

Yoga practices as identity capital

Preliminary notes from Turku, Finland

As elsewhere in Finland, different types of yoga practices are popular in the city of Åbo/Turku. But how do practitioners view their own relationship to their practice, and further, what do they feel that they as individuals gain from it? Through in-depth interviews with yoga teachers in the city of Turku and using the theoretical framework of social psychologists James E. Côte's and Charles G. Levine's (2002) concept of *identity capital*, I wish to examine ways in which individuals, in what could be called a post-secular society, construct a meaningful sense of self and of individual agency. The observations offered in this article represent preliminary notes for a larger work on yoga in Turku, conducted at the 'Post-Secular Culture and a Changing Religious Landscape' research project at Åbo Akademi University, devoted to qualitative and ethnographic investigations of the changing religious landscape in Finland.

But before I go on to my theory and material, let me just briefly state something about yoga in Finland in general and in the town of Turku in particular. Turku may not be the political capital of Finland any longer, but is by far the oldest city in the country, with roots going back to the thirteenth century. However, as a site of yoga practice, Turku has a far shorter history than this.

As in many other Western countries, the first people in Finland who talked about yoga as a beneficial practice Westerners might take up rather than just laugh at as some weird oriental custom were the theosophists. The first theosophical lodge (Aura) in Turku was founded in November 1907 (Ahlbäck 1995: 144), but even though theosophical authors did deal with yoga at some length in their publications, their yoga was very different from what people generally see as yoga today. As Swami Vivekananda (see De Michelis 2004), H. P. Blavatsky and others were very critical of the physical practices of what they called 'Hatha Yoga', understanding the so-called Raja Yoga of Patañjali was the 'real' or 'uncorrupted' yoga. For them, yoga meant an internal, meditative practice.

It took many more decades before what Elisabeth De Michelis (2004) has called *modern postural yoga* arrived in Turku. A local branch of the Yoga

Federation of Finland was founded in 1969, and courses soon started attracting large numbers of students. The Yoga Federation of Finland held a virtual monopoly on postural yoga in Turku until the advent of several commercial yoga studios in the early 1990s, much as in other localities in Finland.

As in some other Eastern European countries, Finland's yoga scene today is bifurcated between an older and a newer style of practice. What could be called the old style is represented by the Yoga Federation of Finland, founded in 1967. Characteristic for the so-called Hatha Yoga taught by this group is that it has been explicitly severed from its Hindu roots to create a type of completely secular yoga 'uniquely suited to Finnish people'. Unlike in some other countries, this development was not a response to state or political pressure, but rather a response to criticism of yoga from circles within the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and a result of the personalities of the early leaders of the Federation. Within the Yoga Federation of Finland, yoga is typically taught by volunteers in adult education facilities. Somewhat like the British Wheel of Yoga (see Newcombe 2005) the Yoga Federation of Finland does not follow any particular Indian guru (though a rather loose link with Tirumalai Krishnamacharya is often emphasised today, see e.g., Tavi 2011), and the style of yoga taught is very gentle and soft so as to suit anyone, regardless of age or physical condition. Perhaps as a result of the rising median age of its teachers, the gentleness of the Yoga Federation's style of practice has increased in recent years. Since the Yoga Federation calls its own brand of yoga 'Hatha-yoga', that term, internationally generally applied to postural yoga in general, is, for practitioners in Finland, synonymous with soft, gentle yoga.

Scholars have noted the importance of the Federation's decades of work for the popularisation of yoga in Finland (Ketola 2008: 275). Its extensive and very dedicated network of people teaching yoga in their spare time means that yoga classes are available all over the country and cost very little. At the Turku Adult Education Centre, you can get 50 hours of yoga for 50 Euros.

The newer style of yoga is represented by the commercial, internationally practised brands of yoga that started arriving in earnest in Finland in the 1990s. Unlike for example Great Britain and the United States, the Iyengar school of yoga (see e.g., De Michelis 2004) is not very influential here. Rather, the dominant position is held by K. Pattabhi Jois's Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga method, but most international styles of yoga can be found in Finland today. These schools are urban, often celebrate their Indian roots, cater mainly to young people, and are set up along commercial lines. This yoga is clearly a transnational cultural product (Strauss 2005: 9).

These two styles of yoga may well be viewed as forming two discrete worlds. However, preliminary findings indicate that many who practise one of the new brands of yoga had started out with the Yoga Federation. Considering the popularity and easy availability of these classes, this is not surprising, though it is noteworthy that there is not as much traffic in the other direction. Both sides have less than flattering views of each other: the urban youth calls the yoga of the Yoga Federation 'woollen socks-yoga' or 'grandmother yoga', while the Yoga Federation practitioners scoff at the soulless gymnastics of the young.

