

JOY: The Journal of Yoga

www.journalofyoga.org

USING YOGA AND MINDFUL AWARENESS WITH FIRST RESPONDERS: A LOOK AT THE DATA FROM THE SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONIST APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this paper is to utilize both collected data and the symbolic interactionist perspective to 'explain' how the practice of yoga is useful in assisting first responders in finding harmony with themselves and the world around them. Symbolic interactionism is rooted in the assumptions that human beings respond to objects based on the meaning they assign to those objects and that these meanings are utilized and understood through an interpretative process that is adopted for dealing with objects we encounter. The yogic tradition indicates that, through practice, we learn our true identity; our 'true self' that has the ability to witness and respond with awareness to situations and circumstances that arise. Combining these perspectives is both theoretically and practically useful to those who are more likely to experience trauma, stress, anxiety, and depression, such as first responders.

KEYWORDS: yoga, mindfulness, mindful awareness, police, first responders, symbolic interactionism

INTRODUCTION

In the West, yoga is predominantly thought of as asanas (postures), breathing (pranayama) and meditation (dhyana) [Monk-Turner & Turner, 2010]. “Because many experience relaxation and ease with the practice of yoga, yoga is considered a mind-body

exercise. The underlying premise of mind-body exercises is that the physiological state of the body may shape emotions, thoughts and attitudes” (*Ibid*). The word 'yoga' comes from Sanskrit, the scriptural language of ancient India. “Its root is the verb *yuj* (or *yug*), meaning ‘to yoke’ or ‘to unite.’ Yoga is actually two things. First, it is a state of being in which the individual practitioner experiences a cellular connection with that which is the Universe, the Source, or God” (Lasater 2000: xix). The second aspect of yoga involves “the principles associated with that deeply connected state of being” (*Ibid*). In the Yoga Sutras, 'yoga' is defined to mean, “the yogic experience.” In fact, most ancient and some modern 'yogis,' those who practice yoga, believe that the practice could unify individuals with the universe, beget the understanding that all beings are one, and allow us to experience total happiness. “Yoga is often translated as ‘union’ of mind, body and spirit. Classically, yoga is understood as the science of the mind. The yogic experience is that which is gained by controlling the modifications of the mind” (Monk-Turner & Turner, 2010).

Nowadays, modern yoga refers to a complex discipline that can involve corporeal concerns, as well as philosophical, cultural or even political concerns. Modern yoga also emphasizes self-realization, mind expansion, and bodily adjustment (Hoyez 2007: 114). According to Nora Isaacs (2014), the author of *The Little Book of Yoga*, most modern yogis want to "live more comfortably" in their bodies and "to be kinder, to feel better and more alive" (pg. 6). Modern yogis believe that yoga can strengthen your spirit, especially with a regular yoga practice. Issacs (*Ibid*) states that, along with this practice, "you become less reactive in stressful times." According to ancient yogic philosophy, "every person is compassionate, loving, and peaceful. Yoga helps us uncover the basic goodness in ourselves and in others, which can so easily become buried beneath anger, resentment, self-criticism, and doubt" (Isaacs 2014: 7-8).

According to Lasater (2000), the complex tradition of yoga is about

a very simple thing: happiness (*ananda*). Yoga tells us that in order to realize lasting happiness, we must commit ourselves to nothing less than self-transformation and self-transcendence. For although our true nature, or spiritual Self, is always the same, it tends to be obscured by our conventional thoughts, emotions, and patterns of behavior (xv).

Yoga helps us to “remove all obstructing (mental) clouds, so that we may come to enjoy the sunshine within... we learn, step by step, to live in the light of our true nature” (*Ibid*).

Whicher (1998), states that Patañjali's yoga can be seen as “a responsible engagement, in various ways, of ‘spirit’ (*purusa*= self, pure consciousness) and ‘matter’ (*prakrti*= the source of psychophysical being, which includes mind, body, nature), resulting in a highly developed, transformed, and participatory human nature and identity, an integrated and embodied state of liberated selfhood (272). You do not use yoga to change into something different. “Rather, yoga takes you *back* to your true Self” (Lasater 2000: xx). “By profound meditation, the knower, the knowledge, and the known become one. The seer, the sight and the seen have no separate existence from each other... Then the Yogi stands in his own nature and realizes his self (Atman), the part of the Supreme Soul within himself” (Iyengar 1976: 22). According to yoga philosophy, the unchanging part of you is known as the ‘seer,’ that which experiences or ‘sees’ the world through the lens of the mind.

As Patañjali explains in the Yoga Sutra, the mind—which includes your thoughts, emotions, and even the sensory input you receive from your body—is the instrument of perception through which the seer engages with the world around you. The seer is what you might think of as your inner voice or guide. It's often referred to simply as the Self. It's your true essence, and yoga teaches that this essence remains stable no matter what happens around you or to you, whether you feel connected with this part of you or far removed from it (*Ibid*).

