Modern Postural Yoga and the *Health-Spirituality-Neoliberalism Nexus*

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**Abstract**

The practice of yoga has become an integral part of practitioners’ lifestyles, spirituality, and therapeutic paths across the world, not to mention institutional and governmental interventions of pedagogical, rehabilitative, and political nature in settings as diverse as schools, hospitals, and prisons. While social science literature has explored some of these areas of analysis, we currently know little about how particular conceptions of health and wellbeing, of the sacred, and of the economic-political continuum overlap, diverge, and reciprocally influence each other, in reference to yoga and beyond. Using the example of “modern postural yoga”, this paper aims to provide a preliminary account of what we term the *Health-Spirituality-Neoliberalism Nexus*, that is, of the manners in which different “social fields”, such as the medical/therapeutic, the spiritual/religious, and the political/economic fields, are partly governed by the same practical-discursive logics and display profound “symbiotic relationships”. More specifically, this paper elucidates how specific health discourses centered around practitioners’ self-care, self-responsibility, and self-control dominate, not only the medical/therapeutic field, but also the landscape of contemporary spiritualities and the widespread neoliberal ethos that characterizes the current social, political, and economic model of Westernized societies. Here, the categories of physical and psychological health, the idea of a fulfilling spiritual life, and economic success display deep “elective affinities” that we seek to uncover mobilizing a series of foundational sociological concepts such as the Bourdieusian notion of “field” and a Foucaultian reading of “biopolitics” and “governmentality”.

Keywords: yoga, health and wellbeing, the *Health-Spirituality-Neoliberalism Nexus*, field, biopolitics, governmentality.

# Introduction

“Modern postural yoga” (De Michelis 2004), a form of yoga based on the reiterated performance of a series of postures often synchronized with the breath, is increasingly central within the landscape of contemporary spiritualities, the wellness and fitness industry, and therapeutic culture. From its roots as a mainly male-renouncer system of knowledge shrouded with secrecy in pre-modern times, yoga – at least in its postural variants – is now a highly classed, gendered, and racialized mainstream physical activity particularly present in urban areas across the world. In contemporary Westernized societies many aspects of postural yoga have become an integral part of practitioners’ lifestyles, spirituality, and therapeutic paths, as well as institutional and governmental interventions of a pedagogical, rehabilitative, and political nature in settings as diverse as schools, hospitals, and prisons. The progressive diffusion, popularization, and institutionalization of yoga rends it an important social phenomenon worth of serious sociological scrutiny in relation to the ideals and discourses of ‘health’ it promotes, next of course, to its centrality within the landscape of new, or alternative, spiritualities.

The social scientific literature on yoga is relatively marginal but it continues to steadily grow, featuring handbooks (e.g., Newcombe and O’Brien-Kop 2021), edited collections (e.g., Baier, Mass and Preisendanz 2018; Hauser 2013; Singleton and Byrne 2008; Singleton and Goldberg 2014;), monographs (e.g., Strauss 2005; Singleton 2010; Foxen 2017, 2020; Jain 2014, 2020; Newcombe 2019; Lucia 2020; Wildcroft 2020), and special issues (e.g., Shaw and Kaytaz 2021), next to numerous other publications, spanning across disciplines and approaches. More specifically, this body of knowledge “has developed in the interstices between religious studies, South Asian studies, Indology, anthropology, and sociology in the last two decades, following the keystone publication of Elizabeth De Michelis ‘*A History* *of Modern Yoga’* (2004)” (Di Placido 2021: 506). This literature has so far competently explored the history, transnational developments, and contemporary deployments of several yoga schools, tracing their genealogies, uncovering their practical and discursive roots, and problematizing yoga’s history as an inherently Indian system of knowledge. However, scholars working within the disciplinary boundaries of “yoga studies”, as much as within the broader fields of religious studies and the sociology of religion, have so far only incidentally discussed how yoga could also serve as a privileged site to inquire into whether and how particular conceptions of health and wellbeing, of the sacred, and of the economic-political continuum overlap, diverge, and reciprocally influence each other.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This paper uses the example of modern postural yoga and its dominant health discourses to provide a preliminary account of what we term the *Health-Spirituality-Neoliberalism Nexus*. Through this concept, we aim to advance analyses of the processes through which different “social fields”, such as the medical/therapeutic, the spiritual/religious, and the political/economic fields, are partly governed by the very same practical-discursive logics and display profound “symbiotic relationships” (Wacquant 2004)[[2]](#footnote-2). More specifically, illustrated by data from a qualitative study of the apprenticeship processes of modern yogis, this paper elucidates how specific health discourses centered around practitioners’ self-care, self-responsibility, and self-control dominate, not only the medical/therapeutic field, but also the landscape of contemporary spiritualities and the widespread neoliberal ethos that characterizes the current social, political, and economic model of Westernized societies where the categories of physical and psychological health, fulfilling spiritual life, and economic success display deep “elective affinities” (Weber [1905] 2011)[[3]](#footnote-3). Here, an analysis of the forms of subjectivity consecrated by these fields – and by their intersections – demonstrates the importance of theorizing about them not merely as autonomous fields organized around a specific stake but also as a continuum, or as we put it, a *Nexus*.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In what follows, we begin by introducing the theoretical premises and sensitizing concepts of this approach, chiefly the Bourdieusian notion of “field” (e.g., Bourdieu, 1966, 1971a, 1971b) and a Foucaultian reading of “biopolitics” (e.g., Foucault 2003, 2007, 2008) and “governmentality” (e.g., Foucault 1997, 2010). We then zoom into our empirical object of analysis, that is, modern postural yoga, briefly discussing its history, diffusion, and contemporary developments. From this, we move to a discussion of the *Health-Spirituality-Neoliberalism Nexus*, expanding on the centrality of the specific conceptualization of subjectivity pivotal to the internal articulation and logic of practice of these three overlapping and reciprocally informing fields. The final part of the paper concludes by arguing for the wider usefulness of the analyses provided to the study of other social processes, discourses, and practices beyond postural yoga, especially in relation to some of the privileged objects of analysis of the sociology of health, of the body, and of religion, also underlining the exclusionary mechanisms and the emancipatory potentials of the *Nexus*.

