Research

North American Yoga Practitioners’ Lived Experiences of Mind-Body Connection: A Phenomenological Study
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Abstract

The practice of yoga was born in India thousands of years ago and brought to North America gradually beginning in the 20th century. The traditional practice of yoga is spiritual in nature with an intention of purifying the mind and body, leading to an alleviation of suffering through connection with the Divine (i.e., liberation). Yoga has gained widespread popularity in North America, but whether North American yoga practice includes an intention on the purification of the mind-body, in contemporary practice often described as a mind-body connection, has yet to be explored. This research study investigated North American yoga practitioners’ experiences of mind-body connection in their practices. Six yoga practitioners residing in North America were interviewed for this study. Interviews were audiorecorded and transcribed. Phenomenological analysis was conducted to produce the essence data, and thematic analysis was conducted to produce the contextual data. Phenomenological themes regarding the co-researchers’ experiences of mind-body connection in their yoga practices were identified and grouped into four textural essences: (1) the experience of breath, (2) local or internal experiences, (3) an increased sense of awareness and mindfulness, and (4) transcendental and spiritual qualities. Four structural conditions that allow practitioners to experience mind-body connection during yoga practice were identified: (1) breath, (2) physical asana, (3) practitioner intentionality, and (4) environmental conditions. Findings of the current study suggest a capacity for North American yoga practitioners to experience mind-body connection that is essential to traditional yoga practice. Weinstein. Int J Yoga Therapy 2021(31). doi: 10.17761/2020-D-19-00043.

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Yoga is a practice, born in India thousands of years ago, that people traditionally followed to work with the mind and body simultaneously. The word yoga means union, derived from the Sanskrit root yuj.1 With the practice of yoga, a practitioner may reveal a state of union with the higher Self or the Divine.1,2 To attain such union, yoga aims to relieve suffering of the self through connection with the Divine and uses a mind-body connection as a vehicle to achieve liberation (Yoga Sutra 1.23–24).3,5 Mind-body is defined as “of, involving, or resulting from the interrelationship between one’s physical health and the state of one’s mind.”6 In yoga, this interrelationship of mind-body involves union between the mind, body, and spirit.5 The connection of mind and body is explained in the traditional philosophy of yoga in the Bhagavad Gita and the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, both of which are further discussed below.

Functionally, yoga is a process of going inward that comprises postures (asana), breathing techniques (pranayama), energetic body locks (bandha), hand positions (mudra), and meditation.16 Each of these components supports individuals in developing a greater sense of awareness of the mind and body, which, in turn, may lead the practitioner to experience a state of mind-body connection through which supreme consciousness is realized. Another significant component of yoga practice is the yamas and niyamas, which are moral and ethical ways of living mindfully.1 The yamas are practices of restraint and self-control that include nonviolence, truthfulness, nonstealing, nonexcess, and nonpossessiveness.1 The niyamas are moral observances that include purity, contentment, self-discipline, self-study, and surrender.1 A yoga practitioner engages with the yamas and niyamas with the ultimate goal of the realization of supreme consciousness.

The 2016 Yoga in America Study,7 conducted by Yoga Journal and Yoga Alliance, revealed at that time that the number of yoga practitioners in the United States had increased to more than 36 million (up from 20.4 million in 2012). As she referenced this data, Carin Gorrell, editor in...
chief of Yoga Journal, stated that more people than ever are “realizing the benefits of yoga, from stress relief to flexibility to overall well-being.” Gorrell furthermore stated that “yoga is a thriving, growing industry.” A similar trend exists in Canada where, as of 2005, 1.4 million Canadians were practicing yoga. It is of interest whether this rapid expansion of yoga as a health and wellness industry is diluting North American practitioners’ understanding of a fundamental component of traditional yoga practice, the mind-body connection. The present work sought to explore the question of whether North American yoga practitioners are engaging in a practice that is focused on the concept of body and mind integration, which, as reviewed above, is traditionally described as the vehicle for liberation.