The key to self-acceptance, according to Patañjali, is that the more connected you are with the unchanging Self, the less you suffer from the inevitable changes of the non-Self. This ability to

discern what is your true Self from what is not—to connect with that true, authentic Self and to act as often as possible from that quiet, knowing place—is the key to feeling better as a result of your yoga practice. (*Ibid*). In other words, the essence of yoga, as well as its ultimate goal, is "to find harmony with yourself and the world" (Isaacs 2014: 12).

It is important to note that the self is resistant to any approach that might involve a true letting go of attachments; the self is “poised to assert its privileges of ownership on all experience. After all, if realization (as well as experiencing true happiness) is going to happen, ‘I’ and ‘mine’ don’t want to miss it” (Hartranft 2003: 95). Which brings me to the purpose of this paper. The main goal of this piece is to utilize the symbolic interactionist perspective to 'explain' how the practice of yoga is useful in assisting first responders, especially police academy cadets, in finding harmony with themselves and the world around them. Both the academic *and* the philosophical literature is lacking in any discussion on this topic (as well as the sociological analysis of the spiritual self). In connecting the scientific to the spiritual, we can actually see more similarities than differences when analyzing the concept of the self. This paper began with a long definition of what yoga is. What follows is a short discussion of both the popularity and practice of yoga as well as the connection of the self as conceptualized by sociological and philosophical theorists to the self as conceptualized by the founders of yoga.

YOGA STATISTICS

Yoga is becoming “more and more fashionable all around the world. This activity, partly considered as therapeutic, reveals contemporary ways of producing global practices” (Hovez 2007: 112). It has become a “transnational world practice” (Hovez 2007: 117). In many societies, the number of yoga practitioners has increased exponentially as well as the number of

yoga schools. “Yoga is a globalized phenomenon, and there is a growing space for the many ways of understanding this practice, combining spiritual, cultural and therapeutic knowledge” (*Ibid*).

The latest ‘Yoga in America’ study (yogajournal.com 2012) shows that 20.4 million Americans, or 8.7 percent of U.S. adults, practice yoga. This is compared to the 15.8 million reported in the 2008 study; an increase of 29 percent (*Ibid*). “Of current non-practitioners, 44.4 percent of Americans call themselves 'aspirational yogis'—people who are interested in trying yoga” (*Ibid*). In addition, practitioners spend \$10.3 billion a year on yoga classes and products, including equipment, clothing, vacations/retreats, and media. This is almost twice the estimate from the 2008 study (\$5.7 billion) [*Ibid*]. Women report practicing yoga at higher rates than men; 82.2 percent versus 17.8 percent respectively (*Ibid*). “The majority of today's yoga practitioners (62.8 percent) fall within the age range of 18-44” (*Ibid*).

When it comes to the ‘newer’ popularity of yoga, the statistics are glaring. Of those who responded to the ‘Yoga in America’ study, 38.4 percent have practiced yoga for one year or less, 28.9 percent have practiced for one to three years, and 32.7 percent have practiced for three years or longer (*Ibid*). In other words, 67.3 percent have practiced for three years or less, driving home the idea that yoga has become more popular in recent times. Out of all yoga practitioners studied, 44.8 percent consider themselves beginners (22.9 percent are new to yoga; 21.9 percent are beginning to practice yoga after taking some time off), 39.6 percent consider themselves intermediate, and 15.6 percent consider themselves expert/advanced (*Ibid*). In the ‘Yoga in America’ study, the top five reasons given for starting yoga were: flexibility (78.3 percent), general conditioning (62.2 percent), stress relief (59.6 percent), improve overall health (58.5 percent) and physical fitness (55.1 percent) [*Ibid*]. According to Hoyez (2007), health is the

primary reason for adopting yoga. “However, spiritual motivations are also superimposed on health concerns, also leading to health-related notions (notion of well-being, mental relaxation, etc.)” (114).

YOGA AND MINDFUL AWARENESS

Smith (2007) states that nearly all of the forms of yoga taught and practiced in ‘Western’ or late-modern cosmopolitan contexts downplay or ignore the transcendent aims of both the Classical and Hatha Yoga traditions. Instead, most styles of ‘modern postural yoga’ emphasize the physical benefits of asana (physical yoga postures) as well as their effects in terms of the reduction of stress or relaxation. Modern yoga can be split into ‘meditational yoga’ (which focuses upon meditation and concentration techniques), and ‘postural yoga’ (which places a stress upon physical practices) [Lea 2009: 75]. “But there is often also a ‘suggestion of something spiritual affixed’ to asana (or postural) practice, even in its most secular Western contexts” (Smith 2007: 27-28).

According to Lea (2009), “yoga offers an experience of ‘subjective life’: life lived in ‘deep connection’ with the ‘self-in-relation’, through the cultivation of attentiveness to ‘states of consciousness, states of mind, memories, emotions, passions, sensations, bodily experiences, dreams, feelings, inner conscience, and sentiments’” (72). There are moments during a yoga practice in which the practitioner can be overwhelmed by anxiety or physical effort, or preoccupied with other thoughts.

