

Mind-Body Transformations: Appearance and Yoga in the Hot Room

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Bikram's hot yoga is a moving meditation—that is, a copyrighted series of 26 yoga postures and two breathing exercises performed over 90 minutes in a “hot room” (40% humidity, 40 degrees Celsius). Yoga postures are called *asanas*, breath control is called *pranayama*, and yoga practitioners are called yogis. In Bikram studios, yogis practice in front of full-length mirrors, and the instructor meticulously describes execution of *asanas* through verbiage rather than demonstration. In other yoga practices, the yogi softly focuses on a non-descript point in front of them, called a *drishti*. In Bikram yoga, the focal point is the yogi's own body, which they are expected to watch without blinking their eyes, for much of the 90-minute practice.

This is an exploratory, qualitative ethnographic research project investigating the impact of a particular form of *hatha* (physical) yoga practice on bodily perception. The body is an important site of cultural production, and as such is a critical location where struggles and conflicts manifest (Davis 1992; Kaiser 2012). Yoga attempts to resolve bodily struggles by redressing the Cartesian disconnect between the mind and the body. This research asks: how does the “hot room” environment and repetitive series of postures affect the way people think about, experience, and relate to their bodies outside of the yoga studio? While there are many forms of *hatha* yoga, Bikram's yoga was selected for this research study for a number of reasons: first, the series is regulated (26 postures and 2 breathing exercises in 90 minutes), thus creating a control; second, the series is practiced in front of full-length mirrors and in bright lighting so that the practitioner must be faced with their image; third, a growing body of research studies suggest many physical and neurological health benefits of the Bikram practice (Hart & Tracy 2012; Tracy and Hart 2013). In order to find a large group of regular yoga practitioners, the researcher traveled to conduct ethnographic research at the nine-week-long Bikram teacher training in Los Angeles, California. The teacher training is where knowledge about the series is imparted on future teachers. Trainees attend two 90-minute yoga classes each day, followed by lectures and posture clinics where they learn fundamentals of the *asanas* and *pranayama*.

Methods and Research Participants

This research uses a mixed-methodological approach, combining ethnographic (participant observation) and autoethnographic (journaling and self-reflection) methods with demographic and open-ended questionnaires. The ethnography was conducted over a 9-week period, at the Bikram's Yoga College of India teacher training, April 15 – June 16 2013 in Los Angeles, California. Of the 390 teacher trainees in attendance, thirty-five women between the ages of 22 – 45 (average age of 32.8) provided informed consent to participate in the study (research was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board). Study participants were from many parts of the world, predominantly North America (22), but also Europe (6), South America (2), Asia (2), Australia (2) and the Middle East (1). On average, the women had

practiced hot yoga regularly for 3.75 years. The researcher lived on-site for 9-weeks, participated in the training, and kept in touch with participants afterwards.

Findings

After the 9-week intensive training, many research participants explained that they felt a newfound comfort with, and love for, their bodies. For example, a 31-year-old Canadian woman explained, “Being forced to look at yourself in the great big mirror every day forces you to see yourself just how you are today, and you learn to fall in love with yourself and accept your body how it is.” Acceptance of their bodies, even aspects considered faults, was a theme throughout interviews and open-ended questionnaires. For example: “I’m more accepting of my physical faults. They don’t bother me as much. I like myself a lot more too” (45-year-old Australian woman); “I am gradually learning to like and even love myself. I have never been a fan of my body, but this practice has given me a new appreciation for its beauty” (29-year-old American woman); “Even after running marathons and doing Bikram very regularly, I still don’t have a ‘flat stomach’ but am now resigned to the fact. I face myself in the mirror every day and like myself and my tummy” (43-year-old Irish woman). Study participants often mentioned the role of the mirror in the yoga room as aiding their perceptual transformation. The yoga studio is a kind of “transformational space” (Green & Kaiser 2011) that affects how people feel in their bodies. Transformation was often discussed in terms of body surface—that is, the skin (e.g., “It feels like I’ve shed my (old) skin!” “I finally feel comfortable in my own skin.”).

The research suggests that the yoga studio is also a transformational space that affects dress and clothing choices. When women were asked if regular Bikram yoga practice changed how they dressed outside of the yoga room, most (33 of 35 respondents) believed that to some degree, their clothing preferences changed. This shift in dress was often discussed as a byproduct of greater bodily acceptance. For example, a 43-year-old Hispanic woman from New York explained: “When I first started yoga I always wore long pants because I was self-conscious about my thighs being fat and the cellulite. Now I’m no longer as self-conscious about the areas of my body where I still need to lose weight. So much so that now I’m wearing smaller outfits.” Regular Bikram yoga practice transformed how women felt in their bodies and dressed outside of the “hot room.”

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