Many fields of study (e.g., behavioral medicine and psychoneuroimmunology) postulate that mind-body connection is an integral aspect of human experience, and researchers in these fields have generated evidence for this union of body and mind. However, the very concept of mind and body being split is a Western, reductionist view, and thus there is no agreed-upon definition of the mind and body connection, nor is there one specific way of describing individuals’ experiences of it. Yoga practitioners have historically used the spiritual practice of yoga as a process of drawing attention inward to the mind and body, with the ultimate goal of relieving suffering through attaining union with the Divine. However, research studies to date have not explored whether a connection of mind-body is facilitated by yoga in the North American context, where yoga is often practiced for numerous reasons that may be unrelated to its origins.

This apparent gap in contemporary research related to yoga and mind-body connection led to an interest in the subjective, lived experiences of the mind-body connection among North American yoga practitioners and to the subsequent development of the present study. The research question guiding this study is, “What is the lived experience of the mind-body connection in yoga practice for North American yoga practitioners?”

Co-Researchers
Six co-researchers were recruited for the present study through posting hard-copy recruitment posters in key locations and by sharing the poster on social media. Co-researchers ranged from 25 to 64 years old; their mean age was 37.3 (standard deviation [SD] = 16.04). Five of the co-researchers were female, and one was male. At the time of their recruitment their mean time practicing yoga was 16.25 years (SD = 14.9), with a range of 3–43 years. Four co-researchers lived in Canada, and two lived in the United States. Co-researchers did not receive any compensation for participating in the study.

The co-researchers identified their cultural or religious affiliation as agnostic, atheist, Buddhist, Jewish, or Taoist, and no religious or cultural affiliation. In addition, two of the co-researchers identified as being affiliated with all religions.

Types of yoga practiced by the co-researchers included Hatha, Restorative, Yin, Vinyasa, Power, Moksha, Iyengar, Ashtanga, Kundalini, Kriya, and Kripalu. All co-researchers had completed at least one 200-hour yoga teacher training program. The co-researchers had formal and informal yoga practices, which included physical asana, meditation, pranayama, and bandha work. All practitioners had exposure to the Bhagavad Gita and the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali through teacher training programs in which they had participated, and two co-researchers reported consulting with one or both texts regularly as part of their yoga practice.

Interview Process
Semistructured interviews were conducted to collect data; these were audiorecorded and subsequently transcribed. The first interview was a phenomenologically oriented interview, which included contextual, orientation (used to assist the co-researcher in describing a situation where the mind-body connection was experienced), and essence questions (used to ask co-researchers to speak about the essence of their lived experience of the phenomenon). A definition question and questions regarding demographic information were also asked to gain relevant descriptions of the sample population.

Qualitative Analysis
The final product of transcendental phenomenological analysis was a textural-structural synthesis, a synthesis of the meanings and essences of the experience being studied that produces a universal description of the co-researchers’ experiences.

Co-researchers in the present study were then emailed an individualized document of the analysis for their feedback and validation. Co-researchers were offered a second interview to make changes to the study’s findings. None of the co-researchers requested a second interview.
An additional step of data analysis, apart from phenomenological analysis outlined by Moustakas, was then performed to produce the final results. The textural-structural synthesis is the traditional endpoint for transcendental phenomenological analysis. To increase the accessibility of the findings, the synthesis form was analyzed to discover overarching essential meanings across the various components of the co-researchers’ collective experience. Similar structural components of the universal experience were grouped by the qualities of the description and formed into phenomenological structural conditions. Similar textual components of the universal experience were also grouped by the qualities of the description and corresponding meaning and formed into discrete textural phenomenological essences.

Contextual data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s six steps of thematic analysis. The contextual data collected for the present study included a description of the co-researcher’s yoga practice, the overall role of yoga practice in the co-researcher’s life, and the co-researcher’s definition of the mind-body connection.

