

Perspective

What Is Our “Epistemic Responsibility”? Reflections on Social Work’s Orientation in Yoga Therapy Research

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to explore how the social work discipline could provide a complementary lens through which yoga therapy can be analyzed and evaluated by engaging in knowledge-creation practices and procedures that prioritize the “epistemic responsibility” described by philosopher Lorraine Code. More specifically, by seeking to strategically include often-subjugated types of knowledge and by focusing on redistributing epistemic power to agents that typically have been excluded from epistemic participation in contemporary yoga therapy research, the social work discipline, with its strong commitment to social justice, has the potential to contribute to filling an important gap in scientific literature. We begin by presenting the relevance of the social work perspective in relation to the field of yoga therapy. We next offer a reserved critical analysis of the dominant technical knowledge base that currently informs yoga therapy practice. This analysis highlights the social parameters that may be rendered invisible or left aside when adopting a positivist epistemological lens and justifies how the conceptual apparatus of epistemic responsibility serves as a potential platform for rethinking social work’s position and future contributions to the field of yoga therapy. Finally, we mobilize the concept of cultural appropriation to illustrate how striving for epistemic responsibility provides an entry point for addressing the multilevel, complex social processes embedded in yoga therapy practice and research while aiming to capture the many voices—and hence the various truths—implicated in a democratic, reflexive, and inclusive research process. *Larocque & Moreau. Int J Yoga Therapy 2020(30). doi: 10.17761/2020-D-19-00044.*

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Introduction

As yoga therapy continues to gain legitimacy in North American health and mental health institutions,^{1,2} yoga research has gathered momentum across various fields of practice.³ In this quest for empirical knowledge production, few yoga therapy studies are being conducted from the social work vantage point. Although a small number of social work scholars^{4–11} have attempted to fill this gap in scientific literature, the social work discipline is clearly lagging behind. It is therefore timely to reflect on how the social work profession could complement current trends in yoga therapy research by contributing to the multifaceted nature and contextual dimensions of this emerging field of practice.

In line with the evidence-based stance that currently predominates in Western academia, research in the field of yoga therapy has mainly focused on the production of expert-based “technical knowledge.”¹² In the present article, we suggest that social work researchers are well-equipped, both theoretically and methodologically, to provide a complementary lens through which yoga therapy can be analyzed and evaluated by engaging in knowledge-creation practices and procedures that prioritize “epistemic responsibility.”¹³ More specifically, by seeking to strategically include nondominant forms of knowledge, the social work discipline has the potential to contribute to filling an important gap in yoga therapy scientific literature by redistributing epistemic power to agents that typically have been excluded from epistemic participation¹⁴ in contemporary yoga therapy research.

Research Objective

In this article, we use the theoretical framework of epistemic responsibility, elaborated by the Canadian feminist philosopher Lorraine Code, to explore how the social work discipline can claim space for often-subjugated types of

knowledge by “bringing the epistemic subject out of hiding”¹³ in future yoga therapy research. This approach also addresses a blind spot in social work research, which, historically, has not been exempt from reproducing epistemic injustices. We begin by presenting the relevance of the social work perspective in relation to the field of yoga therapy and by identifying the distinct values and ethical codes that firmly link the two disciplines. We next offer a critical analysis of the dominant technical knowledge base that currently informs yoga therapy practice. This analysis highlights the social parameters that may be rendered invisible or left aside when adopting a positivist epistemological lens and justifies how the “conceptual apparatus of epistemic responsibility”¹³ serves as a potential platform for rethinking how social work can push the field of yoga therapy forward. Finally, we mobilize the concept of cultural appropriation to illustrate how striving for epistemic responsibility provides an entry point for addressing the multilevel, complex social processes embedded in yoga therapy practice and research while aiming to capture the many voices—and hence the various truths—implicated in a democratic, reflexive, and inclusive research process.

