Issues in Yoga Therapy

Power in Hatha Yoga Communities and Classes: Understanding Exclusion and Creating Space for Diverse Cultures

Traci Michelle Childress, MA
Omega Institute, Rhinebeck, NY

Abstract

Power is an important dynamic in the Yoga community that influences who has access to the knowledge of Yoga and how that knowledge is shared. To create an ethic of inclusion in Yoga communities, we must consider the many ways in which people experience Hatha Yoga—especially the experiences of individuals who come from cultural backgrounds other than our own. Because it is difficult to see the ways in which cultures—our own and those of others—are seen, experienced, and responded to, it is easy to imagine that the reason that Yoga classes in the United States tend to be homogeneous is based on some inherent natural truth at work. To create space for diverse cultures in Yoga communities, we must recognize that (1) Both teachers and students bring knowledge and culture with them to the relationship, and that (2) Teachers (and institutions) should be held accountable to their perspectives, biases, and opinions about their own and others’ cultural backgrounds. To create a diverse community, there must be an understanding of the human-ness of both the teacher and student, and of the inherent relationship that influences the learning process.

Introduction

Power can be defined as relating to inevitable, and incessantly shifting, hierarchies that place someone or something in a position of privilege over someone else (or some other group). Power is intricately woven into issues of privilege, availability of resources, the freedom to come and go without hindrance, and the right to not necessarily be held accountable to actions. Power is not, as anthropologist J.S. Alter writes, a “one-dimensional force that some people have and others do not. It is vested in culture to such an extent that it defines the framework for all social interaction.”

Power is an important dynamic in the Yoga profession because Yoga teaching and Yoga therapy both involve the transmission of knowledge about Yoga philosophy and practices. In my discussion, I will be guided by the idea that knowledge is produced by and disseminated within a particular and changing cultural context. That cultural context directly influences the evolution of the knowledge itself and who has access to that knowledge. In exploring how cultural context relates to the production and dissemination of knowledge about Hatha Yoga, I will draw attention to how particular cultures, identities, and experiences may be privileged over others. I will consider some issues in how a teacher shares Yoga knowledge with those who seek it, including (1) how individual voices are given space in the teaching or therapeutic process, and (2) how available and accessible Yoga knowledge is perceived to be by students/practitioners.

To create an ethic of inclusion in Yoga communities, we must recognize and take into consideration the many ways in which people experience Hatha Yoga in the world. Over the years, as a white middle class woman immersed in Yoga communities, I have become aware of the fact that we function within groups with specific discourses, or ways of thinking and being in the world. These discourses privilege (and thus invite in and make comfortable) certain individuals, and in doing this, also exclude others. Discourses of exclusivity invite in only those who relate to and live within the same framework. The field of Yoga must consider whether
it has set up discourses of exclusivity that limit the reach of Yoga to all groups and all individuals.

This article weaves together the personal (my own and others’ stories) with the theoretical, based on the assumption that the personal is significant to the broader context. In addition, the ability to engage with stories and experiences other than our own is our ability to relate to diversity. Diversity is a term often used to talk about issues such as race, class, gender, or sexual orientation. In the context of this work, I use the term broadly, to mean the many nuances of and influences upon lived experience. This certainly includes, but is not limited to, the above definable categories.

Yoga Defined: A Cultural Studies Perspective on How Culture Shapes Yoga in the World

To understand the variety of ways in which Yoga is experienced, and how individuals are accepted into or excluded from its practice, it is helpful to consider a cultural studies perspective on Yoga. From this perspective, any definition of Yoga must be made up of all of the many intersecting practices, institutions, individuals, texts, and traditions with which it has come and continues to come in contact. The definition must include the cultures in which the texts and traditions of Yoga originated, the cultures of the institutions that continue to transmit the knowledge of Yoga, and the cultures of the individuals who currently practice Yoga.

In addition to the cultures that have informed and defined Yoga over time, meaning is also created by the written materials that teachers and practitioners create and utilize. Anthropologist J.S. Alter terms these texts “yogic pulp nonfiction.” These texts, or pulp nonfiction, contribute to the meaning of Yoga. There are the texts and books written by Yoga masters (e.g., BKS Iyengar’s Light on Yoga or Yogananada’s Autobiography of a Yogi). But pulp nonfiction texts also include marketing literature and portrayals of Yoga in the popular press (e.g., flyers, mailings, and posters advertising classes and workshops, Yoga websites, and publications such as Yoga Journal). These texts shape the cultural perception of what Yoga is and who it is for.