Results

The results of the present study are organized into phenomenological and contextual sections. Phenomenological results include four structural conditions of the phenomenon and four textual essences of the phenomenon, all reflecting the co-researchers’ experiences of mind-body connection in yoga. Structural conditions represent the conditions that allow for the phenomenon of mind-body connection to be experienced and that serve as a container for the lived experience of the phenomenon. Textual essences represent broad themes reflecting the experiences of the co-researchers in times when they experienced mind-body connection through yoga. Contextual results describe the co-researchers’ sense of the meaning of yoga in their lives and their definitions of mind-body connection.

Phenomenological Results

A description of the phenomenological results in the form of structural conditions and textural essences follows.

Structural Conditions: The Container

Four significant structural conditions were identified by co-researchers in the present study: breath, physical asana, practitioner intentionality, and environmental conditions.

Co-researchers identified breath as an important structural condition in experiencing a mind-body connection in yoga. They described the breath as a significant tool in accessing mind-body connection, as the following co-researcher (CR) described:

I was sitting in meditation after a yoga practice, and I was experiencing the mind-body connection through the breath. My mind was so attentive on the breath and the sensation of the breath as it came in . . . and then, I became only aware of the breath and nothing else. [CR 3]

The breath was integral to practitioners’ experiences of mind-body connection, and they described the common experience of “always coming back to [their] breath” [CR 3]. During practitioners’ experiences of mind-body connection in yoga, the breath may become the central point of their focus. This experience may involve a practitioner training the mind to be attentive on the breath, as one practitioner reported experiencing a “tendency of the mind to escape from being attentive of the breath . . . and then bringing the mind back to attend to the breath” [CR 3]. Thus, the use of the breath as a structural condition aids the practitioner in allowing for the experience of the mind-body connection.

Physical asana, or postures, help to facilitate mind-body connection in yoga practice: All of the co-researchers confirmed that working with poses was a significant underlying structure in their experiences of mind-body connection. Co-researchers commonly experienced mind-body connection when in sasangasana (corpses pose). One co-researcher put it this way:

In sasangasana there’s many instances where I feel mind-body connection there because that’s when your body is completely relaxed. So, the mind can wander, and the key, the trick, is to keep the mind and the body connected in this sort of dynamic stillness. [CR 3]

Co-researchers also experienced mind-body connection when in backbends such as ustrasana (camel pose).

Co-researchers described mind-body connection as a highly intentional experience, and they identified several intentional ways of being that facilitated experiences of mind-body connection.

- By increasing awareness of the sensations and quality of the breath, practitioners spoke of how they would actively “focus on [their] breath” [CR 4] or “gain control over [their] breathing” [CR 5] during states of mind-body connection.
- Slowing everything down, including one’s breath and physical movements, as suggested by another co-researcher’s reflections: “It’s breathing in, really focusing on the breath, and as I inhale doing a slow count to six, and as I exhale thinking about relaxing my body” [CR 6].
• Focus on the present moment, as another co-researcher described: “I was so present with the experience. Even now recounting it to you, I can remember everything of how that moment looked. My presence was so high, yet my thinking mind or analytical mind just went really quiet” [CR 1].

• Having a sense of trust and openness toward the experience, as a co-researcher suggested when offering the following: “My openness was very great, my willingness was really high, and my curiosity as well was really high” [CR 1].

Finally, a variety of environmental conditions are useful in enhancing experiences of mind-body connection in yoga practice. In the present study this included physical conditions, such as being in a comfortable and familiar environment. This also included social conditions, such as being in community with supportive and like-minded others, and being guided by an experienced teacher. One co-researcher practitioner put it as “being in that setting with a group of people practicing, and with a teacher” [CR 5]. Environmental facilitators included spiritual conditions, as one co-researcher described, “It was an Ashram, and there was a sense of spiritual-ness and everybody in the same place was practicing yoga” [CR 6].

Textural Essences of Mind-Body Connection Experiences in Yoga: Lived Experience

The following four textural essences are broad themes reflecting the experiences of all the co-researchers in times when they attained mind-body connection through yoga.