Social Work’s Prospective Orientation in Yoga Therapy Research

Inquiry into social work’s prospective orientation in yoga therapy research is justified for a number of reasons. First, following the same trend as other health and mental health professions,¹⁵ social workers are increasingly using yoga-based interventions in their clinical practices. According to the International Association of Yoga Therapists (J. Kepner, personal communication, February 8, 2019) social workers currently represent 1.5% of IAYT-certified yoga therapists. Although this number initially seems unremarkable, it is interesting to note that social workers are the most significant subgroup of yoga therapists whose work is based in institutions and hospital settings (S. Tebb, personal communication, February 13, 2019). The growing accessibility of certified yoga therapy programs across North America in particular and the developing legitimacy of mind-body-spirit approaches in the social work curricula^{5,7,8} will likely positively affect those numbers in the future.

Recent changes being made by insurance providers also point to such increases in integration. Since 2019, certain providers of professional liability insurance designed specifically for social workers are, at least in Canada, beginning to ask professionals if they use yoga as a social work intervention tool. From this observation alone, we can deduce that the social work landscape is changing and that a burgeoning number of social work practitioners, not necessarily certified as yoga therapists, are integrating yoga into profes-

sional practice. Hence, through a process of appropriation and reappropriation of yogic concepts, the social work profession is quickly becoming an active site of diffusion for contemporary yoga therapy.

Because of limited documentation relating the fields of social work and yoga therapy, we remain poorly informed on the intricacies of these appropriations and on *how* social workers are formally delivering yoga-based interventions and programs. However, literature shows that social workers typically integrate yoga in three ways. First, at the individual and group levels, a number of social workers turn to evidence-based programs that include yogic tools in their protocols (e.g., mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy).⁸ Others, mainly those in private practice, obtain credentials through accredited yoga therapy programs to provide integrative treatment options to their clients. Second, at the structural level, social workers are recently turning to the holistic framework provided by yoga therapy to respond to larger social justice issues, such as environmental justice,^{16–18} or to offer strategies to resist oppression¹⁹ and engage in decolonization practices.²⁰ Third, at the pedagogical level, yoga is also being integrated into social work curricula as a self-care strategy^{6,7} and reflective tool for embodied practice.⁹

This growing interest in the clinical applications of yoga therapy specifically for the social work profession, combined with the lack of research in this area, raises several questions pertaining to ethics, pedagogy, theorizing, practice knowledge, and research. Therefore, it seems imperative that social workers participate more actively in the process of knowledge production to disseminate data that would better inform yoga-inclusive social work practice and extend the knowledge base of other human service professionals who are incorporating yoga therapy into clinical settings.

Linking Social Work and Yoga Therapy: Endorsing Shared Values Through Epistemic Responsibility

Although the two disciplines originated in contrasting historical contexts and locations, many of social work’s virtues resonate closely with yoga therapy’s ethical and moral code of conduct. Yoga therapy is often considered to be rooted in Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras. Considering the first two limbs of Patanjali’s eightfold path, the *yamas* (restraints) and *niyamas* (observances), as guideposts for practice,²¹ yoga therapists are indeed driven by values congruent with the overarching principles that guide social work, which include “respect for the inherent worth and dignity of human beings, doing no harm, respect for diversity and upholding human rights and social justice.”²² Within this description, we can find the same types of ethical engagements described by the *yamas* (nonharming, truthfulness, nonstealing, moderation of the senses, and nongrasping), which particularly emphasize

nonviolence.²³ With a strong commitment to social justice and authentic respect for all living beings, implicit to Patanjali's system and to social work's code of ethics is that we, as professionals, have an ineluctable responsibility to engage in epistemically responsible practices.

In this regard, we propose that social work researchers have a role to play in addressing the inevitable "epistemic injustices"²⁴ that, often unwittingly but perniciously,²⁵ manifest themselves in the research process. These types of injustices occur when those who hold expert or technical knowledge (e.g., doctors, academic researchers, healthcare professionals, yoga therapists) implicitly or explicitly impose their institutional agenda onto clients or participants whose voices are at the margins of the knowledge-shaping process because of their subjugated social positionalities.²⁴

Integral to the concept of epistemic responsibility is the action of "engaging with subjectivity/subjectivities."¹³ This involves placing the "invisible knower" and "would-be knowers"¹³ at the center of knowledge production. In other words, epistemic responsibility serves to shed light on the epistemic injustices that need to be accounted for in yoga therapy research and to evoke the moral and ethical responsibility we have, as privileged agents of knowledge creation and diffusion, to redress these inequalities. Hence, epistemic responsibility includes thinking about our own cultural and social positionality while "advocating to bring formerly silenced voices forward."²⁶