Often the exertions of this demanding practice challenge or disrupt the calm mind and controlled breathing that practitioners try to maintain.

There are other, rarer moments in which these distractions fall away, when the practitioner finds their attention drawn into their body, into the form of the asana ('pose' or 'posture', literally 'seat' or 'sitting down') or vinyasa ('movements'). This focus brings a deepening of attention into the pose, the muscles and the breath. It is at these moments that the practitioner is said to be 'really doing yoga' (Smith 2007: 26).

According to Smith (2007), the practice of asana often provides "a radical form of engagement with the body, which can prove deeply influential on the practitioner's understanding of their embodied selfhood" (37). Attention to the body lies at the heart asana practice. Specifically, attention is brought to the parts of the body active in the particular asana that is being performed. There is also a constant attempt to maintain attention to the breath, allowing the practitioner to remain attentive to any over-exertion or loss of focus. "It seems to be these various moments of 'self-encounter', made available through the practice of yoga, that lead many practitioners to describe the practice as a 'mirror for the self'" (Smith 2007: 40). Beyond the physical ability to execute difficult poses, as well as the calmness of mind required to undertake the practice fully, "this 'encounter' with the embodied self brings about moments within asana practice which practitioners identify as 'spiritual'. The physical practice of asana and pranayama (breathing exercises or focused breathing) allow for forms of focus on one's embodiment and linked forms of bodily experience in which yoga is (at least partly) realized, moments in which the practitioner is said to be 'really doing yoga'" (*Ibid*).

Mindful awareness, or mindfulness, lies at the center of a yoga practice. Mindfulness entails

using the mind for a different purpose than thinking thoughts. Rather it focuses the mind on feeling sensations in the body and the movement of the breath. It is a practice of keeping the mind steady by paying close attention to what's going on moment-to-moment. It involves being present in each moment allowing the mind to observe rather than interpret what is going on (Fox 2011: 4).

The main components that constitute mindful awareness are: (1) becoming skilled at relaxing into a state of awareness as well as connecting with feelings in the body, (2) letting go of thoughts and focusing on the movement of the breath, and (3) practicing merely observing or witnessing one's moment-to-moment experience. Mindfulness has received empirical support as a method of "reducing stress, improving attention, boosting the immune system and promoting a general sense of psychological and physical well-being" as well as increasing self-esteem and holding great promise for "both adolescents and adults with ADHD, depression, anxiety, and other mood disorders (*Ibid*). Regular practitioners of yoga have also experienced "moments of sharply increased mental focus and clarity, and heightened perceptual and intuitive powers. Some describe a dramatic increase in energy and stamina, emotional evenness and equanimity" (Cope 2000: xii). Others have even reported heightened feelings of "connection to an inner self, ecstatic states of bliss, and profound well-being" (*Ibid*).

Now that we know who is generally doing yoga, how yoga is typically practiced, how the self is conceptualized within the tradition of yoga, and what the benefits of yoga and mindfulness are, we can now move on to a discussion of symbolic interactionism and the theoretical and spiritual connection of the self. In the following pages, the self as defined by Sheldon Stryker, Michel Foucault, Peter J. Burke, Erving Goffman, and George Herbert Mead are compared and contrasted to the self as defined by the founders of yoga. These comparisons, along with self-reported data collected from police academy cadets, allow me to 'explain' how the practice of yoga is beneficial to use with those who are most susceptible to being diagnosed with PTSD, anxiety, depression, and the like.

STATISTICAL METHODOLOGY

Seventeen police academy cadets were placed in a weekly yoga class (taught by the Director of Yoga for First Responders) for the duration of their academy training in a large Midwestern city in the Fall of 2015. These 17 cadets (15 males and two females) were asked to self-report on various topics related to yoga, their bodies, their mindfulness, and their continued practice (both pre-class and post-class). This information will be interwoven throughout this paper to provide a data-based connection to concepts within the symbolic interactionist viewpoint.

THE SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONIST PERSPECTIVE

Symbolic interactionism, as it has evolved over the last sixty or so years, has tended to focus much more on the dynamics of self than either symbols or interaction. People's behaviors in interaction with others in social settings are regulated by their perception of themselves. "Self serves as a kind of gyroscope for keeping behaviors consistent and in line; moreover, as has increasingly been emphasized in symbolic interactionist theory, individuals are motivated to verify their sense of self in the eyes of others" (Turner 2013, 331). In broad terms, self is now regarded as a collection of identities that can be

invoked individually or simultaneously in situations, but once evoked, individuals' actions are directed at having others verify an identity or identities. At the same time, identities can act as filters of selective perception and interpretation as individuals mutually role-take with one another (Turner 2013, 331-332).