1. **Theoretical Premises and Sensitizing Concepts**

The theoretical premises of this paper are the outcome of three years of ethnographic research on the pedagogies of modern forms of yoga conducted by the first author (e.g., references to be included after review); the longstanding engagement within the field of contemporary spiritualities of the third author (e.g., references to be included after review), and her current research on the integration of spirituality into the health-care sector; and the ongoing engagement of the second author with approaches to subjectivation and subjectivity at the intersections of religion and neoliberalism, drawing on Bourdieu and Foucault (e.g., references to be included after review). Through the dialogical encounter between our respective research agendas, we have had the opportunity to make preliminary observations about the multilayered and reciprocally informing relationships occurring between what we address as the medical/therapeutic, the spiritual/religious, and the political/economic fields, and have begun to explore possible approaches to theorize them.

In so doing, it became progressively apparent to us that some of the pivotal discursive currents and logics of practice that characterize the current landscapes of therapeutics, spirituality, and neoliberalism – in themselves complex categories that we will discuss more extensively in section 4 – revolve around very similar processes of subjectivation, that is, following Foucault’s (e.g., 1986, 2005, 2010, 2011, 2014, 2018) seminal analyses, those processes through which the individual actively relates to oneself and constitutes oneself as simultaneously an ethical subject and an object to be known by oneself. As we will argue in the following, in fact, competent – and self-reflexive – exercises of-and-in self-care, self-responsibility, and self-control characterize some of the landmark practices through which individuals are deemed to succeed in their healing, spiritual, as much as professional paths.

In line with these premises, we postulate the need to find conceptual tools capable of accounting for the elective affinities or symbiotic relationships that occur between autonomous – although partially overlapping – portions of the social world, such as the medical/therapeutic, the spiritual/religious, and the political/economic fields. The aim of this section, then, is to introduce a series of analytical tools, or “sensitizing concepts” (Blumer 1954)[[5]](#footnote-5), that could be fruitfully deployed to this purpose in the following of the paper.

The first of these concepts is Bourdieu’s notion of *field*. Bourdieu (1996: 231) defines a field as “a network of objective relations (of domination or subordination, of complementarity or antagonism, etc.) between positions… [where] [e]ach position is objectively defined by its objective relationship with other positions”. According to Bourdieu, these “objective relations between positions”, that is, the structure of a field, are determined by the distribution of capital among social actors, where capital is in turn defined “as a form of accumulated labor composed of both material and symbolic resources” (Di Placido 2018: 7). The possession, acquisition, and conversion of capital (e.g., economic, social, cultural, symbolic, physical, and so on), regulate social actors’ role of domination or subordination *vis-à-vis* other social actors, from which then emerges the struggle over the definition of the legitimate culture and the most valued type(s) of capital of a given social field. “In other words”, as emphasized by Swartz (1996: 79), “fields are arenas of struggle for legitimation: in Bourdieu’s language, for the right to monopolize the exercise of “symbolic violence.””. Habitus, famously defined by Bourdieu (1984: 170) as “[a] structuring structure, which organizes practices and the perception of practices”, is within this framework, the culture of the field at an embodied level. In the following, the Bourdieusian notion of field is mobilized in order to explore how specific conceptions of health, of the sacred, and of the political-economic continuum inform the legitimate culture of their respective fields, and most importantly display a certain convergence of discursive contents that in turn requires – or encourage – similar practical repertoires in order to be acquired, or embodied, by social actors.

The second conceptual building block of our theoretical schemata is Foucault’s notion of *biopolitics*. Foucault introduces the concept of biopolitics in ‘*Society Must Be Defended*: *Lectures at the College the France 1975-76*’ (2003) where he defines it as the managing and control of the population as a biological entity. In ‘*The History of Sexuality*’ he then complements this notion with the concept of disciplinary power, discussing the “three-tier structure” (Wallenstein 2013: 11) of bio-power, the type of power that characterizes his understanding of biopolitics. At a micro-level, biopower “works by individualization, or more precisely by *producing* *individuality* as the focal point of all the different techniques for monitoring the body politic” (Wallenstein 2013: 11-12, emphasis in original). At the macro-level, that is, the level of the control of the population, individuals are “treated as statistical phenomena, in terms of collective health and collective forms” (Wallenstein 2013: 12). And finally, “[t]he family is the site of exchange between individuality and collectivity, the relay through which all individuals have to pass in order to become members of the reproductive body politic” (*ibidem*). What is of particular interest for our analyses is the link that Foucault traces between the control of the welfare, wealth, longevity, and health of the population through the pervasive government of individuals’ conduct, or in other words, how dominant discourses on health, spiritual fulfillment, and economic success inform those processes of subjectivation that characterize the ethos of the *Health-Spirituality-Neoliberalism Nexus*.

In ‘*Security, Territory and Population*’ (2007), the concept of biopower is almost entirely replaced by the notion of biopolitics and is re-cast in the light of an analysis of “governmentality” (Foucault 2007: 144), our third sensitizing concept. As Foucault (2007: 144, emphasis in original) poignantly argues:

First, by “governmentality” I understand the ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific, albeit very complex, power that has the population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security as its essential technical instrument. Second, by “governmentality” I understand the tendency, the line of force, that for a long time, and throughout the West, has constantly led towards the pre-eminence over all other types of power – sovereignty, discipline, and so on – of the type of power that we can call “government” and which has led to the development of a series of specific governmental apparatuses (*appareils*) on the one hand, [and, on the other]† to the development of a series of knowledges (*savoirs*).

As Foucault’s words indicate, the concept of governmentality eschews linear conceptualizations. Nevertheless, it is useful to our analyses as it contextualizes biopolitical interventions within a series of *dispositifs* whose main purposes are the fostering of specific types of subjects aligned with the legitimate forms of knowledge that inform their functioning and regulate their deployment. More precisely, we are interested in mobilizing the concept of governmentality as instrumental in linking together: first, “the question of the government of self and others”; second, “truth-telling (*dire-vrai*), the obligation and possibility of telling the truth in procedures of government” (health, spiritual, economic, and so on); and finally, “how the individual is constituted as subject in the relationship to self and the relationship to others” (Foucault 2010: 42, emphasis in original). The question of the ethical self-constitution of the subject, in fact, characterizes the later Foucault and his attempt to re-frame the study of governmentality also in the light of individuals’ freedom (e.g., Foucault 1997, 2010).[[6]](#footnote-6) For instance, in ‘*Technologies of the Self*’, Foucault (1988: 19) states:

Perhaps I’ve insisted too much [in earlier work] on the technology of domination and power. I am more and more interested in the interaction between oneself and others and in the technologies of individual domination, the history of how an individual acts upon himself, in the technology of self.

Emphasizing the “ethical turn” of Foucault’s later work is particularly useful to our analyses as it facilitates an understanding of his previous conceptual apparatus also in the light of individuals’ freedom, agentic power, and performative capabilities, three tropes of the contemporary depiction of the subject within a neoliberal discourse and its deployments within the medical/therapeutic, spiritual/religious, and political/economic fields alike.