The first textural essence derived from the analysis of data was the practitioner’s experience of breath. Co-researchers in the present study reported that when they experienced mind-body connection in yoga practice, they also experienced an awareness of the sensations of the breath, as one co-researcher reported, particularly on the “inhale and exhale” [CR 3]. “The power of the breath” [CR 5] is recognized as an essential component of experiencing a mind-body connection: “I’m to the point now where I can’t imagine practicing without focusing on the breath,” one co-researcher stated [CR 8]. Co-researchers spoke of the breath as a “theme that continues throughout” their yoga practice and experiences of mind-body connection [CR 6]. Practitioners described being aware of both the gross and subtle qualities of the breath: “[T]he breath became very shallow and it just slowed down to a point it was like these microinhales and these microexhales with a lot of space in-between them” [CR 3]. Thus, the breath, described as a textural essence here, was intrinsically part of the lived experience of the mind-body connection in yoga.

The second textural essence was the local or internal experience of mind-body connection. Practitioners described having access to the experience of affect and emotion and the experience of thought or cognition. During experiences of mind-body connection, practitioners described feeling connected to themselves as being “grounded, deeply listening and really tuned in” [CR 1], and as an “acute awareness and feeling . . . all through my body” [CR 2]. Increased awareness of sensations in the body (increased body awareness) also accompanies the state of mind-body connection, or, as one co-researcher put it, “watching the sensations in my body” [CR 1]. During such experiences, practitioners felt awe and deep gratitude, which one co-researcher expressed in this way: “And then, it was just an ongoing commitment to [cultivating] that and just [a] remembrance of what a gift it was to have experienced that” [CR 3]. Practitioners can experience intense emotions during times of mind-body connection, and this includes both positive and negative emotions. In terms of positive emotions, co-researchers in the present study reported having experienced feelings such as “safety” [CR 1], a sense of being validated, and a “feeling of calmness” [CR 6].

The third textural essence was an increased sense of awareness and mindfulness. Practitioners reported experiencing awareness and mindfulness that extended outside of their own bodies toward larger, external structures and systems such as the environment or others around them. One co-researcher described experiencing mind-body connection while speaking to another individual: “I was observing that whole interaction and just enjoying it so thoroughly because it was like I was seeing the whole picture” [CR 3]. There was also a sense of being connected to the greater whole, which one practitioner described as, “[W]e’re always all one” [CR 3]. Practitioners experienced a sense of boundless, raw awareness that can include an awareness of one’s nature, an awareness of “being” rather than “doing,” and an awareness of the present moment; one co-researcher put it this way: “There’s a calm that comes over [me]. The sense . . . that it’s OK to do it the way I want to do it. I can try it in my own way” [CR 6]. Mind-body connection is experienced as the state of awareness itself without placing subjective judgment upon the experience or understanding it intellectually: “There is no thought about it. There is no thought or judgment about your body or whatever it is. You’re just feeling” [CR 3]. When practitioners experienced mind-body connection, they had an awareness of the power of such experiences and an awareness of how “powerful this [yoga] practice can be” [CR 6]. Practitioners experienced an inner focus and recognized an awareness of being immersed in the experience itself or in the greater whole.

The fourth textural essence was composed of the transcendental and spiritual qualities of mind-body connection that practitioners experience in yoga practice. When they
experienced mind-body connection, practitioners also experienced the transcendental dissolution of the ego (the sense of subjective self-identity), which involves an experience of connecting to the greater, collective whole. As one co-researcher described, “I was so not attached to my ego that I was just this operating awareness as I functioned through [myself]” [CR 3]. This co-researcher went on to say, “I started to have that direct experience of the fragmented identity, separating itself and then entering into the collective whole” [CR 3]. Spiritual qualities of the experience for practitioners include a feeling of being interconnected to all other beings; a feeling of being interconnected to nature, the Earth, and the universe; and a feeling of deep compassion, love, and appreciation for all other beings and for the Earth: “We’re always all one, right? But the actual experience of it, of us all being one, is up to us . . . it is up to us to remove ourselves from our limited identities to see that” [CR 3].

**Contextual Results**

Below are the present study’s contextual results, representing the co-researchers’ responses to interview questions asking them to describe their yoga practices, identify the role and meaning of yoga in their lives, and provide their definitions of mind-body connection.