The "position of symbolic interactionism... is that the meanings that things have for human beings are central in their own right" (Blumer 1998: 3). The basic principles of symbolic interactionism include the following: (1) human beings possess the capacity for thought, which is shaped by social interaction; (2) people learn meanings and symbols through social interaction; and (3) people are able to modify or alter the meanings and symbols they use in interactions by

interpreting the situations they are engaged in (McGraw-Hill 2014). The "use of meanings by the actor occurs through a *process of interpretation*" with two distinct steps (Blumer 1998: 5). "First, the actor indicates to himself the things toward which he is acting; he has to point out to himself the things that have meaning... Second, by... communicating with himself, interpretation becomes a matter of handled meanings" (*Ibid*). Overall, the symbolic interactionist approach "sees a human society as people engaged in living. Such living is a process of ongoing activity in which participants are developing lines of action in the multitudinous situations they encounter" (Blumer 1998: 20). These participants are caught up in an immense process of interaction in which "they have to fit their developing actions to one another. This process of interaction consists of making indications to others of what to do and in interpreting the indications as made by others" (*Ibid*).

Although this paper focuses mainly on the self, it is important to note that practicing yoga tends to be both an individual and community activity, involving social interaction. Practitioners of yoga also learn the meanings behind and health benefits of various poses and breathing exercises as well as the Sanskrit terms (symbols) for them. Yogis also learn what it means to practice, what physical and mental health remedies certain poses and breathing exercises offer, and what it means to chant, 'pray,' and meditate. Yoga practitioners can also decide, based on what they think is best for them, whether or not they would like to practice in a more spiritual fashion, a more fitness-based manner, or somewhere in between (thus altering the meanings and symbols of yoga as it best fits her or his life).

STRYKER, IDENTITIES, AND THE YOGIC SELF

Sheldon Stryker argued that identities are parts of larger sense of self, and as such, they are “internalized self-designations associated with positions that individuals occupy within various social contexts” (Turner 2013, 333). Therefore, identity is an essential link between the individual and social structure because “identities are designations that people make about themselves in relation to their location in social structures and the roles that they play by virtue of this location” (*Ibid*).

Stryker also introduced the idea of *commitment* as a means for conceptualizing the link between social structure and self. “Commitment designates the degree to which a person’s relationship to others (or something else) depends on being a certain kind of individual with a particular identity” (Turner 2013: 334). The greater this dependence is, the more a person will be committed to a specific activity or identity. In addition, when expectations of others are both compatible and consistent, exposing very few conflicts and misunderstandings, individuals will be even more committed to the identity presented to these others.

Our identities are formed, not only in interaction with those within the social structure, but also within a connection with and commitment to oneself. Lasater (2000) states that a critical and powerful aspect of our relationships with ourselves is our internal dialogue. This is because

how you talk to yourself reflects your thinking, which may not be truly reflective of reality. Second, it may be repeated for years, thus becoming embedded in your consciousness. Finally, it exists in the silence of your mind, unchallenged by the thoughts and insights of others (xxiii).

The practice of yoga suggests various ways to develop and nurture awareness of this inner dialogue and relax its hold on our consciousness. “Those who pursue their practices with intensity of feeling, vigor, and firm conviction achieve concentration and the fruits thereof more quickly, compared to those of medium or lesser intensity” ([http://www.swamij.com/ yoga-sutras-](http://www.swamij.com/yoga-sutras-)

11922.htm). The more committed we are to living with dignity, treating ourselves and others well, and practicing 'faith,' the more likely we will see our true selves according to the founders of yoga. "For those who move forward quickly in their practices, and do so with intensity, the fruits of the practices are very close" (*Ibid*).

A commitment to the practice of yoga can be theoretically applied to both the use and utility of yoga with first responders. According to Patañjali, practice is required to "still the patterning of consciousness. Practice is the sustained effort to rest in that stillness" (Hartranft 2003: 5). This practice becomes steadfastly rooted when it is cultivated competently and continuously for a long period of time. James Fox (2011), founder of the *Prison Yoga Project*, states that practicing asanas (the physical exercises associated with yoga) is "a vehicle for inner awareness... Focusing on dispersing inner tension leads to acceptance, integration, and peace. Experiencing inflexibility in the body can shed light on inflexible attitudes and states of mind. Postures can serve as a gateway for encountering limitations and fear" (pg. 37). According to Fox (2011), "by keeping the body still you can calm the mind; that by concentrating your attention, you settle the body; and that by certain methods of breath-control, the mind becomes quiet and focused" (pg. 36). This stillness of the body, connected to the calmness of the mind, has proven to be useful for those individuals listed above who are most at-risk for experiencing trauma, stress, and even horror. In fact, out of the 17 participants who self-reported on their pre-yoga program and post-yoga program ability to handle stress, eight cadets (47.06%) saw an increase in their ability to handle stress and seven cadets (41.18%) saw an increase in being able to balance work and relaxation. All 17 participants reported that they felt they had the tools to handle the stress of law enforcement post-yoga program. With regard to the concept of commitment, although 100% of the participants felt that yoga will assist them with handling the

stress of being a first responder, five cadets (31.25%) reported that they will not continue to practice yoga and nine (56.25%) will 'possibly/maybe' continue to practice yoga.