In the West, Yoga has a presence in a number of organized realms, including health and fitness, personal development, and therapeutics. Each of these realms brings with it its own culture, which then interacts and melds with other cultural influences on Yoga. These cultures become part of the cultural and historical context in which Yoga exists and is defined. What Yoga is and who it is for become intricately tied into ideas related to these intersecting cultures. Yoga becomes infused with mainstream ideas related to the fields of medicine, self-help, and therapy about what it means to be healthy, fit, beautiful, spiritual, and even worthwhile.

Familiarity and comfort with the more predominant cultures represented in Yoga—such as some of the mainstream ideas about health and beauty—may make some people feel more comfortable than others within the general Yoga culture.

In addition, each of us brings certain kinds of “cultural capital” to our experience and teaching of Yoga. Cultural capital consists of our accumulated knowledge, understanding, and ways of being in the world that are the product of our experiences in specific environments, relationships, and institutions. Because cultural capital is cumulative, we are often unaware of all of the ways in which we are defined or perceived by the presence of these cumulative experiences, goods, or credentials. Quite frequently, we are seen as being either capable or incapable of doing something, including Yoga, based on how our cultural capital is perceived by others who may or may not share a similar cultural capital.

Cultural capital often dictates choices we make in teaching and structuring classes: choices about the language used in class, the way that a room is set up, the clothing worn by teachers or other students, the clothing that students are expected to wear, the type of body that is perceived as appropriate or fit, whether or not eye contact is made or is expected, what sort of political references are made, what sort of metaphors are used in teaching. These are elements of a particular cultural capital. They are subtle and difficult to see and understand, but can be responsible for whether or not someone feels comfortable or welcomed in a given setting. It is critical that teachers be aware of how these choices invite certain people into the classroom and, at the same time, make others feel less welcome.

The environment privileges (or makes comfortable) a particular cultural capital and, as a result, tends to downplay the value of (or make less comfortable) other forms of culture represented by students or clients. Because students or clients may not be aware of their own cultural capital, they might experience the dominant perspective as more correct or truer. This creates a power imbalance. As education scholar Alex More points out, marginalized individuals may not see the selection of materials and priorities presented in the classroom “as being based on cultural preference…but rather on matters of intrinsic quality.” Individuals who are not members of the dominant culture in any given setting are made to feel that the problem is them, rather than part of a system that represents particular, and privileged,
cultures. In the Yoga world, this could mean that individuals might imagine that they cannot do or participate in Yoga because they are too poor, too overweight, too self-conscious around men or around women, too uncomfortable in clothing required for class, or too nervous about chanting (just to provide a few examples).

More also writes, “Culture may be used in educational systems as a way of disguising, perpetuating and legitimizing institutional bias and inequality. . . and of presenting a particular ‘reality’ in which some students are configured and perceived as simply more or less clever, motivated, or hard working than others.”

To illustrate this, I will share an example of an interaction in the Yoga classroom: a weekend workshop in a city in Germany, led by an advanced Yoga teacher who was also a native English speaker. I was one of two other native English speakers attending. The other attendees were teachers on the higher end of the hierarchy of certification, and had been practicing this particular method of Yoga for many years. Most of them were native German speakers with varying degrees of proficiency in English.

At one point during the workshop, the visiting teacher began drilling us on some of the terms and concepts from Yogic philosophy. People were apprehensive and slow to respond to the questions, and the instructor became very animated and angry, telling us that we should know the answers, especially if we were certified. Being a regular student of many of the attending teachers, I was well aware that many of the teachers did indeed know the answers to the senior teacher’s questions. I had heard them discuss the concepts in classes in German. However, they may have felt unable to discuss the esoteric and complicated ideas in English. The humiliating way we were being addressed made it much harder to risk a wrong answer, and kept me, for one, from venturing into the discussion. The visiting teacher, however, merely took the silence to be a sign of ignorance. There was no apparent awareness on the part of the teacher about how her own language and approach influenced the voice(s) of the students in the room.

