more aware of this connection between body and mind... It's certainly something that I wasn't perceiving, at least at the beginning, and, and it's, it's been growing ever since...'

A link becomes apparent here between a number of the themes already discussed: yoga as enlightening, transforming consciousness and the mind-body connection over time. The relationship between yoga and awareness brings us to the last of the four themes.

Yoga as awareness

A common narrative amongst all participants was the link they identified between practising yoga and increased awareness, both in terms of bodily awareness and emotional self-awareness.

This bodily awareness is summed up by Mike:

'I feel more aware of, of my posture and what I do with my body outside the practice, in a way that I didn't think about before ... what my body's doing as a whole and what different parts of my body are doing...'

Mike suggests a multifaceted aspect to this, involving physical awareness both of parts of his body but also his body as a whole, including his overall posture. This is something that was particularly important to Russell, because of his height:

'... I suppose I always have a concern around my, sort of, self-image, about whether my posture is good or not, being tall, so I feel that I feel, my posture's probably a lot better than it would have been if I hadn't been involved in yoga practice... having that awareness ... I think that has had a really positive impact on my sense of self as well.'

Russell makes a direct link, not only between his yoga practice and improvement to his posture, but also to his overall sense of well-being and sense of self. This is an example of one of the ways the men reported how yoga enhances their well-being in unexpected ways.

Participants also spoke of how yoga made them more aware of what their body could and couldn't do, as Bruce puts it: *'... my ability or lack of ability...'* Others talked of becoming more aware of their breathing, or not overstraining. For Karl, physical awareness seemed particularly important in terms of listening to his body while he was practising the headstand:

'... because I was very aware of kind of taking my time and doing it as slowly as possible, I, I, I just really listened to my body and, and the more familiar I

became with the different stages more, the, the more I kind of overcame the fear of it...'

Through getting in tune with his body through his practice, Karl is able to face an emotion: fear. This is another example of the mind-body connection at work.

For Ewan, the physical awareness he gains through his yoga practice allows him to reflect on practising gymnastics as a teenager:

'Yeah, absolutely, because it made me understand that physicality I had before ... in a whole new way...'

Yoga is a means to rekindle some of the memories of the physicality he had in his youth. In a sense, this helps account for some of the depth of feeling and fondness for the practice he described earlier.

'I can't think of any other activity that explores the body in the way yoga does, because that's literally what you're doing isn't it, exploring your body ... and I think that's important...'

'... and it's, it's been a joy to kind of revisit it in, you know, in my head... and know what I had, know what I've got, know how it works now, and know that that's good...'

Not only is yoga a means of exploring his body, but also how this interacts with memories of the person he used to be ('*know what I had*') and projects those memories through a continuum to the person he is ('*know what I've got*') and appreciation of what he has now.

Alongside physical awareness, the men also talked about an emotional self-awareness that came from their yoga practice, and how they found this helpful, as Bruce describes:

'... just to be aware of, of what's going on. And I find that incredibly helpful too, just that, having that stillness and... You can find out more about what's going on for you, in a way...'

Bruce describes a kind of revelation (*'finding out'*) of internal feelings that results from the mental stillness that comes through physical practice. Ewan goes into more detail:

'... yeah, whether it's out, out of reach or whether I just don't have the mental capacity or state or awareness, awareness is good, awareness to, to bother to do it...'

'... my life doesn't allow me to do that, and that does, yoga does...'

The self-awareness that comes through his yoga practice allows Ewan to get in touch with feelings that may otherwise be out of reach to him, or that would require more work than he is willing to devote to. Yoga is therapeutic, allowing him to get in touch with aspects of his emotional self to maintain his mental health.

Awareness for Karl comes in the form of a greater sense of personal authenticity:

'... whatever I do, whatever I, I, you know, I experience is, is, is very much influenced by how authentic I feel... and yoga is, is very much kind of a tool for me to, kind of, stay authentic.'

One way to think about Karl's use of the term authentic is that yoga feels *right* for him. When asked which feelings came to mind when he thought about yoga, Karl's first response was 'happiness'. He then corrected himself:

'Actually it's not happiness, I think I, I feel more authentic...'