YOGA, FOUCAULT, AND THE SELF

According to Hoyez (2007), we can underline an ideological, cultural and political construction of yoga as a body discipline, which is instrumentalized as a practice which shapes identity. This idea recalls the Foucauldian theme of governmentality which “evokes the ‘relation between the self and the self’, the way that individuals control, determine, delimit their freedom and the other’s, depending on instruments they concretely manipulate. In that sense, the body and its techniques of control authorise the individual to act on his own, to gain perfection or to attain a certain state of well-being” (pg. 114). Foucault also outlines how particular understandings of ‘knowledge’ and its relation to ‘truth’ emerge from such practices of the self, enabling different forms of relation with the self. “The ‘modern’ understanding of knowledge is one that locates a ‘truth’ in the self: something to be discovered or uncovered by the labour of knowing. Here, ‘truth’ concerns the connective relation of the subject and the contextually changing demands of the world—a relation that Foucault calls ‘spirituality’” (Lea 2009: 74).

Foucault also summarizes three critical functions that constitute a ‘care of the self’: a ‘critical’ function, a function of ‘struggle’, and a ‘curative and therapeutic’ function. “The ‘critical’ function consists of ridding ‘oneself of all one’s bad habits and all the false opinions... To ‘unlearn’... is an important task of the culture of the self.’ The function of ‘struggle’ is understood in the sense that the ‘practice of the self is conceived as an ongoing battle’” (Lea 2009: 74). The ‘curative and therapeutic’ function suggests that “we need to live the best form of life that we possibly can (being able to respond to the world in a way that lives up to the

challenges that it presents)” (Lea 2009: 75). This is an ongoing process because there is no absolute or final truth to be reached at the end; the care of the self is not ‘therefore just a brief preparation for life; it is a form of life’ (*Ibid*).

In connecting these functions to the practice of yoga, and living the best lives we can, it is important to note that there are practices associated with a deeply connected state of being; practices that are

rooted in a moral code that is the very foundation of yoga. This moral code is made up of *yama* (“restraints”) and *niyama* (“observances”). The *yamas* are nonviolence, truth, nonstealing, clarity about sexual activity, and nongreed; the *niyamas* are purity, contentment, consistency, study, and devotion (Lasater 2000: xx).

As previously stated, the ‘critical’ function consists of ridding oneself of all one’s bad habits and thoughts. Within yoga, the concept of ‘yama’, or restraint, “explains the codes of ethical behavior to be observed in everyday life reminding us of our personal responsibilities” (Fox 2011: 7). These involve how we interact with people and the environment and includes: (1) *Ahimsa*: Doing away with violence and acting with kindness, friendliness and thoughtful consideration; (2) *Asteya*: Not taking what is not offered; (3) *Satya*: Not lying or deciding to stay silent if the truth has negative consequences for the other; (4) *Brahmacharya*: Not experiencing an undisciplined sexual life, and (5) *Aparigraha*: Freedom from greedy and possessive feelings and desires. The function of ‘struggle’ involves that idea that the ‘practice of the self’ is conceived as an ongoing battle. *Niyamas* refer to the attitudes we adopt toward ourselves and “involves that positive current that brings discipline, removes inertia and gives shape to the inner desire to follow a yogic path” (*Ibid*). These principles include: (1) *Saucha*: Cleanliness; (2) *Santosa*: Contentment; (3) *Tapas*: Self-discipline and purification of body, senses, and mind; (4) *Svadhyaya*: Self-inquiry and self-reflection; and (5) *Isvarapranidhana*: Surrender to the God of

your understanding. These attitudes that we adopt toward ourselves may not come automatically. They may come with time as we practice our *asana* ("postures intended to generate, organize and distribute energy while focusing the attention inward to sharpen control of the mind and body" [*Ibid*]), *pranayama* (the use of conscious breathing to control inner life force energy), *pratyahara* (detachment from or control of the senses), and *dhyana* (expanded concentration of the mind as it stays focused and expanded into quietness). Lastly, the 'curative and therapeutic' function suggests that we need to live the best form of life that we possibly can in order to reach a state of samadhi, where the yogi's "body and senses are at rest as if he is asleep, his faculties of mind and reason are alert as if he is awake, yet he has gone beyond consciousness" (Iyengar 1979: 52). In other words, samadhi is a "state of total absorption experienced at the level of the heart and oneness becomes realized (Fox 2011: 8).

These critical functions that constitute a 'care of the self' are highly connected to many of the limbs of yoga. The main goal of yoga is to "free the mind from confusion and distress allowing oneself to be at peace, and from that state sink into deeper levels of awareness to experience one's true nature" (Fox 2011: 7). In order to accomplish this, the committed yoga practitioner should follow these fundamental principles, or limbs, as described above. The yogi's journey toward self-realization and genuine freedom also denotes a true care of the self.

