

Yoga in Penitentiary Settings: Transcendence, Spirituality, and Self-Improvement

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Abstract Yoga, together with other so-called holistic spiritual practices such as reiki or meditation, is one of the most popular spiritual disciplines in our contemporary society. The success of yoga crosses the boundaries between health, sport, religion, and popular culture. However, from a sociological point of view, this is a largely under-researched field. Aiming to fill this gap, this article analyzes the impact, meaning, and implications of the practice of yoga by taking prisons as the institutional context of the study. The growth of yoga in penitentiary settings is a recent trend in many countries and raises new questions concerning its potential to foster well-being and self-transformation. The research presented here applies Schutz’s concepts of “finite province of meaning” and “stock of knowledge” to understand yoga’s role in inmates’ lives. The main argument of the article is that yoga is a body technique that affords inmates the possibility to enter into a “finite province of meaning” and transcend their everyday prison lives. However, the impact of yoga upon inmates’ lives is not limited just to its physical effects as learning yoga also involves the acquisition of a “spiritual stock of knowledge” made up of Eastern philosophy, holistic concepts, and self-help therapeutic narratives. Indeed, physical movements and spiritual accounts constitute one another in the practice of yoga, thus opening up a pathway into a different reality; movement and spiritual discourse inform one another—and it is precisely in this reflexivity that “transcendent experiences” are created and yoga is made meaningful and important in the improvement-setting of the prison. This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork developed carried out in two different penitentiary institutions.

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Introduction

Religious affiliations, practices, and beliefs have dramatically changed over recent decades in Europe. Historical churches have been displaced as principal providers of spiritual experiences of transcendence and, in Luckmann's terms, they "no longer represent the socially dominant form of religion" (1990: 135). In contemporary societies, new sources of the sacred are emerging and being disseminated through popular media and consumer culture. The religious expressions that are on the rise "lay great stress on the subjective experience of transcendence" (Knoblauch 2008: 148) and are often disconnected from many of the older institutional frameworks. In this context, the sensory and bodily dimensions of experiences of transcendence gain increasing relevance for individuals and become important loci of new spiritual forms and existential meaning-making processes.

Yoga, together with other so-called holistic spiritual practices such as reiki or meditation, is one of the most popular spiritual disciplines in our contemporary society. There is no clear estimate of the real magnitude of the so-called "yoga boom" but there are strong indicators of its increasing expansion worldwide (Singleton and Byrne 2008). Yoga has become one of the most legitimate practices of the holistic universe and it is considered to be at the forefront of the spread of alternative activities and therapies in Western societies (Fischer-White and Gill Taylor 2013). Currently the teaching of yoga is also increasingly being included in schools, hospitals, or prisons among other public institutions. The success of yoga crosses the boundaries between health, sport, religion, and popular culture and can not be explained without taking into account its multi-faceted nature. However, from a sociological point of view, this is a largely under-researched field and has not been the subject of the degree of discussion that its social relevance would demand (Smith 2007).

With a view to filling this gap, this article analyses the impact, meaning, and implications of the practice of yoga by taking prisons as the institutional context of the study. The growth of yoga in penitentiary settings is a recent trend in many countries (Rucker 2005; Rabi Blondel 2012; Bilderbeck et al. 2013) and raises new questions concerning the potential of yoga for fostering well-being and self-transformation. The study presented here applies Alfred Schutz's concepts of "finite province of meaning" and "stock of knowledge" for the understanding of the role of yoga in inmates' lives.

The article is based on ethnographic research developed in two penitentiary institutions. The focus on prisons is not an arbitrary decision. Prisons are privileged sites for observing and examining the reconfiguration of the spiritual and religious landscape since their special features as "total institutions" (Goffman 1961) embody a more explicit and visible crystallization of the changes (Beckford and Gilliat-Ray 1998). As Irene Becci argues, "in prison, individuals are confronted

with existential questions in a particularly intensive way. The conditions of detention and everyday struggles for freedom in relation to space, time and body create a situation in which religion gains particular meaning” (2012: 2). Therefore, the analysis of inmates’ yoga practices in prison can be used as a magnifying glass to better understand the emergence of new forms of transcendence in contemporary society.

The main argument of the article is that yoga is a body technique that offers inmates the possibility to enter into a “finite province of meaning” and transcend their everyday prison lives. However, the impact of yoga upon inmates’ lives is not limited to its physical effects since the learning of yoga comes together with the acquisition of a spiritual stock of knowledge made up of Eastern philosophy, holistic concepts and self-help therapeutic narratives that works as a repentance/self-improvement framework. Therefore, the article also states that the popularity of yoga among inmates is due to its dual and circular character: while the physical performance of yoga enables inmates to experience transcendence, the familiarization with a “spiritual stock of knowledge” through teachers’ comments, conversations with co-participants and the exchange of books helps inmates to make sense of these lived experiences of transcendence by placing them in a meaningful and meaning-making narrative. This has an unexpected consequence: thus, inmates dealing with their situation through their engagement with yoga work in unison with the prison politics on the improvement of the criminals.