Approached together, the concepts of field, biopolitics, and governmentality offer us a preliminary conceptual toolkit allowing inquiry into the lines of continuity, both at a discursive and at the level of embodied practice, that emerge at the intersection of the medical/therapeutic, the spiritual/religious, and the political/economic fields, and that here we begin to trace moving from the case study of modern postural yoga and its polymorphic developments.

# Modern Postural Yoga

De Michelis (2004: 2), in her classic ‘*A History of Modern Yoga*’, defines modern yoga as:

a technical term to refer to certain types of yoga that evolved mainly through the interaction of Western individuals interested in Indian religions and a number of more or less Westernized Indians over the last 150 years…The definition ‘Modern’ seems precise enough to describe its age (it emerged in modern times) and geographico/cultural spread (it is preeminently found in developed countries and urban milieus world-wide).

Building from this definition, we understand modern postural yoga as “a family of practices shaped by globalised ideas of biomedicine, physical culture, New Thought, esotericism and psychology (among other factors)” (Newcombe 2021: 162). The transnational character of this phenomenon, in turn, is due to its historical developments at the intersection of different Western and Asian systems of knowledge, its global spread and appeal – largely based on its discursive construction as a health-enhancing and therapeutic practice – not to mention its transmission “through the medium of English” (Singleton 2013: 38).

What distinguishes modern postural yoga from earlier forms with a more marked esoteric and religious leaning is its development within and fostering of specific discourses on ‘health’. Modern postural yoga, in fact, is primarily thought of as a health-enhancing and well-being promoting practice, where its practitioners can simultaneously cultivate their physical fitness (e.g., flexibility, balance, and weight loss), manage a variety of epidemic psycho-physical ailments (e.g., arthritis, stress, and anxiety), and nourish their spiritual needs (e.g., relationships with the sacred, the transcendent, and search for meanings). Here, as we will unpack in more details in the following, practitioners’ *self* functions as the privileged object molded by these processes of self-cultivation, and in so doing, it also aligns with broader concerns for self-care, self-responsibility, and self-actualization, common defining features of the social organization and logic of practice of the contemporary medical/therapeutic, spiritual/religious, and political/economic fields.

Today the practice of yoga is largely defined by a mixture of physical postures (*āsana*), increasingly performed in sequences (what is usually referred as flow or *vinyasa*); different types of breathing exercises (*prāṇāyāma*); and a final relaxation phase (*savasana*) (e.g., De Michelis 2004; Singleton 2005, 2007). Occasionally, beside these three elements, it is also possible to find the repetitive recitations of specific sounds (*mantra*) or devotional chants (*kirtan*); moments of meditations (for instance vipassana inspired meditations on the breath, Zen inspired meditation on one’s own awareness or tantric inspired meditations based on the visualization of *yantras*, or sacred symbols); cleansing practices of various kind (*kriyas*, for instance of the nostrils or the intestine); the study of sacred texts and yoga philosophy (chiefly Patañjali’s ‘*Yogasūtras*’ (I B.C.E – V century CE), the ‘*Bhagavadgītā*’, part of the Indian epic the ‘*Mahabharata*’ (IV B.C.E – IV C.E), and the ‘*Haṭhayoga Pradīpikā*’ (XV C.E.)); and finally, a certain devotion towards the teacher, in some cases considered like a *guru* (e.g., Singleton and Goldberg 2014).

In this contribution we are particularly interested in examining some of the ways in which modern postural yoga – and its practical-discursive repertoires – is deployed within the medical/therapeutic, the spiritual/religious, and the political/economic fields – and at their intersections – and the type(s) of subjectivity that through yoga practice is fostered and encouraged in these portions of the social world.

**4.** **The Health-Spirituality-Neoliberalism Nexus**

The *Health-Spirituality-Neoliberalism* *Nexus* is a conceptual device tailored to account for the interrelated nature of the medical/therapeutic, spiritual/religious, and political/economic fields, with a particular attention to how certain conceptions of health and wellbeing, of the sacred, and of the economic-political continuum overlap, diverge, and reciprocally influence each other.

We conceptualize the medical/therapeutic field as broadly as that portion of the social world organized around shared representations and agonistic conflicts over “what health is”, its cultivation, maintenance, and promotion. Here, beside the dominant biomedical paradigm of Western medicine – based on the objectification of the body as something to be known and scrutinized by the “medical gaze” (Foucault 1977) and its imperatives of control, knowledge, and manipulation, the detection and treatment of symptoms, – the medical/therapeutic field is also increasingly organized around alternative and holistic conceptions of health (e.g., Brosnan et al., 2018). The simultaneous presence of both biomedical and alternative conceptions of health delineates tensions and alliances between different understanding of the body, mind, and psyche and the most effective ways to treat their respective ailments.

Similarly, the spiritual/religious field, that portion of the social world primarily concerned with legitimate representations of the sacred and sanctioned discourses over and practices aimed at the consolidation of the human-transcendent bond, is progressively characterized in many Westernized societies by the presence and practical-discursive logics of contemporary spiritualities, again fostering competing conceptualizations of the sacred and of the most approved ways to promote human’s relationships with the transcendent (also in its immanent manifestations) (Camorrino 2021). In this field, traditional religions, stereotypically described as authoritative and prescriptive and as requiring faithful observance of sacred texts, religious authorities, and codified rituals are progressively giving way to new forms of spiritual practice largely based on individual’s free choices and personal relationship with the sacred, that is, individualized and privatized spiritualities (e.g., Berzano 2019; Heelas 1996; Heelas and Woodhead 2005).

Finally, the political/economic field is that ensemble of practices, relationships, and discourses that regulate the political and economic rationale around which societies, groups, and individuals organize their conduct in relation to themselves, others, and institutions and their normative apparatuses. As we will expand in the following, although there are also variations and antagonisms, the political/economic field is where we can observe the greatest homogeneity in terms of practices, discourses, and legitimate representations of what counts as the right political/economic forms of conduct, again based on individual’s freedom, entrepreneurial principles, and the progressive erosion of public services and welfare provisions (e.g., Harvey 2005).

Each of these fields is an autonomous field with its own peculiarities, concerns, and practical-discursive logics. Nonetheless, we contend that there are also some deep elective affinities among them, most notably in the manners in which health discourses are transversal to the internal functioning of each field and the processes of subjectivation that they encourage and foster. Modern postural yoga is, in this regard, a useful example that testifies to the hybrid nature and reciprocal influences among these social fields.