With regard to caring for the self, especially the body, out of the 17 cadets who self-reported their experiences, 11 (64.70%) saw an increase in their range of mobility and the same number (11 or 64.70%) saw an increase in their physical strength. These cadets were also asked to define the term 'yoga,' before and after their yoga program. Many of these post-program and academy definitions included, "controlling your nervous system through breath work, breath work with movement, using breathing to relax and recharge the body, (utilizing) controlled

breathing while using techniques and poses to increase flexibility, calm(ing) the body and mind to deal with stress, and the use of breathing to help strengthen and relax the body;” all showing the importance of caring for the self.

BURKE’S IDEALIZED SELF AND THE PRACTICE OF YOGA

For Peter J. Burke, individuals carry broad views of themselves to all situations, or an *idealized self*, but it is the self-image that guides moment-to-moment interaction. “The idealized self may, of course, influence just how individuals see themselves in a situation, but the key dynamics of self revolve around trying to verify this working self or self-image in situations as individuals play roles” (Turner 2013: 341). For Burke, 'self' is an

occupant of a role in a situation. This situation is, in turn, typically embedded in a larger social structure and associated cultural meanings, Roles are thus the link between self, on the one side, and social structure and culture, on the other. By virtue of playing a role, individuals incorporate meanings and expectations associated with this role into their identity in the situation. Individuals have diverse experiences and any role has multiple meanings; thus, the identities associated with a role will vary from person to person (*Ibid*).

In recent years, both Burke and Jan Stets have identified three types of identities: (1) person identity or an individual self-conception (or what some call core-identity); (2) role identity tied to particular roles; and (3) social identity tied to a social group. Individuals can have all three of these identities in play during an interaction (Turner 2013: 344).

In contrast to Burke's and Stets' three identities, many yoga practitioners believe that when we "open our minds and our hearts, not trying to understand, we allow the knowing mind to arise. Wisdom occurs in the mind that rests in not knowing, the still mind that simply is. In letting go of who we imagine ourselves to be... we come upon our natural being that has been patiently waiting for us to come home" (Fox 2011: 50). In fact, *vidya* is a level of perception that

is deeply rooted within us and means 'correct or clear understanding.' This deep understanding within us is not obscured by false perception. A false sense of identity or self is created by over-identifying with the mind "as who we are rather than with our true Being... Being is a state of oneness, a sense of recognition of who we truly are from deep within ourselves" (Fox 2011: 87). By extricating ourselves from our thoughts, observing our breathing, and connecting with deeper sensations in our body, "we can witness ourselves and the present moment as they truly are, free from the mind's interpretations" (*Ibid*). Lasater (2000) states that the "practice of 'living your yoga' uses the psychology of yoga to uncover (your true) Self, or what yoga calls *atman*" (xx). If we live a life of positivity, dignity, honesty, and genuineness, and this is our true Self, then our role in all situations, or our idealized self, is a positive, dignified, honest, and genuine one.

Overall, the yogic tradition indicates that, through practice, we learn our true (one) identity; our 'inner guide' or 'true self' that "has the ability and strength to witness and respond with awareness to situations and circumstances that arise, rather than acting blindly (or based on our labels, past experiences, and emotions) to them" (Fox 2011: 1). This may be particularly useful to those who are more likely to experience trauma, stress, anxiety, and depression. "According to Patañjali, it's the true self, called the Seer (*drashtri*), who is eternal, illimitable, unchanging, and perpetually joyful... The Seer is a light source, as it were, that shines on our world including the contents of our mind, or 'consciousness' but is in no way affected by or attached to whatever happens in those worlds (Rosen 2007). Patañjali instructs us to permanently shift our identity orientation away from the contents and onto the Seer. "Yoga, as Patañjali famously defines it, is the 'restriction of the fluctuations of consciousness.' The practice begins by sitting and calming the fluctuations of the body, breath, and senses, and then the more elusive whirlings of consciousness" (*Ibid*). It is within the calm we create that we are able to

better recognize our erroneous beliefs and "unhealthiness of our limited and self-limiting identity, and allow it to spontaneously fall away" (*Ibid*). Patañjali concluded that what remains is the self or the Seer, enduring forever in its true nature.

In connection to the concepts of wisdom and perception, all 17 cadets (100%) felt that this academy-infused yoga program provided a grasp of the practice yoga as well as its benefits. Out of the 17 respondents, 14 (82.35%) would recommend yoga to other officers and first responders. It may be, then, that yoga is useful to first responders in dealing with stress and trauma, especially if there is a true awareness of what yoga has to offer the individual.