Rooted in everyday-life discourses, the conceptual apparatus of epistemic responsibility demands a stark departure from the individualist and objectivist Anglo-American orthodox viewpoint. The following questions can serve as a starting point to link social work and yoga therapy research on their shared objectives of enhancing inclusivity, interconnectedness, and integrality⁶ in research: Who are the main "epistemic agents"¹⁴ in the contemporary construction of yoga therapy in the Western world? In other words, whose knowledge is considered to be appropriate and credible for research purposes? Furthermore, how is the dominant evidence-based research framework perpetuating epistemic injustices among nondominant groups, and how can we, as researchers, be more "epistemically responsible"¹³ in gathering evidence for the discipline of yoga therapy? Tracing the effects of positivist epistemology offers a backbone to provide potential answers to these questions.

Beyond Positivism: Broadening the Scope of Yoga Therapy Research

A thorough examination of the scientific literature on yoga therapy conducted from the viewpoint of various health-related disciplines reveals that research is generally (but not inclusively) guided by a positivist epistemological stance.

Although social work is renowned for its willingness to embrace collaborative research principles that aim to address the "social relations of power and inequality,"²⁷ the same rationalist-driven dilemma pervades social work research. Reflecting the contemporary pressures of accountability and justification,²⁸ evidence-based research has been deemed the "gold standard"²⁹ to evaluate performance, efficiency, and outcome of practices in both social work^{30,31} and yoga therapy.³² In part because of this strong push toward the standardization of non-mainstream practices through evidence-based criteria,³³ the quantification of yoga continues to dominate scientific discourse. The authoritative biomedical infrastructure has led many yoga researchers to become more preoccupied with "standardizing care" and less with "individualized care,"³⁴ an approach that seems incongruent with the integrative and holistic principles that guide yoga therapy³⁵ and social work.⁶

Making yoga more "scientific" through evidence-based formulation has led researchers from various fields, including philosophy,³⁶ sociology,³⁷ medicine,³⁸ and yoga therapy,³⁵ to raise issues related to the standardization of mind-body practices. They argue that in efforts to standardize these practices, we end up with an inaccurate, fragmented, and reductionist view of treatment modalities that are meant to be holistic and comprehensive. Other scholars have spoken about ethical problems that arise when trying to standardize practices that include the study of phenomena that are fundamentally "perceptible but non-measurable"³⁹ and non-quantifiable.⁴⁰ By standardizing yoga therapy, we potentially compromise important aspects of the practice: We interfere with the uniqueness of an individualized yoga-based intervention, disconnect from our own and clients' intuitive nature, and box in a practice that is meant to be fluid, creative, and personalized.⁴¹ In fact, the more we strive for standardization, the more we risk ending up with "one size fits all"⁷ interventions.

If yoga therapy is to "remain viable" in the Western world,³⁹ we acknowledge that the evidence-based objectivist model (and, by default, standardization) provides a platform to demonstrate *how* and *why* integrative therapies have a legitimate place in our healthcare system. Simultaneously, such a model allows for the development of a common language "at both community and institutional levels,"⁴² thereby improving communication between groups of professionals from the allopathic and complementary communities. However, to acknowledge the broader social implications of yoga therapy interventions, social work researchers need to consider an epistemological shift to "promote richer, more complex types of knowledge"³⁰ that resonates more closely with the nondualistic approaches rooted in social work⁴³ and yoga therapy.³ We turn to the concept of *cultural appropriation* to illustrate how the social work profession

could contribute to broadening yoga therapy research by evoking the complex, multidimensional aspects of the practice through epistemically responsible research.

Cultural Appropriation: Shedding Light on Epistemic Injustices

Deemed a primary concern by a number of researchers on complementary and integrative approaches,^{44,45} cultural appropriation is defined as “the use of a culture’s symbols, artifacts, genres, rituals, or technologies by members of another culture”; it is “involved in the assimilation and exploitation of marginalized and colonized cultures.”⁴⁶ As the use of yoga therapy involves traditional knowledge and values borrowed from diverse spiritual orientations (e.g., Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism), we must first recognize that Westernization of these practices implies a certain degree of co-optation that may be seen as problematic for certain individuals or groups.