What are then these health discourses, and what form of subjectivity is cultivated across these different social domains? In order to answer these questions, we shortly discuss the role of yoga within the medical/therapeutic, spiritual/religious, and political/economic fields respectively, drawing on a selected reading of interview material. collected by the first author as part of a broader ethnographic project on the pedagogies of modern forms of yoga in Italy, Portugal, and the United States (more on this in note 12).

## 4.1. Yoga and the Medical/Therapeutic Field

Modern postural yoga, and its practical-discursive repertoires, are increasingly pivotal to the internal organization of the medical/therapeutic field. As a number of commentators have noted, the social and discursive construction of modern forms of yoga rests deeply on its representation as a therapeutic practice capable to synthetize and exploit the principles of both Western science and medicine and a variety of other Western and Asian systems of knowledge alike (e.g., Alter 2004, 2015, 2018; Di Placido 2020; Newcombe and O’Brien-Kop 2021). Moreover, although often associated with that nebula of alternative therapies that eschew scientific rationalization (e.g., reiki, prana therapy, acupuncture, and so on), yoga is increasingly gaining momentum due to the legitimization provided by scientific studies that assess its effectiveness as adjunct treatment, next to traditional biomedical interventions, for a variety of conditions (e.g., [Bushell](https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/10.1089/acm.2020.0177) at al., 2020; Khalsa, Cohen and Telles 2016; [Raveendran](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/?term=Raveendran%20AV%5BAuthor%5D&cauthor=true&cauthor_uid=30112866), [Deshpandae](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/?term=Deshpandae%20A%5BAuthor%5D&cauthor=true&cauthor_uid=30112866)and [Joshi](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/?term=Joshi%20SR%5BAuthor%5D&cauthor=true&cauthor_uid=30112866)2018).[[7]](#footnote-7) Not surprisingly then, even the United Nations (UN) and the World Health Organization (WHO) explicitly laud yoga’s health benefits.[[8]](#footnote-8) More specifically, the UN stresses “[y]oga’s growing importance to post-COVID-19 wellbeing” and describes it as “a powerful tool for dealing with the lockdown’s uncertainty and isolation, as well as maintaining physical well-being”.[[9]](#footnote-9) These remarks are echoed by the Yoga Journal, “the world’s largest and most influential yoga brand”,[[10]](#footnote-10) that, following the preliminary findings of the review by [William Bushell](https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/10.1089/acm.2020.0177) at al., (2020) of ‘*Meditation and Yoga Practices as Potential Adjunctive Treatment of SARS-CoV-2 Infection and COVID-19*’, argues that “the anti-inflammatory and anti-stress effects commonly associated with yoga, meditation, and pranayama may be an effective adjunctive treatment for COVID-19”.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Within this context, while practitioners, yoga schools, and organizations may diverge in the specific understandings of yoga that they promote, they all seem to share what De Michelis (2020) has rightly labelled an “healthiest idiom”, namely the tendency to frame yoga practices in terms of their health benefits. Giada, for example, forty years old yoga practitioner and instructor, underlines that:

…the greatest majority of those that approach yoga has something to heal…many are convinced that it does very well. Yes, maybe there is something inherently therapeutic in yoga, yes, that in its positive take becomes change but anyway is a sort of self-healing, a self-cure…You try it and see that it does you good and gives you wellbeing.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Here, one’s own health – and its maintenance and cultivation – is the primary capital at stake and yoga becomes a tool to cultivate a specific “health imaginary” (Hauser 2021) where yoga and therapeutic work are overlapping signifiers.

## 4.2. Yoga and the Spiritual/Religious Field

Within the spiritual/religious field, in turn, yoga occupies an ambivalent position as an integral component of religious systems such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, and simultaneously, as a spiritual practice that can be adopted by anybody no matter their faith or religious convictions. Especially in this latter declination, yoga *qua* spiritual practice is an ideal-typical example of some of the defining features of the contemporary spiritual/religious field, where individuals are deemed free to choose – or appropriate – whatever practice, ritual, and symbol they consider instrumental to their relationship with the sacred and the transcendent and assemble them in complex amalgam that evade traditional religious boundaries (Hervieu-Léger 1993; McGuire 2008: 195–199; Morello 2021; Roof 1993). In our research with yoga teachers, yoga is commonly represented as a physical system – not a religion – which may flourish into a full-fledged spiritual quest based on the cultivation of self-awareness, self-care, and self-listening. Louise, for instance, a fifty-five year old yoga teacher with more than thirty years of experience, underlines that “yoga is a great physical practice that has a value added” besides its therapeutic and fitness benefits. Practitioners’ narratives also present yoga as an ethical path of self-conduct and as a spiritual path. Sofia, a forty-seven year old yoga teacher with more than thirty years of engagement with the practice, mentions that “yoga is a philosophy of life”, “to grow, to have a wiser stance in life as years go by”; Aurora, a thirty year old teacher with seven years of teaching experience, echoes this position saying that “yoga is awareness…yoga is a strong personal growth that not everybody does”; Sarah, a forty-five year old yoga teacher with twenty years of experience, underlines that “yoga is a way of living”; and Viola, twenty-eight years old with four years’ experience with yoga, stresses that yoga is “a work on myself”. Susy, a forty-eight year old teacher and studio owner with over ten years of engagement with the practice, mentions that “yoga is an experience for the soul”, or as she elaborates, “yoga is exactly the possibility to seek. And to do this as a job is really a fantastic opportunity”. Finally, Lisa, a forty year old teacher with a background of over fifteen years of dedicated practice, expresses a similar view to some of these claims as she expands on her stance on what yoga is to her:

Yoga is, in some way, to not betray your essence. I mean, it is not that I know how I am, I know what I don’t like and so to find out what I like is more complicated, let alone the so called meaning of life! But let us begin to get rid of what makes me feel enslaved, not of somebody, but of something…the idea is to be listening, this is yoga.

The centrality of practitioners’ *self –* andits discovery, care, management, and cultivation – is here presented in very clear terms. The spiritual quest that yoga promotes, based on a self-reflexive focus on oneself is then a stereotypical example of “self-spirituality” (Heelas 1996: 2) or “seeking spirituality” (Wuthnow 1998) where – within the legacy of long-standing processes of social and discursive construction of Asian practices and traditions as “exotic resources” palatable to middle-class, Western audiences – practitioners’ “private symbolism” (Hanegraaff 1996: 524, 1999) is mobilized in the attempt to individually tailor a personal path towards the discovery of one’s own true self(e.g., Altglas 2014).