The Yoga Federation teaches almost twenty groups in Turku every week. In addition to this, Turku today has seven professional yoga studios, which for a Finnish city of 177,000 inhabitants is a fair number, in fact the second largest in the country. As is typical for Finland, two of these (of which one is by far the largest of all the commercial schools) are focused on the Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga method of K. Pattabhi Jois (1915–2009).

Now, this is, as mentioned, a work in progress. I have so far interviewed most of the yoga teachers at the above-mentioned schools. I will, as I progress with this work also collect some quantitative information. However, at present, I am interested in what a professional commitment to postural yoga—or perhaps I should say semi-professional, since I have as of yet met nobody in Turku who lives solely on teaching yoga—means in terms of identity formation.

It has often been argued that both social and personal identities are becoming increasingly transitory and unstable in the present late modern society (e.g. Giddens 1991, Côté & Levine 2002, Taylor & Spencer 2004). This is, of course, connected with the ever-increasing plethora of choices the individual is faced with, but also with de-traditionalisation and secularisation, and an oft-perceived lack of institutionalised stages of adolescence and adulthood (Hunt 2007), a lack perhaps somewhat romantically or nostalgically contrasted with a contrasting situation in pre-modern societies. Does the post-secular perspective have anything to add to the scholarly debate on identity?

Identity has been discussed in widely differing ways and from the viewpoint of several academic disciplines. In this paper, I view identity as a continual process, rather than as something one attains (or fails to attain) and then tries to maintain, following for example Anthony Giddens (1991, 1994) and Albert Bandura (2002). Because of institutional destructuring in habits and customs and also because of a corresponding continual institutional restructuring and differentiation, it makes sense to view identity as a reflexive and, also, contextually varying project for one's whole lifespan. As argued by

Dan P. McAdams (1993, 1997), this identity formation process creates a story or narrative that explains or gives meaning to past actions. For an individual related to a reference group and embedded in a social structure, creating a personal narrative of his or her life creates coherence and makes it meaningful in a certain context. Such a creation of ‘personal myths’, as McAdams calls them, is an elementary part of identity formation by which individuals negotiate with themselves who they are and what is significant in their lives—as well as create possible paths for the future.

Sarah Strauss (2005: 57–9) argues that the practice of yoga is a quest for wellness—a combination of well-being and fitness—in order to reach an authentic Self, healthy in every sense of the word. Unlike the early modern Romantic self-development quest (*Bildungen*), she writes, such a quest is not for a youth to develop into a fully formed adult member of society, but rather a continual sense of self-making, with no end in sight. Through a careful, ongoing management of various aspects of quotidian life, the individual practitioner attains an authentic Self, that is, a Self in complete balance.

This goes well with my material, where this kind of an ongoing quest for balance comes up often (e.g., IF mgt 2011-046). While sometimes devoting up to six or seven hours a day to teaching and practising yoga, the teachers I have spoken to find time for many other interests as well, from golf to playing in bands. None seems interested in any kind of yoga purism. I have found no indications of a fear of non-yogic interests being counterproductive either to the practice of yoga or to the image of a yoga teacher—rather, excessive purism is frowned upon and the theme of balance is often raised. However, non-yogic practices are often interpreted in relation to yoga. I quote:

Many books on golf mention yoga as a good thing to practice. There is so much in common between yoga and golf, such as the importance of posture, balance, breathing and flexibility of body. And even a kind of spiritual mindset—the further you go in golf, the more even small mental movements will affect your swing. So I believe that yoga would be very useful for all golfers. (IF mgt 2011-025.)

Now, how is this identity constructed and how can we analyse it within the conditions of the post-secular situation? Jürgen Habermas (according to Côte & Levine 2002: 49) views identity as being embedded in social experience, symbolic communication, and as a reflection of institutional processes. Yet it can potentially be under the agentic control of the individual, that is, if communicative and broader social conditions allow. This correlates with Albert

Bandura (2000: 78), who argues that, '[p]eople's success in shaping their social and economic lives lies partly in a shared sense of efficacy to bring their collective influence to bear on matters over which they can have some command.' The sense of collective agency can thus be seen as a guideline for social identity.