**Description of Yoga Practice**

Co-researchers described various components of their yoga practice, which included physical asana practice (100%), pranayama (100%), meditation (67%), mindfulness (50%), relaxation practice (17%), and teaching yoga (67%). Co-researchers reported practicing these components formally in a group or class setting or informally at home or, with the exception of teaching yoga, elsewhere on one’s own.

**Meaning and Role of Yoga in One’s Life**

The co-researchers in this study were also asked to identify the overall role and meaning of yoga practice their lives. Four themes emerged from their responses; Table 1 presents the frequency and offers a brief description of each theme. There was considerable overlap in the responses co-researchers provided with respect to the meaning and role of yoga in their lives: They all spoke about yoga helping them to improve or maintain their physical, mental, and emotional well-being.

**Mind-Body Connection**

Contextual results regarding the definition of the mind-body connection as described by co-researchers in this study are grouped into three themes; Table 2 presents the frequency and brief descriptions of all three.

**Table 1. Meaning and Role of Yoga Practice in Co-Researchers’ Lives: Four Themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Frequency (%)</th>
<th>Example of Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provides feelings of goodness and</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>I would leave the first couple of classes that I did, like, just beaming . . . And, I definitely got that feeling of, like, “Oh, no. This is the juice. There is something really good in here for me.” [CR 2]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pleasure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Means of healing from pain</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>On the purely physical level it’s like having a doctor. [CR 4]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(physical or other)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-care practice</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>Finding a few minutes every day, to stop, to breathe, and just [to] try and find quiet in my body. [CR 6]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifestyle</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>The practice that I do on the mat must carry over into all the other things that I’m doing that day. [CR 3]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2. Co-Researchers’ Definitions of Mind-Body Connection: Three Themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Frequency (%)</th>
<th>Example of Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Space to witness and process</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>The mind-body connection in yoga is allowing room to witness the interaction between your mental and emotional state and your physical bodily state. [CR 2]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interactions between mental,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>emotional, and physical body states</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction between the mind</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>I would start by saying the mind and the body are not separate. That the body is the antenna that receives the mind. [CR 3]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and body (which includes mental,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>emotional, and physical body states)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preexisting phenomenon that one</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>It’s already always happening, right? Like, we’re already always breathing, but we could become aware of the breath. [CR 1]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>must work to become aware of</td>
<td></td>
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The co-researchers’ definitions suggest that the presence of an interrelationship and interaction between the body and mind is at the center of the mind-body connection. Furthermore, the definitions suggest that for one to experience mind-body connection, one is required to recognize and be aware of the interactions that take place between the body and mind, which may or may not include emotional or spiritual awareness.

Discussion

This study was interested in answering a research question to ascertain how the mind-body connection is being experienced in a North American context, apart from the traditional context in which yoga was born and practiced. Following is a discussion of the contextual and phenomenological data, along with an examination of how these findings compare to other mind-body concepts discussed in related traditional and contemporary literature. Finally, limitations to the present study and possibilities for future research are discussed.

For co-researchers in this study, yoga practice consisted of physical asana practice, pranayama, meditation, and mindfulness (see sutras 2.46–51), which are part of traditional yoga practice. Co-researchers also described contemporary related components such as teaching yoga. Finally, co-researchers described the component of relaxation, which is reflected by both traditional and contemporary literature. Although teaching the components of yoga was a part of traditional practice, as teacher passed on these practices to student(s), the traditional philosophical texts do not focus on teaching yoga as a component of the practice itself in terms of the eight limbs of yoga. That the co-researchers in the present study suggested teaching yoga as a component of their practice may reflect that yoga in North America is an industry that generates profit. Relaxation is implied in sutra 2.46 (“a steady, comfortable posture”), which describes that any posture that brings comfort and steadiness is asana. Because stress is such a central component of contemporary life, there has been a shift away from a relaxed state as the platform from which to practice yoga and toward relaxation as a byproduct of practice. For example, a 2011 study focused on the therapeutic effects of yoga. In it, Woodyard stated that yoga should be considered a complementary therapy in the treatment of stress, anxiety, or depression, as it helps to increase feelings of relaxation. Thus, relaxation as a component of yoga practice for the co-researchers in this study suggests both traditional and contemporary influences.