## 4.3. Yoga and the Political/Economic Field

Within the political/economic field modern postural yoga plays, once again, an ambivalent role, depending on who is mobilizing its practical-discursive repertoires and to what end. From the perspective of state’s interventions into penitentiary, educational, and other organizational structures, as well as from the perspective of companies’ reliance on the relaxing, calming, and stress-reducing effects of yoga practice, yoga can be seen as a disciplining and pacifying tool that facilitates the cultivation of “docile bodies” (Foucault 1977), as we will expand in the following.[[13]](#footnote-13) From the perspective of the Hindu Nationalist Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Hindu Nationalist political party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), yoga is the hallmark of the Indian and Hindu character. More specifically, yoga is here mobilized as “a global soft power solution to counter the Global North’s climate change privilege on the international stage” and “as biopower for the advancement of India’s depressed economy on the domestic front” (Miller 2020: 93).[[14]](#footnote-14) From the strategic representation that the yoga industry gives of itself (e.g., Jain 2020), as much as from the perspective of alternative movements within it and at its margins (e.g., Wildcroft 2020), yoga is a tool not only for personal transformation, but also for the cultivation of genuine social and political change (e.g., Di Placido and Pedrini, 2022). For instance, *karmayoga*, or *seva* as it is commonly referred to, a form of self-less service where the individual is not concerned with gaining something for him or herself, is a central activity of several international yoga schools and guru-led organizations such as the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission, SYDA Foundation, and the Self-Realization Fellowship. Most of these movements mobilize yoga as the building block of their philanthropic and humanitarian agendas, such as disaster relief programs, the construction and even management of schools, hospitals, social housing and so on (e.g., Lucia 2014, 2018). Similarly, although this time with a more explicit focus on yoga practice *per-se*, Di Placido and Pedrini (2022: 14, emphasis in original), reports the voice of an experienced teacher in her fifties with over thirty years of practice and experimentation with different styles of yoga, who emphasizes that yoga:

“is really an exchange at a deeper level, with all the cultures, so it is something that goes beyond our habits and this is very, very important. It makes you think a bit because you say: “*Bring peace to the world*”, it would be enough to be all on the mat and peace is really born. *Differences would be erased, judgments erased,* *everything erased*”.

In some other cases, the political role of yoga practice is even made more explicit, as when it is employed within – or as a form of – activism tackling racial, social, and economic injustices and inequalities. Examples of this are for instance the [*Yoga + Social Justice Collaborative*](https://www.yogaandsocialjustice.com/) and the Yoga & Body Image Coalition and other initiatives of this kind.

Yoga then emerges as a polyform systems of practices and discourses simultaneously deployed to strengthen and legitimize specific political and economic agendas, ranging from the maintenance of – or challenge to – the current social organizational structures of education, detention, and care, to global politics and international relations, to voluntary work and the “gestural subversion” (Jain 2020: 71) of the dominant capitalist discursive apparatus.

##  A Note on Health Discourses and Subjectivation

What unites yoga’s deployment within the three social fields discussed above is a common conceptualization of health and of the processes of subjectivation that regulate the internal organization and structural functioning of these social domains. More specifically, health is transversally conceptualized across these domains as a type of physical and symbolic capital that social actors should strive to maintain, protect, and acquire, so as to assure their dominant positioning within these fields, where ill-health, sickness, and even death are seen as subjective shortcomings and not as natural, systemic, and unavoidable facets of what it is to be human. In these fields, it seems to us, social actors are recognized as legitimate subjects especially on the ground of their will and ability to heal and recover if sick, care for themselves, and actively participate in the performative repertoires required by their specific social positioning, largely oriented towards the axes of educational trajectories, working careers, and family life. Yoga is here a powerful subjectivizing tool, as it allows practitioners to achieve exactly these objectives while simultaneously offering the opportunity of getting in contact with themselves. As other studies have also underlined (e.g., Godrej 2017; Markula 2004; Lea 2009), yoga practice is an effective technology – or technique – of the self, through which practitioners can simultaneously conquer spaces of freedom and self-determination through their engagement with self-reflexive and sensuous bodily work while, nonetheless, also conforming to “discourses of individual choice and responsibility so crucial to the neoliberal program” (Godrej 2017: 781). It is to this ambivalence, as emerged from the voices of the yoga teachers interviewed, that we dedicate the remaining of this section.

In the following extract, Linda, a thirty-six year old yoga therapist with ten years of experience with various styles of yoga, describes how yoga allowed her to gain spaces of freedom and self-determination and act accordingly to make some necessary changes in her life:

So that’s what the practice gave me, it was more about wanting how to be with myself. Like I said that idea “Can you let it be? Can you let it be?”. I am a fixer, I always wanna make it better, I wanna know what I need to do, I think I am very good in that regard, I wanna fix it, but “Can you just be with what is even though you can’t fix it?”. You need just to allow yourself to feel that. “Can you be curious about your own experience?”. That idea of looking in for mere curiosity, no judgment. “Can I just be curious about my own experience just so that I can know about it, just so I can know?”. And that was what yoga was able to give, for me with an hour on my mat finally I could turn off the noise from the outside and I could turn on the volume of what was going within and suddenly start listening what was going on with me, and that’s when I started to recognize a lot of things needed to change for me. “A lot of things do not feel in alignment for me” [...] I started to feel what my life felt like and then of course when you actually feel things you are encouraged to make different choices, especially when you are very uncomfortable.

As previously hinted at, a particularly productive manner to frame Linda’s experience of conversion is Foucault’s (1986, 2005) notion of epimèleia heautoù (literally care of oneself), namely the processes and practices of constitution of the individual as an ethical subject of reason. Here, Foucault (2005: 11) defines *conversion* “…from the outside, from others and the world etc., towards “one self”” (Foucault 2005: 11) as an experience where individuals are encouraged to cultivate a specific introspective relationship “of attending to what we think and what takes place in our thought” (*ibidem*). Similarly, Linda was able to put aside – or at least counterbalance – her “fixer” attitude with an attention and an openness to her own experience exactly because she mastered a certain way of attending to her inner landscape. In so doing, as she recounts in the following of the interview, she was also able to quit her managerial position for a leading American corporation and dedicate more time to herself and her family.