The social psychologists James E. Côté and Charles G. Levine (2002: 143–4) have suggested the term *identity capital* to describe the resources at an individual's disposal that contribute to what they call an internal point of reference. The acquisition of this identity capital is the product of an agentic personality, and it consists of either tangible (socially visible), or intangible effects (socially invisible qualities such as ego strengths, internal locus of control, self-esteem and a sense of purpose in life). Côté and Levine also point out the importance of analysing how skilful people are in constructing and completing strategies of actions that achieve certain ends (or identities) for them, that is to say, how they create their agency in different circumstances (Côté & Levine 2002: 123). The idea of an active change or transformation is integral in defining human agency, irrespective of which aspects of it are emphasised.

All of my interviewees viewed the study of what they call 'the philosophy of yoga' to be important to their ongoing yogic transformation. What this philosophy comprises of was very variously defined. Everyone dutifully reported having read or at least tried to read Patañjali's classic Sanskrit yoga text, the *Yoga Sutra*. More important were, however, modern texts, such as those of Ken Wilber (IF mgt 2010-033), Eckhart Tolle or Jon Kabat-Zinn (IF mgt 2011-025). But much more central than such study, which in several cases seemed to be more or less incidental, was the bodily practice itself. Sarah Strauss (2005: 10) articulates a viewpoint held by many of my informants when she calls yoga a form of embodied knowledge, which no amount of reading can impart. It is no coincidence that the most common question when two yogis meet, rather than 'How do you do?', is 'How has your practice been?' The practice, then, is much more than a means to some specific end: it is important identity capital in itself.

While the corporeal, quotidian nature of this practice is evident in the interviews—many speak of injuries, becoming bored or uninspired at times (e.g., IF mgt 2011-025), it is sacred at the same time, in the sense of transcending ordinary life, or as being of non-negotiable value (Anttonen 2000). My informants deemed this postural practice as increasing strength of body and mind (IF mgt 2011-024), giving new perspectives on life (IF mgt 2011-025), a sense of unity with all of creation (IF mgt 2010-033), as well as flexibility in dealing with all kinds of people (IF mgt 2011-046).

Another important theme is freedom. One informant felt that yoga gave her freedom from competitiveness, though not completely. I quote:

I felt that within dance there was just so much competitiveness, it was so hard and visible. Everybody was always speaking about who is better or worse than someone else, who is more interesting or more artistic? I thought that I would lose this competitiveness completely in yoga, and in the beginning it really was like that. But now there are more schools, and while there is no direct competition between them, everyone has their own style, and to me it is a pity that there is no cooperation. Everyone just does their own thing. Perhaps they don't even know what the others are doing. They are not even interested. Whenever a new school opens, I like to visit it and see what the place looks like, who the teachers are, what kind of students they have and all. But nobody ever visits me. (IF mgt 2011-024.)

A different kind of freedom is illustrated in the following quote:

By-and-by the practice makes you feel lighter, and you kind of identify yourself less with the physical body. That is one experience I have had. After practice, you kind of feel that you are very much free at that time, that you are not bound by your body or anything. You are completely liberated and you can sense that kind of energy around yourself. (IF mgt 2011-025.)

All of this represents Côté's and Levine's intangible identity capital, with the exception of strength and flexibility, which may also be understood to represent tangible identity capital in the creation of the image of a successful yoga teacher. In my interviews, success is also often implicitly linked with money, a constantly recurring theme. Some view taking money for teaching something as 'spiritual' as yoga as disagreeable, while others feel that unless they charge high enough prices, people will not appreciate what they offer, and neither would they be showing themselves that they appreciate their own work. At least so far, there are no clear correlations between the view on money and professional status, age or type of yoga taught. But regardless of opinion, everyone is aware of the prices that competing schools charge and everyone has thought about this question. While yoga today, as many scholars have pointed out, functions along the standard principles of a consumer society, there thus seems to be some uneasiness about this among yoga teachers.

Now, is there anything that could be called post-secular within the practices that I am studying?

Many secularisation theories have been heavily bound up with the idea of a privatisation of religion (see Weber 1930 for the classic thesis). This privatisation of religion correlates well with what could be called the privatisation of identity. According to the sociologists Harold J. Babbitt and Charles E. Burbach (1990), the Twenty Statements Test (TST) developed by the sociologists of the Iowa School in the 1950s and often used in studies since then, shows that among North American college students personal identity (defined in terms of styles of self-presentation) seems to be increasing in importance, and social identities (understood as socially recognised roles) appear to be increasingly less important. Some 80–90 per cent of college students in the 1990s appear to favour personal identities, compared to about 30 per cent in the 1950s.