'... being in tune with myself and being kind of compassionate with myself, so, by being, kind of, authentic with myself ... and by identifying it and kind of responding to it, it, it makes me happy, you know, that I'm, kind of, mindful and caring to myself.'

These extracts suggest another layer to the relationship between yoga and well-being. Through feeling more in tune and authentic with himself through his practice, Karl experiences this process as a form of self-care that makes him happy, a form of compassion towards the self, similar to the self-nurturing described by other participants earlier.

This sense of self-awareness and personal compassion was suggested by Mike in a related way:

'... I think in a way I think that yoga gives me, gives me stability, perhaps, and it's, it's, it's something that I value, because there are, you know, sometimes you feel, or I should say, I feel, [laughs]... I feel I haven't achieved what I wanted to achieve in certain areas... I feel, you know, I have reasons for being un-, be, being unhappy about, what I am now because I'm not what I thought I would be, when I try to visualise myself twenty years ago, but yoga makes me, perhaps, yeah, perhaps it does give me more acceptance, or it helps me, it helps me with accepting that this is what I am and this is what I

can achieve, and that it's not, it's, it's not the end of the world, if, if I'm not what I thought I would be, you know...'

'... it makes me take a step towards acceptance, accepting what I am, accepting what I do, accepting that, that this is my life now, and there's no reason why it should be any, any different... I think that the stability that I get from yoga ... definitely works towards, or with, the acceptance...'

This represents a 'bringing together' of many of the themes already discussed. Mike describes how yoga represents a calming and stabilising force in his life and encourages him to reflect on himself in a way that allows for greater self-acceptance. In a sense, the self-acceptance described here by Mike, the compassion and authenticity described by Karl, the groundedness described by Bruce and the self-awareness described by Ewan are all manifestations of a common notion: a closer, more honest and more revealing dialogue with the self through yoga practice and the way in which this enhances the men's overall well-being.

Discussion

This study provides a detailed investigation into the relationship between yoga and well-being for the participants involved and enables us to deepen our understanding of this relationship. The use of IPA allowed the men to describe aspects to this relationship in their own ways, demonstrating the significant personal meaning of the practice in their lives and how it forms an essential component of their overall well-being. The mind-body connection, the transformative and dynamic aspect to the practice, and enhanced awareness also emerged as salient themes for participants.

The study reveals ways in which these themes are distinct from one another, but also interrelated; the themes therefore combine in order to enhance the men's overall well-being.

The men describe yoga as a profoundly important and meaningful experience for them, essential to their well-being. Yoga is something cherished and valuable, allowing them to feel nurtured and cared for. Yoga is described as facilitating change: it's their medicine, it's their physical maintenance, it's their therapy. It is calming and soothing, transforming and stabilising, encouraging a sense of authenticity, self-awareness and self-acceptance through their practice. At times, they describe a sense of mystery around their practice, beyond their ordinary comprehension. Some of the men describe a spiritual dimension to their practice, as if yoga is something bigger than the self, something which commands dedication, or something to be revered and respected, something which lifts them out of their ordinary existence.

It would be easy to conclude that yoga is being idealised by the men in this study as a kind of universal panacea. We feel it is more true to describe what yoga means to these men as an important *mechanism* that they define as significant and facilitative in their lives. Through their practice, they are able to *transcend* negative aspects of their lives that matter to them: physical issues such as health anxiety, concerns about their posture, or emotional issues such as low mood or daily aggravations. The men suggest that the benefits they get from their yoga practice are, for them, unique to yoga, or they transcend the benefits from other forms of exercise. Some of these benefits appear abstract, or transcend their expectations or their comprehension.

There are a number of definitions of transcendence and transcendentalism within theology, philosophy (e.g. Immanuel Kant, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Jean-Paul Sartre), phenomenology (e.g. Edmund Husserl) and yoga studies. As a spiritual discipline, Feuerstein (2003) compares yoga to Christian *mysticism*, Muslim *Sufism*, or the Jewish *Kabbalah*, the goal of which is the realisation of *transcendental reality*, however it may be conceived. One manifestation of this is the goal of *transcending the ego*, or simply *transcending the human condition* (White, 2009). Although none of the men in our study described wanting to transcend the ego in any such explicit terms, the way that they describe yoga as a mechanism for transcending aspects of the self suggests a transcendental aspect that might be implicit in their practice.