This is just one example of what we expect from students. Our curriculum and rules of membership are also of particular significance, as they may be structured according to the cultural capital of the majority. In Yoga classes, the following forms of discipline are common: not allowing questions about what is presented as true, attempting to require a certain type of personal practice, not allowing students to participate in other forms of Yoga training, and making demands on how students spend their time outside of class. If the student does not adhere to the demands, he or she may be unable to participate in Yoga classes or may not be considered a true member of the Yoga community.

In some long-term Yoga training programs, students are not allowed, for example, to participate in any Yoga courses that are not taught in the method taught in the training. The reason given for this is that “sampling” creates confusion for students. This sort of demand requires that students behave in a way that may not necessarily encourage or enhance learning, but may merely control behavior. Students might be best able to understand the value of a methodology by comparing it to another one. For example, my own background and education in liberal arts and interdisciplinary studies has led me to be most comfortable learning by comparing things extensively in order to understand them. But according to the programs that make this demand, this requirement may seem like an inherent truth that participants need to adapt to, rather than being seen as a particular cultural capital.

**Group Membership, Class, and Real Life Experience with Yoga Communities**

Any group or institution that has membership guidelines, rules of participation, and a belief system will inevitably exclude individuals. This is the nature of having membership. As gender activist Kate Bornstein writes, “a group remains a group by being inflexible: once it stretches its borders, it’s no longer the same group.” However, it is critical to examine how it is that people are excluded and to cultivate (on a regular basis) an institutional and personal awareness of issues within the organization of systems that exclude, marginalize, or do not invite to the circle, those who are more marginalized in the culture of the institution or classroom.

In numerous interviews and conversations, Hatha Yoga teachers in the United States—most of them white, middle aged, and middle class—told me that they have experienced their classes to be made up of mostly white, middle-to-upper-class students. When I asked why they thought this was so, replies were generally something like the following: “I think [Yoga] is very middle class because I think the middle class can afford the time to practice Yoga. And they can also afford the time to improve and better themselves, while poor people are spending most of their time trying to survive” (A.H., oral communication, 2005). “It’s class restricted, but I think that’s actually been true of spiritual practice. People need leisure time [to have a spiritual practice]” (M.N., oral communication, 2005).
It is clear that the pricing of Yoga, Yoga therapy, and Yoga trainings limits participation. While it might be true that many poorer Americans are lacking the resources to participate in training programs or Yoga classes, there is no reason not to look at how to create alternative options or approaches to payment. Not doing so threatens to result in a Yoga culture that represents only those who can afford one type of payment. The view that not having money means you can't participate in a given activity can be used to justify maintaining the status quo or the dominant cultural capital represented in the Yoga community. Middle class teachers, such as the ones quoted above, may resort to middle class ideas about working class people, why they are absent, and why they should be included or not in their Yoga classes. It is also important to note that these middle class ideas may not match the experience of the working class.

Neither the teacher nor the potential student may recognize consciously that these issues contribute to the feeling that participation in Yoga is appropriate or inappropriate, available or unavailable. Because it is difficult to see the ways in which cultures—our own and those of others—are seen, experienced, and responded to, it is easy to imagine that the reason that Yoga classes tend to be homogeneous is based on some inherent natural truth at work, such as the assumption illustrated in the responses shared above that working class people simply do not have enough time to do Yoga. One 30-year-old Yoga student from California wrote about this issue in an online survey I conducted in 2006 (unpublished data):

“[Yoga] is expensive and exclusive. The studio I go to not only charges quite a bit for classes but has a retail store where things are extremely expensive. When I walk through the clothing, jewelry, books, incense and trinkets to go to class and see the prices, the message I get is that this studio is not for me. It is out of my range. I am very upset by this. Upset that my participation in classes is limited to my income at the time. Upset that not everyone can get the classes I got that have changed my life so. Upset that I have not found a real way to integrate it into my life so that I am not dependent on a teacher and a studio.”