GOFFMAN'S PRESENTATION OF THE SELF IN EVERYDAY LIFE

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, published in 1956, sociologist Erving Goffman uses the metaphor of the theater to portray the importance of human and social action and interaction. He refers to this as the 'dramaturgical model of social life' (Goffman 1956). According to Goffman, social interaction may be equated to activity in a theater, and people in everyday life to actors on a stage, each playing an assortment of roles. The *audience* consists of other individuals who observe the role-playing and react to the performances. In social interaction, like in theatrical performances, there is a *front stage* where the actors are on full display in front of an audience. There is also a *back stage* where individuals can 'be themselves' and rid themselves of their role or identity that they play when they are in front of others.

Moreover, Goffman uses the term 'performance' to refer to all the activities and behaviors of an individual in front of a particular set of observers, or audience. Through this performance, the individual, or actor, gives meaning to themselves and others, as well as to their situation. These performances deliver impressions to others; even though the actor may or may not be aware of their performance or have an objective opinion of said performance. Impression

management, or “the techniques that social actors use to maintain particular images of themselves when they encounter problems during interactions” may be used, though, since the audience is always attributing meaning it and to the actor (McGraw Hill 2014).

The practice of yoga, according to Lasater (2000), is to “pay attention to your whole life: your thoughts, your bodily sensations, and your speech and other actions. As you do, you will discover that nothing is separate from anything else” (xxi). Practice can also be understood as a “willingness to return to the reality of this very moment, that is, to observe with dispassion and clarity exactly what is—right now” (*Ibid*). In applying the practice of yoga to Goffman’s concept of ‘performance’ we can actually see two things: (1) Being ‘on your mat’ (focusing on your yoga practice), even in class form, means that you are no longer performing. You are living your yoga. Your asana and pranayama are not being practiced in comparison to others’. You are on the back stage when you are ‘on your mat.’ You are your true self here. (2) Being cognizant of your whole life, on *and* off the mat, means that you are also performing on the front stage (where the actor formally performs and adheres to conventions that have meaning to the audience). In this case, the actor knows she or he is being watched and acts accordingly. Lasater (2000) states that “relying on paying attention to the thoughts and sensations of the moment will give (an individual the)... chance to respond to life... from integrity” (xxi).

As previously stated, not reacting to situations blindly and with rational thought is something that first responders may find possible through yoga and mindfulness. In fact, 12 police academy cadets (70.59%) self-reported that they applied yoga techniques to their academy classes and skill-building and found these techniques to be helpful. The same number of cadets (12 of 17 [70.59%]) enjoyed the deep relaxation of each yoga class throughout the duration of the academy.

YOGA, MEAD, AND THE SELF

The self, according to George Herbert Mead, is socially constructed. This social conception of the self, he argues, entails that individual selves are the products of social interaction and not the (logical or biological) preconditions of that interaction. Mead defines the self as “the ability to take oneself as an object and identifies the basic mechanism of the development of the self as reflexivity—the ability to put ourselves into the place of others and act as they act” (McGraw-Hill 2014). According to Mead, a self can arise only through social experiences. “The self is something which has a development; it is not initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process” (Morris 1934: 135). Although the self is a product of symbolic interaction, it is not simply a passive reflection of the ‘generalized other’. The individual’s response to the social world is active; she or he decides what she or he will do in the light of the attitudes of others; but her or his conduct is not unthinkingly determined by such attitudinal constructs. There are, it appears, two phases (or extremes) of the self: (1) that phase which *reflects* the attitude of the ‘generalized other’ and (2) that phase which *responds* to the attitude of the generalized other.

According to Mead, the “me” is the social self, and the “I” is a response to the “me” (Morris 1934: 178). “The ‘I’ is the response of the organism to the attitudes of the others; the ‘me’ is the organized set of attitudes of others which one himself assumes” (Morris 1934: 175). Mead defines the “me” as “a conventional, habitual individual,” and the “I” as the “novel reply” of the individual to the generalized other (Morris 1934: 197). The self that arises in relationship to a specific generalized other is referred to as the “Me.”

The “me” is only known retrospectively, or on reflection. When we act in habitual, customary ways we are not typically self-conscious and are engaged in actions at a non-reflective level. Conversely, when we take the perspective of the generalized other, we are both ‘watching’ and forming a self in relation to the system of behaviors that constitute this generalized other. These reactions or actions of the individual, whether in response to others or self-initiated, fall within the “sphere” of the “I.” Every response that the “I” makes is somewhat unique. Its responses may differ only in small ways from previous responses, but they will never be absolutely the same. Mead asserts that, the ‘I’ gives the sense of freedom, of initiative. The situation is there for us to act in a self-conscious fashion. We are aware of ourselves, and of what the situation is, but exactly how we will act never gets into experience until after the action takes place” (Morris 1934: 177–178). The “I” is a ‘source’ of both spontaneity and creativity.