The phenomenologist Steen Halling (2008, p.13) describes how the term transcendence is often used with 'otherworldly connotations', as if to leave the realm of the actual, a quality that belongs solely to the divine. In contrast, he argues that, as human beings, our 'openness to possibility' suggests that transcendence 'is at the very heart of our humanity', which he discusses in relation to intimacy.

Transcendence is an ongoing aspect to ordinary human existence, an experience of opening up or 'moving beyond' (p.183). This gives more of a sense of the experiences described by the men in the present study - the act of 'moving beyond' and transcending aspects of their lives through their yoga practice.

Halling goes on to discuss the work of Abraham Maslow (1962) as the most notable psychologist who has written specifically about transcendence as part of his theory of hierarchy of needs, self-actualisation and 'peak experiences'. At first Maslow thought these peak experiences were confined to 'very healthy or self-actualised people', but he later felt that anyone could experience them, describing these

experiences as a sense of 'profound peace' or a connection to a 'profound reality.' This concept is similar to the 'heightened existence' discussed by phenomenologist Matthew Ratcliffe as one of the 'existential feelings' he describes that are outside of everyday experience and that people sometimes struggle to express with everyday emotional vocabulary (see Ratcliffe, 2008). Perhaps yoga is a form of peak experience for the men in our study, or enables them to experience 'profound' or 'heightened' experiences as part of their practice.

The enhancement in psychological well-being described by the men in this study relates to the psychological benefits reported by participants in the study by Garrett and colleagues (2011) following stroke. These psychological benefits can also be seen to mirror the reduction in psychological distress reported by cancer patients and survivors in the study by Buffart et al (2012). Moreover, descriptions of yoga as a self-care technique which improved feelings of connectedness by women in the Kinser et al study (2013) relate well to the sentiments of nurturing and yoga as a shared experience described by the men in the present study. However, there is a contextual distinction between yoga as an intervention in the three studies cited and yoga performed for its own sake in the present study. Comparisons between reported well-being between these contrasting contexts could prove a fruitful area for further research, particularly if phenomenological methods were employed to examine experiential differences between yoga performed as an intervention compared to the everyday experience of yoga. Specifically, is the significant personal meaning of yoga described by the men in this study, who are all regular, keen practitioners, something that might be experienced from practising yoga as an intervention?

The mind-body connection described by participants in this study presents an interesting dynamic against the backdrop of current issues within health psychology in terms of its core assumptions and perspectives. The men describe yoga practice as 'bringing it all together': a union of the mind and body in one practice, promoting a sense of harmony between the two. As a discipline, health psychology emphasises a holistic biopsychosocial approach to health and illness, highlighting the link between stress and illness, cognitions and recovery, coping and longevity (Engel, 1977).

Participants in this study have confirmed the meaning of this link for them and provided us with added insight into how the mind and body communicate.

Interestingly, the men's accounts remind us again of the literal meaning of the Sanskrit word yoga, 'to unite or to harmonise', in this case unity or harmony between the mind and the body.

The descriptions of the mind-body connection resonate with Edmund Husserl's theory of embodiment outlined in his *Cartesian Meditations*, being a rejection of the notion of Descartes' *Cartesian Dualism*. Descartes conceived of the mind and body as two quite separate substances, mutually distinct from one another and each of which is able to exist independently of the other. The powerful mind-body connection felt by the men points to how the lived body is not something that we have, or something to which we are attached; rather, the lived body is enmeshed with our experience as a conscious being. From the perspective of Husserl, the body is the 'zero point of orientation' (Husserl, 1989), and this notion is echoed in Bruce's comment from earlier: *'Well, I suppose the two are interlinked... anyway... What's going on in here... [his mind] ... is going on ... in your muscles and everything else...'* and also captured by Ewan's summary of what yoga means to him: *'... but that is exactly what it is, bringing it all together... health, body, mind...'*

The ideas of Merleau-Ponty (1945/62) are very useful here to illuminate what might be going on for Ewan and the others. The men experience their yoga practice as body-self-world unified and this is possible because we do not simply have bodies rather we *live* through them – the body is a site of possibilities. When Ewan reflects on his yoga experience, he sees this unity afresh because it is through his body that he is realising it.