A 43-year-old black woman who was raised poor, is currently middle class, and lives in the Northeast, wrote:

“Yoga in my community is skinny, vegetarian, white, new agey, competitive, young, and athletically oriented. I am none of these things. I often feel unwelcome and misplaced, or patronized, in many Yoga classes I’ve tried out. It is rare for me to find a teacher willing to meet me in the place where I am: neither ascetic nor athletic; no where near ‘pure’; and [I am] very anxious about issues of cultural and religious appropriation; and still longing for the deep clarity that comes from bringing my body and mind together in a strong, centered alignment. Sometimes Yoga classes use what I experience as ‘coded language.’ I am so accustomed to it that it isn’t impenetrable for me, but I sometimes bump up against the language and it gets in the way of me learning new concepts. I have always wanted to take Yoga with an African American or Caribbean teacher to see how more familiar language would affect how I learn and practice Yoga. Yoga in [my city] is treated as a cool fashionable commodity rather than a spiritual practice. This turns me off. My pet peeve: Yoga studios in [this town] are guided by a particular middle class downwardly mobile aesthetic that I find alternately amusing and annoying. Didn’t the guys who passed on the yogic tradition live in caves? [I have received] frequent unso-
licited comments about how Yoga could help me to lose weight—even when I was 50 pounds thinner and very healthy—[these comments] are about ethnocentric body views; this was an indication that I should run, not walk, away from this class.”

This woman feels excluded from the Yoga scene in her community. She has experienced specific encounters that illustrate the way in which the cultural capital represented in Yoga classes in her area bump up against (to use her words) her own culture. This story gives powerful testimony to the complex experience of practicing within a culture and community that is not sensitive to, or simply not aware of, the implications of differing forms of cultural capital. As Yoga professionals, we must consider these individuals’ stories and perspectives.

Creating Inclusion and Diversity in Yoga Communities

Two important points need to be made about how we can create space for diverse individuals and diverse cultures in the Yoga community: (1) Individuals bring knowledge and culture with them to any environment or relationship, and what they bring with them should be given space in the educational or healing process, and (2) Teachers (and training boards and institutions) should be held accountable to their perspectives, biases, and opinions about their own and others’ cultural capital.

To create an expansive, spacious learning environment and community, there must be a very real sense of the human-ness of both the teachers and students, and of the inherent relationship that nuances the learning process. Yoga institutions, teachers, and therapists must work to create a deeper awareness of the evolving reality of lived experience—our own and others’. Ignorance of the experiences of those with whom we come in contact in our work should not be an excuse, and is, essentially, a privilege of being a member of a dominant group.6,7 Above all else, this requires that we seek to make space for the experiences of those we teach and train, especially those who think, look, or believe differently than we do. As teachers and members of the institution of Yoga in the world, we must seek real transformation in the larger culture of Yoga and create more accessible classrooms, training programs and associations.

Gary Howard, president and founder of the REACH Center for Multicultural Education in Seattle, Washington points out that inner work is a necessary component of transformation even at the institutional level.6 Yoga as a practice trains us to do this inner work. To quote Howard, this means doing the “inner work of multicultural growth,” by “listen[ing] carefully to the perceptions others have of [Yoga in the world], particularly [its] students and colleagues from other racial and cultural groups. They can help us see ourselves in a clearer light.”6(p4) We must seek to understand the experiences that our students have in our classes.

I have created a list of five guiding questions for Yoga professionals, based on education scholar Sonia Nieto’s principles of creating multicultural learning communities.8 If institutions, teachers, and therapists were to use these questions, they could serve as part of a practice of holding themselves and their communities accountable to a more equitable, multicultural, spacious, and diverse learning/healing environment.

1. Is this approach/setting allowing learning/healing to be actively constructed?
2. Is this approach/setting honoring, giving space to, and building on the experiences that students/clients have brought with them?
3. Is there space for discussion/sharing about how individuals learn/heal and what approaches to learning serve them best?
4. How is the cultural and historical context in which we are learning/working playing a role in the process of education/healing?
5. What is the social environment of this group or relationship? Of the teachers/leaders involved? Of the students/participants? And what is the culture of this organization/class/session?

As Nieto writes, “The major issue is not to make particular strategies, approaches, or even content prescriptive, but rather to examine critically the environment in which those strategies and curriculum are played out.”8(p108) Teaching and facilitating learning or healing is about building relationships. In relationship, we seek to understand one another, to create boundaries, to respect boundaries, and even to push boundaries. We must honor the knowledge, wisdom, and experience of one another, whatever our official role.

References


Direct correspondence to Traci M. Childress at tracichildress@gmail.com.