Next to these processes of subjectivation, where practitioners, thanks to their engagement with the practice, are exposed to the possibility of substantial self-transformative experiences, yoga also encourages a certain alignment with the normative values, norms, and practices of contemporary neoliberal societies. In the following, Maria, a thirty-three year old yoga teacher who has been practicing for three years, and Desire, a forty-five year old yoga teacher with five years of experience with the practice, reflect on how yoga helped them to accommodate to very demanding working environments. More specifically, Maria pinpoints that her work as assistant manager of the CEO of a multinational corporation of the hospitality sector is “very frenetic” and that although in the past she “experienced all these things with some anxiety...because I felt under pressure”, now, thanks to sustained yoga practice “I started to slow down and to have a sort of detachment between myself and what happened to me”.

Desire, in turn, describes yoga as a tool to mitigate her stressful position as manager of the Italian section of a very well-known international corporation in the entertainment industry, a career that at times makes her feel “a bit overloaded”. She continues stating that:

So, I do yoga and I take yoga in my workplace. It does not mean that I do the exercises with the mat. [Instead] I take the principles of yoga in my workplace. I have a following of people and they are all great professionals that live their job following the principles of yoga and they try to maximize it. And when they succeed to do it, results are guaranteed.

These types of narratives, where practitioners juxtapose a stressful working career with the balancing and performative benefits of their yoga practice is a common trait of an emerging new middle-class whose members are particularly exposed to the stresses of modern urban living (e.g., De Michelis 2004: 249-250) and the flexibility demands that characterize post-Fordist, neoliberal economies (e.g., Schnäbele 2010, 2013). Women are often especially exposed to the difficulties of balancing their career aspirations, long working hours, and private life, such as the management of the household, childrearing activities, and finding times for oneself.[[15]](#footnote-15) In this context, yoga as a form of “serious leisure” (Stebbins 1982) offers at least a partial – although privatized – solution to this complex amalgam of duties, aspirations, and expectations. Nevertheless, due its costs and overall social and discursive construction, mainstream forms of yoga are almost exclusively the prerogative of the privileged classes, and yoga’s therapeutic and self-transformative premises remain substantially inaccessible to other women – and men – from ethnic minorities and subaltern classes.[[16]](#footnote-16) We will expand on the classed, gendered, and ethicized dimension of contemporary yoga in the conclusion of the paper, while here we turn to its critique from a Foucaultian perspective.[[17]](#footnote-17)

The Foucaultian notion of “biopolitics” is a particularly useful sensitizing concept in theorizing the role of yoga within those processes of governmentality aimed at the control of the welfare, wealth, longevity, and health of the population through the pervasive government of individuals’ conduct. This type of governmentality, in fact, “dominates our everyday conduct as much as the ethos of our contemporary societies” (Di Placido 2020: 12) fostering processes of subjectivation resulting in the creation of what Jim McGuigan (2014) aptly calls the “neoliberal self”. The neoliberal self is the ideal-typical model of subjectivity of contemporary neoliberal societies where the normative ideals of self-responsibility, self-actualization, and self-care govern individuals as they govern themselves. Specifying the analyses at hand in relation to modern postural yoga, we contend, together with Farah Godrej (2017), that yoga practitioners such as Maria and Desire, could be labelled as “neoliberal yogi[s]”, that is, yoga practitioners whose practice “on the mat” is instrumental to the cultivation of a type of subjectivity and self-conduct substantially in alignment with the dominant paradigms of neoliberalism.

This neoliberal twist of modern postural yoga is self-reflexively discussed by Susan in the following extract, as she problematizes the pacifying power of yoga as something to be aware of as one delves deeper into the practice:

I think that there are limits in yoga sometimes, that pure meditation does not have, because yoga pacifies you. And for whom, like me, had rage as a drive for the greatest part of her life this thing is beautiful, being pacified is wonderful. And it is unpopular to say it, because I say, sometimes [yoga] is better than to take a Xanax. And then if you are not careful you can use it as Xanax and don’t do the journey but pacify yourself. So, you have to be careful and alert to understand what are the mechanisms that you create. Because if you don’t love the conflict but you are always in conflict because you have within a rage that is yours, that may come from anything, and you pacify it, that thing there will come back sooner or later. And so, you have to go and look at it somewhere. Because yoga pacifies and suddenly you don’t know any longer what is that rage except those days in which you wake up and drive on somebody and then you go back to do yoga. Emm, so here it is necessary to keep a high guard. Because the pacifying power makes us keep telling ourselves how beautiful we are but what a hell! It is not true! We only want the light, not the darkness. But that thing makes us absolutely authentic. And so we must seek.

Susan’s critical reflection is particularly instructive as it elucidates some of the ambivalences intrinsic in the contemporary dissemination and explosive diffusion of yoga: the “pacifying power of yoga” signifies that practitioners cultivate an attitude of detachment and acceptance of whatever happens to them, thus being subjected to a specific declination of “docile bodies” (Foucault 1977). According to Foucault docile bodies are the outcome of continuous and uninterrupted exposure to “processes which subject our bodies, govern our gestures, dictate our behaviours etc.” (Foucault 1980: 97), or in other words, to that facet of power implicit in disciplinary technologies implemented to control, dominate, and normalize individuals (Foucault 1977). Moreover, these docile bodies are regulated by a rationale that connects control, or docility, with utility (Foucault 1977: 137). Therefore, in embodying a specific declination of the docile body, yoga practitioners are not merely subjected to specific disciplinary technologies of control – or more precisely of self-control – but are also substantially framed as economic subjects whose actions ought to be primary directed by the economic scopes of efficiency, productivity, and high work-related performances. It is exactly for this reason, often obscured by yoga’s health benefits, stress reduction promises, and spiritual appeal, that yoga is particularly popular among those sections of the population engaged in demanding working environments.