The four structural conditions of breath, physical asana, practitioner intentionality, and environmental conditions helped to facilitate experiences of mind-body connection among the yoga practitioners in the present study. These four structural conditions are discussed in traditional yoga literature as outlined below. In traditional yoga practice, practitioners are encouraged to use the breath as a tool to facilitate a mind-body connection. Asana are the physical postures as described above (sutra 2.46). Finally, the traditional practice of yoga supports engaging in the practice intentionally. The first chapter of the Yoga Sutras’ discusses samadhi pada, concentration, as the foundation on which yoga practice is built. This concept is intentional in nature as concentration may aid the practitioner in facilitating a mind-body connection, with the ultimate purpose of guiding practitioners toward a state of union with the Divine. Thus, the structural conditions of breath, asana, and practitioner intentionality in the present study are reflected in traditional yoga literature.

Also in contemporary related research, Ivretzan and Jegatheevaran found that for Western practitioners, yoga is initially practiced with the intention of enhancing physical fitness; however, over time spiritual intentions become more salient. Ivretzan and Jegatheevaran argue that yoga practiced in the West, like classical Indian yoga, “cultivates the opportunity for spiritual growth.” The current study suggests that practitioner intentionality is an important structural condition in the practice of yoga, which may support the practitioner in developing a traditional, spiritual practice of yoga.

The importance of environmental conditions is also reflected in traditional yoga literature. Physical environmental conditions are described in the Hatha Yoga Pradipika, a 15th century yogic text that outlines a clean, orderly, and peaceful space as a precondition to productive practice (1.13–14). Additionally, social conditions described by co-researchers in the present study are reflected in the yogic concept of satsang, a Sanskrit term that translates as “company of the true” and refers to being in the company of like-minded others who engage in a spiritual dialogue. Thus, the results of the present study suggest that North American yoga practitioners may require certain supportive environmental conditions in their yoga practices to access mind-body connection, in similar ways to traditional practitioners.

The experience of breath was a focus in the current study. The Yoga Sutras describe the experience of breath and the control of the breath as foundational to yoga practice. In ancient yoga literature, a common term for breath is prana. Pranayama, meanwhile, refers to the control of the breath using various techniques. Satchidananda suggested that by regulating prana one also regulates the mind because the two always go hand in hand. Regarding sutra 2.51, Satchidananda described that it is easier to control prana in a gross manifestation compared to a subtle one: “So first, we

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learn to control the physical body, then the movement of the breath, then the senses, and finally the mind” (p. 153). The experience of the breath in mind-body connection states attained by North American practitioners closely mirrors the concept of prana, given that practitioners in this study described being aware of the breath in both its gross and subtle qualities. Furthermore, the structural component of the breath as an aspect of the container that facilitates mind-body connection closely mirrors the concept of pranayama, as practitioners in the present study also described gaining control over the breath.

In examining contemporary research support for the experience of breath, Mehling and colleagues20 studied the common ground of mind-body therapies; they were interested in body awareness as a “mechanism of action” in mind-body approaches in practices such as yoga. Mehling and colleagues20 described breath and breathing as common aspects across practitioners in attaining body awareness and reported that breath was the “central connector or link between body and mind” (p. 6). This is reflected in findings of the present study, given that co-researchers described the breath as a central component in the experience of mind-body connection.