Yogic philosophy outlined in the *Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali* describes how the practice is designed to trigger complex transformational processes of the mind, although the nature and mechanism behind these processes remains unclear. In her 2013 phenomenological study, Acebedo explored this process and interpreted her findings within the framework of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, suggesting the transformative aspect to yoga parallels Merleau-Ponty's notion of the prereflective state, the living body, and synthesis of the body. Her findings support the transformative aspects to yoga described in the present study, and others examining the transformative effect of Kundalini yoga in raising consciousness and increasing awareness (e.g. Vandewalle, 2013). These findings are extended in the present study, however, in the sense that the transformative aspect to yoga was reported by the men within a much broader range of areas involving self, body and other. More specifically, the mechanism by which yoga was reported to transform mood parallels neatly with the Kinser et al (2013) study into depression. In contrast, the stabilising aspect to yoga seems unique to the present study, which could form a specific topic for further research.

The transformative element highlighted in the present study raises the interesting question whether there is a developmental process at work here, something intrinsic to the process of yoga which could be universally applicable, a trajectory or

continuum, a concept explored by Smith and Osborn in their study on the experience of pain (2007). As with all qualitative work, however, caution needs to be maintained in applying findings from any study to the wider population, and larger, longitudinal studies would be needed here.

Participants in the present study described how a heightened awareness resulted from their yoga practice and was linked to their well-being in a number of ways. The men seemed to attribute enhanced emotional self-awareness to the sense of calm, mental focus and 'being in the moment' that was required during the practice. This relates closely to the present-moment awareness described by the women in the McIver et al (2009) study, and how this helped them with eating more healthily. Similarly, the enhanced physical awareness described by the men in the present study resembles the renewed bodily awareness described by participants in the Tul et al (2011) study into pain management, with both sets of participants also reporting increased levels of self-acceptance as a result of their practice. From a psychological perspective, there is growing interest within clinical psychology into how attitudes such as present-moment awareness and acceptance can be harnessed as techniques in mindfulness-based treatments for things like pain management, as well as for mental health issues such as anxiety and depression (Tul et al, 2011).

In fact, the sense of enhanced bodily awareness highlighted by participants in these studies reminds us of one of the key foundations from which IPA was developed: the 'chain of connection' between embodied experience, or the 'embodied self', talk about that experience, and a participant's making sense of, and emotional reaction to, that experience (Smith, 1996). A large body of IPA research has focused on the body and the embodiment of emotion (Smith et al, 2009). The kind of enhanced body

awareness that patients undergo in mind-body therapies is described by Mehling et al (2011) as a progression towards greater unity between body and self.

There has been some discussion in the phenomenological literature of parallels between yoga and phenomenology. Early comparisons focused on the similarity between Husserl's transcendental phenomenology and classical yogic meditation (Morley, 2001). In particular, these highlighted consonance between the goals of yoga practice being 'suspension of the fluctuations of thought' and what yogic scholar T.K.V. Desikachar (1995) describes as 'the practice of observing oneself without judgement', and the suspension of presuppositions necessary for the 'phenomenological reduction', or *epoché*. This idea is captured in the present study in Mike's comment about the mental focus required for his practice: *'Very rarely do I manage to think about other things... while I'm practising... It makes me concentrate on, on yoga only...'*

Morley extends the comparison between yoga and phenomenology to include Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology and its focus on the lived body and embodied consciousness. He writes, 'The central place of the body in the theory and practice of yoga suggests a comparison with Merleau-Ponty's thesis of the primacy of the body and could serve as a point of mutual clarification.' In particular, he compares the yogic practice of *prāṇāyāma*, or breath control, and the proprioception inherent in yoga practice, with Merleau-Ponty's discussion of interiority and exteriority and his focus on collapsing subject-object distinctions. We didn't specifically focus on breath control in the present study, although our participants did refer to it in passing when discussing increased physical awareness through their practice. This could serve as a potential focus for a follow-up study.