Bringing our analyses to a close, we would like to emphasize the ambivalences intrinsic in any contemporary deployment of modern forms of yoga within a neoliberal rationale. As Andrea Muehlebach (2012: 25) argues, neoliberalism is “a force that can contain its negation – the vision of a decommodified, disinterested life and of a moral community of human relationality and solidarity that stands opposed to alienation”. From this perspective, although the transnational dissemination of yoga can be inscribed within a broader network of disciplinary and biopolitical forms of government that regulate practitioners’ self-conduct micro-politically, that is, at the level of every-day practice, yoga as a technology of the self at the same time implies the possible opening of horizons of freedom for practitioners that are in opposition to dominant forms of subjectivation. This, according to Godrej’s (2017: 791-793) counter-hegemonic reading of postural yoga, “requires marrying postural practice to particular philosophical precepts” (Godrej 2017: 792), favoring “particularly Patanjali inspired form of anti-materialism, while connecting yogic practice to the explicitly political rendering of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*” (ibidem). During our research into the contemporary yogic landscape, alternative readings of yoga practice as cultivating a vision of constructing decommodified selves and communities that might challenge the current neoliberal order were, although present, marginal (see also Di Placido and Pedrini 2022). Nevertheless, as Strhan (2022) discusses, these kinds of differing moral impulses that are alluded to within yogic repertoires “gesture towards deeper fissures within the human subject in modernity, between dimensions of order, control and rationalization and the vertiginous dimension of ideas of grace, ethics, and transcendent possibility that exceed totalizing logics of exchange” (see also Levinas 1969; Strhan 2019). In other words, the current – and substantial – alignment between neoliberal forms of governmentality and yoga practice does not makes of yoga – or yoga practitioners – something inherently neoliberal. We argue that this alignment “is more circumstantial than organic” (Di Placido forthcoming), and as much as neoliberalism is pervasive, ubiquitous, normalized, and dominant it is also incomplete, malleable, vulnerable, and porous (e.g., Godrej 2017; Harvey 2005; Makovicky 2014), that is, “every attempt at its reiteration also provides an opportunity for resistance” (Cavanagh 2014: 33). Whether postural forms of yoga may act in this direction, and if so how, is something that lies beyond the scope of this paper and would require further analyses at the intersection of sociology, political science, and comparative philosophy.

**5. Conclusions**

Using the example of modern postural yoga and its dominant health discourses, in this paper we provided a preliminary account of what we termed the *Health-Spirituality-Neoliberalism Nexus*, that is, of the manners in which different “social fields”, such as the medical/therapeutic, the spiritual/religious, and the political/economic fields, are partly governed by the very same practical-discursive logics and display profound symbiotic relationships. With this theoretical ambition guiding our writing, the paper elucidated how specific health discourses centered around practitioners’ self-care, self-responsibility, and self-control dominate, not only the medical/therapeutic field, but also the landscape of contemporary spiritualities and the widespread neoliberal ethos that continues to characterize the current social, political, and economic order of Westernized societies. In this concluding section, we expand on the usefulness of the *Health-Spirituality-Neoliberalism Nexus* to the study of other social processes, discourses, and practices beyond modern postural yoga, especially in relation to some of the privileged objects of analysis of the sociology of health, of the body, and of religion and reflect on the exclusionary mechanisms and emancipatory potentials of this *Nexus*.

First, we contend that the conceptual device of the *Health-Spirituality-Neoliberalism Nexus* could be employed to further study how specific conceptions of health, embodiment, and spirituality are informed by a neoliberal ethos, to the point that similar subjectivation processes – invariably guided by a neoliberal ideology – are transversally at work across these social domains and define their privileged model of subjectivity. Although previous research has already emphasized the influence of biopolitical injunctions in cultivating one’s own health (e.g., Nettleton 1997; Rose 1996), the sociology of health has substantially neglected how this might intersect with different forms of spirituality, such as yoga. On the contrary, we contend that to fully comprehend contemporary understandings of selfhood, embodiment, and self-transformation, among other important declinations of subjective experiences of health, it is not sufficient to account for the localized discursive framing of these pivotal dimensions of human life in a single social domain – being it the medical/therapeutic, the spiritual/religious, or the political/economic field – but it is necessary to explore the interconnections among different areas of the social field. To ignore this important point is to neglect the porosity of our organizational structures, the fluidity of social practices, and postulate an autonomy and a self-referentiality that these social domains do not display in practice.

Second, the *Nexus* could be used to conduct more in-depth explorations of the organizational structures of health-care, spirituality, and workplaces, such as to critically inquire into the integration of spirituality into health-care settings or companies, or conversely explore how a managerial logic is progressively pervading also the therapeutic and the spiritual discourse. This line of research could explore, for instance, how alternative conceptions of health are mobilized to strengthen – or even challenge – the neoliberal imperatives of self-care, self-control, and self-responsibility within health-care settings, spiritual groups, and companies, or whether these alternative conceptions of health intersect with – or are informed by – the proliferation of alternative spiritualities. Other studies could zoom into what type(s) of alternative conceptions of subjectivity do specific health and spiritual practices promote, something that remained largely on the background of our analyses.

Third, we urge future studies to explore how the *Nexus* is socially reproduced and transmitted by its legitimate cultural intermediaries both within and beyond the boundaries of the *Nexus* itself, with a particular attention to how it contributes to the pre-conscious embodiment and incorporation of specific habitus. This type of analyses may also allow future research – at a dispositional level – into the ways in which neoliberal ideals are transmitted or challenged and adopted or adapted within and across different social fields, that is, discussing the lines of continuity and the ruptures between neoliberalism and the types of habitus that are fostered in different social domains.

This last point brings us to a mention of the exclusionary and emancipatory potentials of the *Health-Spirituality-Neoliberalism Nexus*, that, we claim, are first and foremost dependent on social actors’ ability to exploit the logic of self-actualization inherent in its social organization, or on the contrary, be swallowed by its normative apparatus. Here, social actors’ capitals (e.g., physical, social, economic, cultural, and symbolic) are the primary stakes that allow them to either thrive within the *Nexus* or succumb to its self-focused practical-discursive logics. This signifies that the *Nexus* is – and will be – as emancipatory and inclusive or as exclusionary and symbolically violent as the broader socio-cultural climate in which it is situated and develops. Currently, as McGuigan (2014: 224) correctly underlines, “[a]lthough neoliberalism is first and foremost a doctrine of political economy, it is also, rather more diffusely, a principle of civilization that shapes the socio-cultural makeup of people through socialization in the broadest sense”. As a consequence, the *Health-Spirituality-Neoliberalism Nexus* is fully embedded within neoliberalism as a contemporary “principle of civilization” and as such, it is bound to reproduce the exclusionary mechanisms and emancipatory potentials of the broader social order within which it is inscribed. Here, as Linda Woodhead argues in relation to subjectivation (2008: 149):

Whilst it may have hegemonic status, the entitled, reflexive, self of late modernity is nevertheless a fragile project which is inflected by gender, class and ethnicity, and which can only ever be partially inhabited. It requires particular social and material conditions for its realization – or even approximation.