However, many scholars subscribing to the notion of a post-secular society have critiqued the idea of a privatisation of religion and found evidence to the contrary. Instead of discussing the decline of religion and the loss of its meaning in a society, there is a move towards resacralisation or revitalisation of religion, or a re-enchantment (e.g. Habermas 2006, Taylor 2007, Partridge 2005, Besecke 2007). It may be that the turn from social identities to personal identities will likewise have to come under scrutiny, especially considering the blurring of the boundaries between the social and the personal (or public and private) that the new media has brought with it. The same goes for the distinction between religious/spiritual and secular identities. The issue of religious/spiritual identity is very sensitive to context and thus, also, to research methods. It is possible to profess a religious/spiritual identity in one context and deny or compromise it in another.

Rather than such strict categories, it may be more germane to see identity as a 'variable indexicality', to use Gavin Flood's (2006) apposite phrase, meaning that the content of the 'I' is filled out in different ways in different contexts. By this I do not intend to subscribe to what has often been called a 'post-modern' understanding of identity (Côté & Levine 2002: 40–4), where there is no stable content, but I rather wish to emphasise a general fluidity and elasticity of identity around some internal points of reference.

While primarily identifying themselves as yoga practitioners, my interviewees are comfortable with using many other identities as well. They seem to have little zeal for proselytising yoga among their non-yogic friends, though one person said that the physical shape of some of her friends sometimes tempts her to do so (IF mgt 2010-024). Yoga practitioners make up the ma-

jority of the social network outside of work for only one of my interviewees, and even he claimed that to be coincidental. None reported their interest and profession having been criticised or questioned by friends or relatives, showing the degree of public acceptance of yoga in today's Finland.

Also, sometimes contemporary religious or spiritual well-being practices are regarded as providing mere resources to be used by the individual seeker and agent, understood as the main or even sole authority over his or her own spiritual life (e.g. Heelas & Woodhead 2005). However, the question may not be quite as simple as this. Matthew Wood (2008) argues on the basis of his ethnographical researches within various New Age settings that individual seekers may instead have many authorities, and that together this plurality of authorities undermines one single and determining religious authority. Thus the contemporary field of religiosities/spiritualities and well-being practices, does not necessarily imply a categorical change from outer to inner authority. Rather, it indicates that the whole question of authority becomes increasingly complex. Therefore, one characteristic of post-secular culture would be that this set of multiple authorities may consist of very different yet somehow interacting sources: traditionally understood as religious sources as well as scientific texts, personal inner voices, and so on.

This is well borne out in my material. While some of my informants do speak of themselves being their most important teachers (IF mgt 2011-024), others refer to named authorities without hesitation (IF mgt 2010-033). And importantly, even the ones who have no teachers feel they would like to have one. I quote:

- Who would you say is your most important teacher right now?
- Hmm, I would have to reply myself, really. I have always felt like that. Or maybe I have missed a little having someone to turn to if I had any questions. And I have looked for such a person, but I haven't found my guru or important person yet. I feel like there is nobody here in Turku, or, well, everyone has something to give, but I haven't found anyone here in Turku, and that's a pity. . . .I guess that is why I have actively tried to participate in courses all over the world. And being an air stewardess comes in handy here—when we fly somewhere far away and everyone else goes out shopping, I go for yoga! (IF mgt 2011-024.)

Further, while not formally belonging to any particular school of yoga, this person claims to teach the Ashtanga Vinyasa method in its 'pure form', and mentioned the writings of both national and international teachers of this

school as important guidebooks for her teaching. On the other hand, the leader of the local Ashtanga Yoga school, mentioned the famous Indian female guru Mata Amritanandamayi as his most important source of spiritual inspiration and called himself an 'Ashtanga heretic' (IF mgt 2010-033). Much remains to be done here, but it is obvious that the question of authority is a complex one.

To sum up. While much work remains to be done, preliminary findings indicate that while yoga teachers in Turku, Finland view the study of both classic and modern texts of yoga as important in the creation of their own yogic identity, it is in their own sacred but very down-to-earth physical practice that their personal agency finds its main locus, and through which they create both tangible and intangible identity capital. An ongoing progress towards all-round wellness, defined as strength, mental and physical flexibility as well as freedom from various constraints seems to be at the centre of this identity capital, but a balanced, successful life comprising various social relationships is important as well. The yogic identity may be understood as my informants' internal point of reference, but it does not rule out various other identities, fluidly entered into in appropriate contexts.

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