The article is divided into three main parts. The first part provides the contextual background and methodology used in the study. The second part exposes the theoretical and conceptual perspective adopted in the research. In the third part of the article, the main findings are presented and organized around three subsections: one on the body and the concept of the “finite province of meaning,” the other on the concept of the “spiritual stock of knowledge” and the last one on the role of yoga in fostering processes of personal changes and alternation (Berger and Luckmann 1966). The article ends with the main conclusions.

Making the Case: Yoga and Holistic Spiritualities in Catalan Penitentiary Setting

In Goffman’s words, entering a “total institution” involves a “series of abasements, degradations, humiliations and profanations of the self” (1961: 24). In the penitentiary context, the inmates’ “territories of the self” (Goffman 1971) are constantly violated by the destruction of privacy, the loss of autonomy and the limitation of the processes of expressive differentiation and individualization. However, simultaneously, modern prisons are institutions founded on the rehabilitative ideal. Theoretically regarded, the detention should contribute to the individual’s desistance from crime, and subsequent reintegration into society.¹ In this context, religion is often held to play an important role, both in coping with the pains of imprisonment and in facilitating symbolic and material resources for

¹ In this regard, the Spanish Constitution (art. 25) states that “criminal punishments involving deprivation of freedom should aim towards rehabilitation and social integration”.

fostering self-esteem and providing a meaningful narrative about one's life (Clear and Sumter 2002).

In recent years, and especially in the US, there has been an impressive amount of studies aimed at discussing the role of religion in conditions of detention (Kerley et al. 2005; Clear and Sumter 2002; Johnson 2002). In Europe, the research on religion in prisons has also been on the rise, but it focuses mainly on the policies of accommodating religious diversity in prisons (Beckford and Gilliat-Ray 1998; Becci 2012; Furseth and Kühle 2011; Martínez-Ariño et al. 2015). However, in both the American and European context, research has been mainly limited to analyzing the role of traditional religious organizations. Apart from a few exceptions (Becci and Knobel 2014; Griera and Clot-Garrell 2015b), the increased presence of holistic spiritualities in prisons has been mostly dismissed and ignored. This is not a coincidence, but rather reflects the fact that the growth of holistic spiritualities in penitentiary institutions is a vastly hidden phenomenon that passes unnoticed beyond prison walls.

In my case, the “discovery” of the increasing presence of yoga (and especially kundalini yoga) and other holistic activities in prison was not a result of pure scientific inspiration, but rather an outcome of a previous research project concerning the accommodation of religious diversity in Spanish prisons (and hospitals). This former project made me gradually aware of the fact that almost every penitentiary institution in Catalonia offers yoga courses for inmates along with other spiritual activities such as *reiki* or meditation, to name only the most popular. However, these activities are never framed in religious terms by prison staff and authorities, but justified through a non-religious discourse that, by means of a scientific narrative, describes its effects in terms of physical health and psychological wellness. My growing interest in learning more about the role, impact and conditions of possibility of holistic activities in the penitentiary context dates back to this initial insight and led to the design of a new research project.² After adapting its objectives to fit the bureaucratic requirements, official permission to conduct ethnographic work consisting on of participant observation in yoga lessons and interviews with inmates, prison staff, and yoga volunteers was obtained.³

The research revealed that yoga was first introduced in Catalan prisons in the mid-nineties on the initiative of individuals who offered themselves as volunteers to teach yoga to inmates. The success of these first isolated experiences, together with the emergence of a NGO specifically devoted to the spread of yoga among disadvantaged groups, led to the official recognition of yoga activities in the Catalan penitentiary setting in 2011. That year an agreement was signed between the yoga NGO (*World Prem*) and the Catalan Department of Justice. The agreement officially acknowledged the teaching of yoga in penitentiary institutions and established the basis for the expansion and organization of yoga courses for inmates.

² The research project was designed in collaboration with Anna Clot-Garrell (sociologist) and Marta Puig (criminologist and yoga instructor).

³ The project was structured around three dimensions: (a) the analysis of the impact and meaning of yoga for inmates; (b) the conditions that have enabled the emergence, legitimacy, and dissemination of yoga in prison and its institutional success; (c) and the role of “yoga entrepreneurs” and socially engaged forms of holistic spirituality in contemporary society. Due to space and scope limitation, this article focuses primarily on the first objective (see Griera et al. 2015 for a development of the second dimension).