It is important to note that the “I” and the “me” exist in dynamic relation to one another. The self arises in a social situation and this situation structures the “me” by means of intersubjective symbolic processes (language, gestures, play, etc.). The active organism, as it continues to develop, must respond to its situation as well as to its “me.” This response of the active organism is the “I.” The individual takes the attitude of the “me” or the attitude of the “I” according to situations in which she or he finds her or himself. For Mead, “both aspects of the “I” and the “me’ are essential to the self in its full expression” (Morris 1934: 199). Both community and individual autonomy are necessary to identity. The “I” is process breaking through structure. The “me” is a necessary symbolic structure which renders the action of the “I” possible, and “without this structure of things, the life of the self would become impossible” (Morris 1934: 214).

According to James Fox (2011), the make-believe "I" is constantly and compulsively defining itself, and building an image of itself from passing thoughts. We select from the great mix of our experiences an image here and there, and discredit the rest through some of rationalization" (pg. 50). We tend to critique and remark on everything from the current point of view of the self-image. "We become our states of mind rather than allowing them to just pass through" (*Ibid*).

Stephen Cope (2000) also states that, out of ignorance arises "I-ness": the belief in and clinging to a separate, solid, 'small s' self" (pg. 64). Out of 'I-ness' arise both attraction and aversion which involve our inclusive identification with our likes and dislikes. Out of this "inevitably arises clinging to life and fear of death—a deluded and desperate desire for life to be small, neat, permanent, and solid rather than vast, incomprehensible, impermanent, and discontinuous, as it really is" (*Ibid*). In the yogic view, we "cling desperately to every outward and visible representation of 'me' and 'mine,' building our lives around the most gross apparent realities, which are by their nature the most impermanent aspects of the whole enterprise" (Cope 2000: 76).

The Bhagavad Gita also suggests that, "Free from the 'I' and 'mine,' from aggression, arrogance, greed, desire, and anger, he is fit for the state of absolute freedom. Serene in this state of freedom, beyond all desire and sorrow, seeing all beings as equal" (Gates and Kenison 2002: 412). Until we know who we are, which allows us to see all beings as equal, "there will be pain, because we are not operating with all the facts at our disposal. We look out into the world and become confused" (*Ibid*). Some yogis, though, have moved beyond delusion, let go of false personas, and spend time in "direct contact with the underlying reality. Some people have called that experience *samadhi*" (*Ibid*). Those who are most at risk for experiencing mental and

physical issues related to trauma, stress, anxiety and depression would, theoretically, benefit from moving past the 'I,' 'me,' and 'mine' and experiencing samadhi. Yoga, according to the symbolic interactionist perspective, would fuse the two phases of Mead's self: there would only be one 'phase' which both reflects, and responds to, the attitude of the 'generalized other.' There would be no need to distinguish between the 'I' and the 'me' because they would be one and the same. All that is left is a true understanding of the self.

CONCLUSION

The main objective of this paper was to utilize the symbolic interactionist perspective to 'explain' how the practice of yoga is useful in assisting first responders (those most apt to be diagnosed with PTSD, anxiety, depression, etc.) in finding harmony with themselves and the world around them. In connecting the theoretical to the spiritual, we saw many similarities when analyzing the concept of the self. Utilizing this concept as defined by Sheldon Stryker, Michel Foucault, Peter J. Burke, Erving Goffman, and George Herbert Mead, there is a strong connection of the self as conceptualized by sociological and philosophical theorists to the self as conceptualized by the founders of yoga. Realizing our true self is one main key to dealing with the anxiety, stress, trauma, and depression related to being imprisoned, responding to crime and destruction, participating in and witnessing military combat, and being an at-risk juvenile.

Yoga as a mindfulness practice is a tool for reengaging first responders with their 'selves' to restore the connection between mind, heart and body. Programs such as *Yoga for First Responders* (<http://yogafirstresponders.org/>) has been launched in order to provide "vital

emotional wellness and mental-resiliency training in academy settings, in-service trainings, and community- based programs.”

Even more recently psychiatrists, psychologists, sociologists, criminologists, and clinical social workers—many working with current and ex-prisoners as well as U.S. military veterans—recognize that embodiment practices such as yoga enriched with mindfulness practices can have more impact in lessening the symptoms that lead to both reactive behaviors and stress-related health issues. Yoga, taught specifically as a mindfulness practice, is very effective in releasing deeply held, unresolved trauma, allowing individuals such as yogis, mental health practitioners, and criminal justice personnel to address the resultant behavioral issues.

As previously stated, symbolic interactionism is rooted in three basic assumptions. First, human beings respond to objects—things, ideas, events, or people—based on the meaning they assign to those objects. Second, the meaning a person dedicates to an object transpires from his or her social interactions. Third, these meanings are utilized, understood, and personalized through an interpretative process that is adopted for dealing with objects we encounter. The yogic tradition indicates that, through practice, we learn our true identity; our 'true self' that has the ability to witness and respond with awareness to situations and circumstances that arise. This is both theoretically and practically useful to those who are more likely to experience trauma, stress, anxiety, and depression.

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