Interactions and exchanges between cultures have become inevitable with globalization and can enrich the way knowledge landscape is created and validated. But implicit to the definition of cultural appropriation, this melding of cultures becomes problematic when power dynamics and notions of social control are not being accounted for. Introduced to the North American cultural and social imagination in the late 19th century by Indian-born yoga teachers and scholars, yoga was once mainly seen as a “mental and magical” practice.⁴⁷ Only in the 1930s did yoga become associated with *asana* (postural practice) in the public sphere, gaining popularity in the post-war era. Since the 1990s, the rapid pace of globalization has sped up “the ongoing process of acculturation,”⁴⁸ thus adding yoga to the list of contemporary consumerist trends. As a result, the transformation and repackaging of this ancient discipline often clashes with traditional Indian culture and spiritual elements.⁴⁹ Returning to Code’s framework of epistemic responsibility, we could add that intrinsic to cultural appropriation is the minimization of the capacity of marginalized groups (e.g., racial/cultural minorities) to act as epistemic subjects and influence how yoga is being (re)framed, whether this reframing is for social work intervention purposes or for yoga therapy research.

Blinne⁵⁰ argues that this “remixing” process should not be interpreted in binary terms (e.g., authentic vs. nonauthentic yoga), but rather as being continuously shaped by interacting cultures and social contacts, thus redefining the original boundaries of yoga. This nonbinary view of the evolution of modern yoga allows us to analyze how the shaping and actualization of yoga occurs within specific and socially valued discourses, times, and spaces, all of which provide normative instructions as to how yoga should be

delivered. Nevertheless, this remixing leads to unequal epistemic opportunities for nondominant groups whose voices are being suppressed or disqualified and who are therefore “precluded from making an impact.”¹⁴ The fact that contemporary yoga is being constructed primarily as a “white space,”⁵¹ where the White and privileged have greater access to the practice and to professional trainings,⁵² serves as a reminder of the underlying epistemic injustices involved in cultural appropriation. Taking into account the inequalities being (re)produced when adopting a top-down approach in research and in the delivery of yoga therapy services is of particular interest to both yoga therapists and social workers, whose guiding principles advocate for a collaborative, bottom-up, and inclusive approach to the dissemination of knowledge.

In recent years, cultural groups have campaigned both against the globalization and Westernization of yoga and as a way to regain epistemic agency and resist epistemic injustices. These mobilizations highlight the complexities and rich cultural history of this ancient discipline but also the social relations of power inherent to the concept of cultural appropriation. Since the Hindu American Foundation launched the “Take Back Yoga” campaign in 2008, other groups have formed and come forward to denounce the effects of cultural appropriation. These initiatives range from the social media-based group “Healing from White Yoga,” created in 2019 by former Western yoga teachers and students, to the academic peer-reviewed journal *Race and Yoga*, which since 2016 has published papers that critically examine issues related to inclusivity and the intersecting axes of discrimination and oppression involved in contemporary yoga.⁵³

We witnessed these phenomena in 2015 when the student federation at a Canadian university demanded that free yoga classes for students with disabilities be abolished, claiming that using ancient traditions represented a form of cultural appropriation. The classes were, at the time, deemed inappropriate for university grounds.⁵⁴ In light of this event, we wonder whether the acknowledgment of epistemic responsibility in research would have provided the required discursive space to bring attention to the larger, structural issues at hand. Surely, these types of collective initiatives would be of interest to social work researchers who are concerned with “promoting values of equality and social justice by challenging the power of oppression.”⁵⁵

Taking into account the “microinvalidations”²⁴ that arise from particular research activities (e.g., those who omit certain categories of knowers) can only be accomplished if alternative forms of knowledge, provided, namely, by “non-dominantly situated knowers,”¹³ are considered as “worthy of epistemic attention.”¹³ Without expanding further on the concept of cultural appropriation, we wish to offer some

avenues for thought on how social work's theoretical and methodological baggage allows for these types of issues to surface in research while remaining connected to an agenda that seeks to avoid replicating the "structural conditions that generate oppression."⁵⁶

Responding to Our Epistemic Responsibility

Theoretically speaking, Code's framework of epistemic responsibility serves as a pertinent entry point for thinking of social work's role in broadening the scope of yoga therapy research and undeniably calls for more qualitative research. Increasing epistemic agency requires that we value research from diverse epistemological and ontological perspectives⁵⁵ and can be accomplished by choosing research projects that embrace subjective experience and address social inequalities.