Regarding practitioners’ internal experience of the mind-body connection in yoga, this essence parallels Patanjali’s traditional definition of yoga as expressed in sutra 1.2,1 “Yogas citta vrtti nirodham.” Satchidananda21 interpreted this sutra as, “[T]he restraint of the modifications of the mind-stuff is Yoga” (p. 3). Meanwhile, Ram Dass22 offered this interpretation: “Unified consciousness comes with cessation of thoughts” (p. 1). Sutra 1.3, translated as “then the Seer (Self) abides in Its own nature,” describes that the purpose of calming the vrttis (fluctuations) of the mind is so that one’s true nature can be revealed. Thus, yoga as a practice is designed to aid practitioners in the removal of the fluctuations of the mind so that the true Self can be revealed, leading to a spiritual experience.1 This concept is an essential foundation upon which traditional yoga practice is built, a fact reflected by practitioners’ descriptions of local or internal experiences of the mind-body connection. In contemporary research, internal experiences of mind-body are reflected by Mehling and colleagues32: Participants in their study regarded body awareness as an inseparable aspect of embodied self-awareness and that those who engaged in mind-body therapies progressed “towards greater unity between body and self” (p. 1).

Aspects of the essence of yoga practitioners’ increased sense of awareness and mindfulness during mind-body connection are mirrored in both traditional and contemporary literature. Sutra 1.40 is translated as, “[G]radually, one’s mastery in concentration extends from the praloma atom to the greatest atom” (p. 59).1 This sutra describes that when a practitioner has developed an ability to focus the mind on a small object, the mind becomes a tool to explore more subtle aspects of experience, a sense of interconnectedness, and the external world. Practitioners describe the subtler aspects of the experience as, for example, larger, external systems around them. In contemporary research, Kinser and colleagues27 studied the use of gentle yoga for women with major depression and reported that yoga became a relational technique that allowed participants to gain a sense of connectedness and shared experience with others. This is reflected in the findings of the present study, as practitioners reported a sense of increased awareness and mindfulness of others and the larger environment.

The transcendental and spiritual qualities of mind-body connection are described through a traditional lens in sutra 3.7,1 translated as, “[T]hese three [dharana (concentration), dhyana (meditation), and samadhi (meditative consciousness)] are more internal than the preceding five limbs [of yoga practice]” (p. 168). This sutra describes that the experiences of calming the body and breath and recognizing sensations are felt first as inner practices. When one’s practice deepens and the connection between one’s mind and body is more absolute, the boundary between inner and outer dissolves.1 Once there is a state of increased meditative awareness, the body, breath, and senses seem to be outer practices, and the practitioner may experience a sense of moving beyond them and into the realm of only the mind, thus transcending the body. This traditional literature suggests a transcendental quality to experiencing mind-body connection, which is expressed in the results of the present study.

In contemporary research, Wiesner24 wrote that spirituality as part of one’s yoga practice embodies “an empathy that extends beyond the individual into the natural environment” (p. 28). Wiesner described this form of spirituality as one of the essential qualities of a yoga practitioner that gives rise to a “yogic mind.” The essence described by practitioners in the present study parallel Wiesner’s concept in terms of connecting to the greater, collective whole; this suggests that North American practitioners are attaining a state of “yogic mind.”26 The description of transcendental and spiritual qualities given by co-researchers in the current study has also been given in Yaden and colleagues25 work on neurotheology, in which individuals who undergo mystical experiences reported a feeling of self-transcendence. Furthermore, Fiori and colleagues30 studied yoga practitioners’ performance on the rod and frame test, which requires the integration of proprioceptive, vestibular, and visual signals. Their findings suggested that higher levels of self-transcendence, described as the tendency to experience spiritual feelings and ideas, may enable yoga practitioners to optimize vertical judgment tasks by relying more on internal

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signals from their own bodies (interoception) than on external, visual cues.

A final note on spirituality and yoga practice: Park and colleagues\textsuperscript{21} examined motives for adopting and maintaining yoga practice and showed that most initially practice yoga for exercise and stress management. Over time, however, the primary reason for continuing to practice yoga was spirituality. Based on this examination, it is suggested that North American yoga practitioners experience the spiritual aspect of mind-body connection in both traditional and contemporary ways.