Similarly, Sarukkai (2002) argues that the phenomenology of yoga practice is the perfect complement to the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty. He describes yoga, in particular *āsana* and *prānāyāma*, as inherently an internal practice that allows a richer phenomenological experience of physical processes such as breathing and sensory experience than would otherwise be possible. These experiences serve to address what he describes as the ambiguity with which Merleau-Ponty uses the terms ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ coupled with an absence of the notion of the inner body in his philosophy of dimensionality. This is the space, he says, ‘where yoga and phenomenology meet.’

In their recent study, Anderzén-Carlsson, Lundholm, Köhn & Westerdahl (2014) draw parallels between Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of perception and the experiences of patients who undertook a course of medical yoga as an intervention to respond to stress. Thus, they cite Merleau-Ponty as a means of describing the essence of participants’ experiences: ‘To learn to see colours it is to acquire a certain style of seeing, a new use of one’s own body: it is to enrich and recast the body schema.’ Participants experienced yoga as a means to ‘use their bodies in a new way’, to ‘enrich and recast’ their body schema, and consequently to alter their ‘way of being in the world.’ To conclude, Morley (2001) describes yoga as potentially an important resource for phenomenologists wanting to focus on the psychology of the lived human body.

The present research helps to deepen our understanding of the relationship between yoga and well-being, demonstrates the significance of yoga for those involved, and serves to illuminate some of the mechanisms behind this relationship through the rich, idiographic accounts of the participants’ lived experience of their practice. The men suggested how the nurturing aspect to their practice, the mental focus required,

their enhanced self-awareness and corresponding positive effect on their self-esteem were, for them, unique to their yoga practice. In this way, these findings help to 'bridge the gap' between what is already known about the benefits of other physical exercise within health psychology, and those benefits that may be unique to yoga (see Acebedo, 2013). The present study therefore responds to the gap in the health psychology literature identified by the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine and the American Psychological Association in 2009, by examining the connection between yoga and well-being more closely in terms of *why* and *how* the health benefits are experienced.

Some of these insights can be attributed to the experiential, phenomenological methodology employed, but like any qualitative study, the findings are limited to the experiences of the participants involved. This study involved a small, homogenous sample of Caucasian male yoga practitioners who live in London, UK. Participants were self-selecting, meaning that they were all enthusiastic to discuss their yoga practice at the outset. Furthermore, having all practised yoga for some time, in that sense the men are at a similar 'stage' of their yoga journey, and there were suggestions from some of them that the benefits of yoga do increase over time.

These limitations suggest caution in transferability of findings to the heterogeneous population.

Some suggestions for further research have already been made. Each of the super-ordinate themes identified would be worth studying in their own right, for example to build on the phenomenological work by Mehling et al (2011) on awareness and Acebedo (2013) on the transformation of self. As discussed, the stabilising aspect to yoga would be worth examining in more detail in particular, especially when one considers the potential therapeutic benefits this may offer in relation to the physical

upheaval and emotional disturbance caused by many conditions and illnesses encountered within clinical and health psychology. More generally, the breadth of applicability of the findings from this study could be tested through purposively selected groups of participants to contrast the demographic group from the present study (see Osborn & Smith, 2007). In particular, is the significant meaning of yoga described by these men experienced by other populations, for example different demographic groups or non-self-selecting samples? And does this change over time?

Health promotion in general and preventative health behaviour in particular have been identified as two gaps in the IPA health psychology literature to date (Smith, 2011). The findings from this study suggest that the various phenomenological approaches may provide fruitful ground for further study in this area, for example lifeworld research into aspects of embodiment that impinge upon health behaviours.

To conclude, this study adds to the body of research into the relationship between well-being and mind-body therapies. In the past, research into well-being within health psychology has tended to focus on stress, coping and lifestyle choices (Lazarus, 2000). There is a growing trend within psychology as a whole towards a more holistic paradigm for health, well-being and flourishing based on research findings within clinical and health psychology. Within this trend, a variety of 'mind-body approaches' are enjoying growing popularity in the West, both as therapeutic interventions and as part of this general framework for well-being (Barnes, 2004). The present study fits the wider aims within health psychology of seeking to enhance well-being through understanding health beliefs and promoting health behaviours (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006).

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