Historically, the social work profession has been renowned for joining forces with marginalized groups to challenge and change the very foundation of traditional knowledge (e.g., antiracist social work, community action, feminist social work).⁵⁷ A range of research methods and theoretical frameworks that are fundamental to social work aim to "challenge hegemonic power and tactical concessions"⁵⁵ by meaningfully involving service users or agents of emerging social movements in the research process. For example, antioppressive,⁵⁶ emancipatory,⁵⁸ critical,⁵⁹ and structural social work research⁶⁰ espouse theoretical frameworks that allow for the research process to become a collaborative and collective endeavor⁵⁷ by shifting the focus toward the inclusion of the voices and wisdom of those who are typically excluded from dominant methodologies of the social sciences. Furthermore, qualitative research designs that seek to "include reciprocity" by leaving contributors "better off than when they began the research study"⁶¹ have the potential to "contribute to the social good."⁶¹ Participatory action research, for example, firmly linked to the social work profession,⁶² is designed "as a cyclical process of experiential learning and action"⁵⁶ committed to engaging with participants as partners in the process of generating knowledge. Consistent with the ethics of social work and yoga therapy, this type of research situates the research project within a particular social and historical context,⁶³ thus enabling the unveiling of the power structures that act as barriers to the epistemic agency of service users. Institutional ethnography⁶⁴ as an ontology and methodology represents another fertile mode of inquiry for both social workers and yoga therapists who conduct their work out of institutional settings. By repositioning experiential knowledge at the center of the research process, this method examines how knowledge is socially organized by linking everyday life to translocal processes of administration and governance.

Offering a detailed description of the vast repertoire of social work theories and methodologies that fit within the theoretical framework of epistemic responsibility and examining their flaws and limitations would be beyond the scope of this article. In light of this discussion, the crucial point we wish to raise is the following: To adequately respond to our epistemic responsibility, the types of research we undertake "ought to reflect taken for granted social work principles"²⁷ as well as yoga therapy's ethical underpinnings. With this in view, by conceptualizing knowledge through epistemic responsibility, social work unquestionably has the potential to broaden yoga therapy's research agenda by providing a unique lens through which yoga therapy can be analyzed and evaluated. This would contribute to the recalibration of power dynamics in the research process and redress the effects of epistemic injustices, such as those involved in cultural appropriation.

Conclusions

The social work discipline has recently jumped on the yoga research bandwagon and could benefit greatly from pausing to reflect on how the social work viewpoint can contribute to expanding the knowledge base in yoga therapy. Considering the rapid infiltration of yoga-based interventions into social work, which involves a range of ethical, theoretical, and pedagogical considerations, this reflection is just as essential for social workers as it is for other health professionals who are integrating mind-body approaches into clinical practice. In light of our professions' guiding principles, we suggest that the conceptual framework of epistemic responsibility¹³ provides a solid platform to reflect on how scientific knowledge is acquired, created, and constructed in contemporary yoga therapy research. In fact, turning to the notion of epistemic injustices¹⁴ compels a rethinking of how research practices can produce, distort, modulate, or enhance epistemic activity and agency in certain groups of knowers.¹⁴

The present article suggests that social work as a discipline could further distinguish itself by turning toward alternative epistemological positionings to allow for the yoga therapy knowledge base to be more comprehensive and coherent with our professions' ethical, epistemological, and philosophical underpinnings. Although positivist-oriented research undeniably has its place in building a strong scientific portfolio for yoga therapy, relying solely on evidence-based formulation is insufficient to capture the richness and holism of this ancient practice and the complex social processes that determine the epistemic value of various groups of knowers. By examining the epistemic injustices inherent to cultural appropriation, we illustrated how the framework of epistemic responsibility provides an entry

point to reframe and renegotiate what is considered to be appropriate knowledge in yoga therapy research and how social workers can complement current trends by posing the question, “What is our epistemic responsibility?”

Conflict-of-Interest Statement

The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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