The foregoing discussion suggests that contemporary North American practitioners in the present study were accessing components of an ancient process in a contemporary context. Furthermore, the findings suggest that the experience of mind-body connection is one of realization, involving increased states of awareness and mindfulness of the breath, body, sensations, emotions, cognitions, internal states, larger structures and systems outside the individual, and—for some—the spiritual realm or experience of transcendence. It is argued that traditional tantric and yogic ontology moves the practitioner deeper into the self, and that ultimately spirituality is facilitated by going in, with the ultimate realization of union with the Divine, the pure and true Self.\textsuperscript{1} For North American practitioners in the present study, the mind-body connection as realization may be experienced in one or more ways as suggested by the four textural essences presented above, and practitioners may continuously shift between these aspects.

Limitations and Future Research

It is important to consider the limitations of the present study. The findings only represent the lived experience of mind-body connection as realization for the particular group of co-researchers who participated in the study. Additionally, all co-researchers in this study also had previous yoga teacher training, which may increase their knowledge and understanding of the mind-body connection in yoga and set them apart from general yoga practitioners with no such training. This limits the potential generalizability of the results. Co-researchers in this study also represented a limited set of North American yoga practitioners, leaving parts of Canada and the United States underrepresented.

Implications for further research that stem from the results of the present study are worth pursuing. Because this study’s results indicate that breath is considered both the path to accessing mind-body connection and part of its essence, it would be worthwhile to revisit Mehling and colleagues’\textsuperscript{25} study on mind-body therapies. In their study, breath was identified as a central connector between one’s body and one’s mind.\textsuperscript{25} Mehling and colleagues\textsuperscript{25} suggested that the breath “can serve as a tool for the [therapeutic] practitioner to use with the patient, a tool that patients can learn to use themselves in their work towards re-integration of mind and body” (p. 6). Given the earlier findings and those of the current study, future explorations on the use and experience of the breath in relation to mind-body experiences, and the potential for restoring mental and physical well-being by using breath with mind-body union, are warranted. An additional implication for future research relates to the yamas and niyamas. Although not a focus of the current study, the yamas and niyamas are crucial components of yoga practice, as described above. Thus, it is of interest to explore how these principles are experienced in yoga practice, particularly in relation to mind-body experiences and the mind-body connection.

Contemporary research on mind-body topics is largely based on outcomes, focusing on the benefits of mind-body therapies on mental and/or physical health.\textsuperscript{32-35} In contrast, the textural essences of the phenomenon of mind-body connection reflect practitioners’ lived experience of the mind-body connection during the experience of the phenomenon as opposed to the resulting changes after having had the experience. Future phenomenologically based research studies designed to gain a further understanding of how practitioners develop and experience mind-body connection would help to enrich the results of the present study.

Conclusions

The findings of the present study addressed the research question that this study was designed to explore by describing the experiences of the mind-body connection among a set of yoga practitioners in North America. The present study’s findings of both structural conditions and textural essences relative to mind-body connection experiences are valuable in a variety of ways. The structural conditions derived from the present study were compared with both traditional yoga literature and contemporary research findings. This comparison suggests that for the contemporary yoga practitioner in North America, the experience of mind-body connection in contemporary practice has both similar and distinct features compared to traditional practice. Furthermore, aspects of the described textural essences are reflected in traditional yogic literature, particularly in the Yoga Sutras, and in contemporary research, as outlined in the discussion above. This suggests that North American practitioners have the potential to access aspects of traditional yoga practice even in a contemporary context. Regarding the present study’s specific research question, the findings suggest potential for North American yoga practitioners to use the vehicle of the mind-body connection in yoga practice similarly to Eastern practitioners in a tradi-
tional yogic context. This suggests that North American practitioners may have the capacity to experience mind-body connection as the vehicle toward a state of union with the Divine and to experience realization through the practice of yoga in a similar way to that of traditional Eastern practitioners.

Conflict-of-Interest Statement
This work was prepared as part of a Master of Arts in Counselling Psychology degree with Adler University. The student researcher who conducted this study has no financial relationships with any entities that could be perceived to have influenced the content of this work. There are no patents or royalties relevant to this work. The student researcher who conducted this study is not and has not been engaged in any other relationships or activities that could have influenced the content of this work.

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