As a consequence, as much as neoliberalism – even in its hegemony – is always also partial and subjected to possible ruptures and transformations, subjectivation processes – whether aligned or challenging neoliberal ideals and discursive apparatus – are nonetheless determined by material conditions such as class, gender, and ethnicity and social actors’ amount and type of capitals. As Woodhead (2008: 150) continues, in fact, “[f]or many non-white women the project [of subjectivation] may be elusive due to some combination of factors including economic deprivation, lack of connection to ‘white’ social networks, racial discrimination, and religious and cultural factors favoring masculine domination.” In this context, the practice of yoga as a form of self-transformative serious leisure appears to be an example of what Marion Goldman (2012: 2) calls “spiritual privilege”, namely “an individual’s ability to devote time and resources to select, combine, and revise his or her personal religious [and spiritual] beliefs and practices over the course of a lifetime” in the attempt to make sense of life’s challenges and gain a sense of control over one’s own life. Similarly, Cassandre Campeau-Bouthillier (2021) remarks how practicing yoga is, today, a “symbol of embodied affluence”. We then conclude arguing thatno matter the inclusive rhetoric of the contemporary yoga industry and the good faith of most of its practitioners, the exclusionary mechanisms of yoga – and of the *Nexus* more broadly – remain closely tight to class, gender, and ethnicity, that is, to social stratification, capitals’ availability, and ‘white’ social actors’ taste for – and appropriation of – the exotic appeal of self-transformative Asian practices.

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1. Two notable exceptions are Jain’s (2020: 18) theorization of “neoliberal spirituality”, that is, those spiritualities such as mainstream forms of yoga where “the dynamics of neoliberal capitalism”, “the goal of material success” and “the quest for spiritual liberation” are deeply interconnected; and Lucia’s (2020) “white utopias”, a concept introduced to theorize about the manners in which yoga, among other exotic cultural and religious resources, is romanticized, re-appropriate and mobilized as a central tool to the temporary construction of the social and ideological fabric of transnational transformative festivals, where it is used as a tool for spiritual growth and to cultivate human connections by their largely white participants. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Wacquant (2004) introduces this expression in order to clarify the homologies between the practical-moral universe of the boxing gym and that of the ghetto. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. As correctly argued by Löwy (2004: 93) “Weber uses it [elective affinities] only three times in The Protestant Ethic, but it appears also in several of his other writings, mainly concerning sociology of religion. Weber does not define it, but one could propose the following definition, based on the Weberian use of the notion: elective affinity is a process through which two cultural forms – religious, intellectual, political or economical – who have certain analogies, intimate kinships or meaning affinities, enter in a relationship of reciprocal attraction and influence, mutual selection, active convergence and mutual reinforcement.” Similarly, Bourdieu (1984: 141-144) rehabilitates Weber’s notion of “elective affinities, arguing that “the seemingly most immediate ‘elective affinities’ are always partly based on the unconscious deciphering of expressive features, each of which only takes on its meaning and value within the system of its class variations (one only has to think of the ways of laughing or smiling noted by ordinary language).” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The idea of the *Nexus* partially overlaps with and rests on Pedrini’s, Brown’s and Aimini’s (2020) concept of “hybrid field”, coined to discuss – starting from a micropolitical exploration of the coaching environment – how “boxe popolare”’s (a style of boxing codified by Italian leftist grassroots groups) (Pedrini 2018, 2020) coaches negotiate the boundaries of the field relying on the practical-discursive logics of different fields, such as the sporting and the political fields. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. According to Blumer (1954) sensitizing concepts, contrary to “definitive concepts”, are those sociological tools that eschew prompt operationalization but nonetheless point the sociologist towards the exploration, description, and understanding of the distinctive features of specific instances of our social world. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. As Foucault (1997: 300) clarifies in an interview first published in *Concordia: Revista internacional de filosophia* 6 (July-December 1984),“I am saying that “governmentality” implies the relationship of the self to itself, and I intend this concept of “governmentality” to cover the whole range of practices that constitute, define, organize, and instrumentalize the strategies that individuals in their freedom can use in dealing with each other. Those who try to control, determine, and limit the freedom of others are themselves free individuals who have at their disposal certain instruments they can use to govern others. Thus, the basis for all this is freedom, the relationship of the self to itself and the relationship to the other”. For a similar position see also ‘*The Government of Self and Others*’ ([2008] 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Nevertheless, as correctly emphasized by Shaw and Kaytaz (2021: 286, emphasis in original), “…despite thousands of articles seeking to validate yoga scientifically, there is no conclusive evidence that yoga is *necessarily* safe and beneficial to health…Rather, the modern construction of yoga as a system for health and wellbeing, along with attempts to demonstrate its efficacy in terms of medical science, supports a widespread *belief* that yoga is good for you, bodily, emotionally, and morally or spiritually”. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <https://unric.org/en/international-day-of-yoga-yogas-growing-importance-to-post-covid-19-wellbeing> (accessed August 24, 2020); <https://www.who.int/india/events/international-yoga-day-2020> (accessed August 25, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <https://unric.org/en/international-day-of-yoga-yogas-growing-importance-to-post-covid-19-wellbeing> (accessed August 24, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <https://www.yogajournal.com/about-us/> (accessed October 9, 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. <https://www.yogajournal.com/yoga-101/strength-your-immune-system-with-yoga> (accessed August 24, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. All the interviews have been conducted between November 2017 and February 2020 in Milan, Italy (nine) and Riverside, California (three). On average these practitioners are highly educated, with ten out of twelve holding a university degree (either a bachelor or a master). A further common trait of this sample is their current – or previous – employment in the “immaterial knowledge work sector” (Schnäbele 2013: 140) with three practitioners holding managerial positions in multinational, corporate businesses; three being holistic practitioners such as massage therapists; five teaching yoga alongside other physical activities such as fitness and pilates; and one being a fashion designer. At the moment of the interview, five practitioners out twelve were employed or self-employed as full-time yoga teachers while five taught yoga as a second job and the remaining two were not actively teaching. Two were also studio owners. All the participants interviewed – except one with Asian descents – are Caucasian women aged between twenty-eight and fifty-six years old with various degree of experience with the practice, ranging from a minimum of two years to over thirty years. Overall, the practitioners’ sociodemographic constitution just discussed – although with notable exceptions – substantially adheres to the ideal-typical modern yogi profile already mapped by other studies (e.g., Lewis 2008; Markula 2014; Newcombe 2019; Strauss 2005) as being inherently composed by middle-class, middle-age, white women. All the names used in the paper are pseudonyms. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For an overview of yoga’s ambivalent deployment within the carceral system see Godrej (2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For a more nuanced discussion of Modi’s political usage of yoga see Mazumdar (2018), McCartney (2018, 2019), and Jain (2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. According to a recent estimate 72% of yoga practitioners and teachers globally are women (Zuckerman 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. For similar analyses from a feminist perspective see Mangiarotti (2019, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. For other studies that employ a similar approach see Lea (2009), Godrej (2017), and Smith and Atencio (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)