In most penitentiary institutions the yoga course is a one-and-a-half hour weekly activity taught by volunteers.⁴ Additionally, some prisons also organize intensive yoga courses. The research project was designed as a multiple case study (Yin 2003) that examined three of these intensive courses, two of which were held in a large prison in the outskirts of Barcelona during the summer months of 2013 and 2015. These two courses consisted of a so-called “yoga quarantine,” i.e., a 2–3 h daily lesson for a period of 40 days, including a mixed group of male and female convicted prisoners. The third case consisted of a 2-month intensive course (June–July 2014), in a remand prison, involving 2-h lessons, 3 days per week.

The fieldwork consisted of participant observation in the yoga classes but also involved surveys of all the inmates participating in the courses ($n = 54$), as well as interviews with a selection of inmates, yoga teachers, social educators, and other prison personnel. A total of twenty-five interviews were conducted; these facilitated a better interpretation of the observational findings, but also led to new questions and findings. Throughout the fieldwork I also collected inmates’ writings, paintings, and other documents/artistic artifacts that the inmates themselves offered me. From the beginning I asked for inmates’ consent to be present. Despite the security obstacles and other constraints imposed by the prison context, I managed to be able to move ‘relatively’ freely inside the prison, and to engage in many informal conversations with inmates, staff, and yoga volunteers. However, this does not invalidate the fact that the closed nature of prisons, together with the internal security concerns, has posed specific limitations to the ethnographic practice (Wacquant 2002; Bosworth et al. 2005; Waldram 2009).

The table below summarizes the main profile characteristics of the inmates participating in the three intensive yoga courses (Table 1).

Table 1 Yoga courses participants’ profile

	1st case. Yoga quarantine (2013)	2nd case. Intensive yoga (2014)	3rd case. Yoga quarantine (2015)
Average age of participants	37,8	40,6	36,2
Sex of the participants	11 men/4 women	24 men	11 men/5 women
Place of birth	Europe (3), Latin America (7), Spain (4), US (1)	Spain (13), Latin America (7), Europe (3), Morocco (1).	Spain (4), Morrocco (1) and Latin America (11)
Average time already spent in prison	3 years	10.6 months	2.9 years

⁴ Most of the volunteers are instructors of Kundalini yoga, with an age range from 28 to 48 years and an urban middle-class background. There are similar numbers of men and women, and their motivations for teaching in prison are framed in terms of altruism, apprenticeship, and personal growth. Volunteers are among the principal carriers—in the Weberian sense of *Träger*—of holistic therapies and activities in prison.

Participation in the course is voluntary, but the inmates need to obtain official permission from the institution to enroll. In addition, for space and security reasons, not everybody is accepted. In all three cases there was a waiting list of inmates who wanted to enter the program. Some of them were accepted after the first week, while others were expelled because of ‘bad behavior’. ‘Bad behavior’ is described as not following the class, talking with other inmates, moving out from their own space, or infringing internal rules of the institution.⁵ Social educators are in charge of policing bad behavior, but ‘committed’ participants also tend to ‘denounce’ these disruptive behaviors to yoga teachers or staff arguing that they “break the atmosphere of the class”. It is important to notice that around 80 % of those inmates who have followed and finished an intensive yoga course in prison have already been long-term attendees of the prison’s ‘regular’ weekly yoga class. Therefore, the sample is not ‘neutral’ but configured by those inmates who already have shown a commitment towards the activity of yoga. Additionally, in the words of an educator, “yoga students are not ‘patio guys’ [*referring to those who spend most of their time hanging out in the patio*], they are usually part of the non-problematic inmates who already participate in many other activities”.

We have no data about the criminal records of the inmates participating in the intensive yoga courses.⁶ However, a consideration has to be made in this respect. In the case of the remand center inmates have not yet been sentenced, while in the other prison most of the inmates face long-term sentences. This places the inmates in a different psychological situation, a fact that has consequences in the way they take the yoga class. In the remand center, the success of yoga is very much related to dealing with uncertainty and impatience; in the long-term prison, yoga works more as a survival strategy. In both cases, however, the yoga class becomes what Crewe et al. (2013: 218) have termed an “emotional zone” which “cannot be characterized either as ‘front-stage’ or ‘backstage’ domains” but “enable the display of a wider range of feelings than elsewhere in the prison”. Johnson (1987) characterizes these “emotional zones”—such as the yoga class—as “sanctuaries” that offer “sheltered settings” where the rigid and aggressive emotional regime of the prison can be altered for a while. As will be further developed, the popularity of yoga among prison inmates is closely related with the fact that the yoga class provides a “sanctuary” where a “broader emotional register” is permitted (Crewe et al. 2013: 12). Singing mantras, lying down with the eyes closed, holding hands or even crying are accepted behaviors in the class (but not in the prisons’ public areas).

However, a more structural account of the institutional success of yoga should also be mentioned. The yoga program is supported by the prison’s management team, which facilitates its functioning. This support becomes understandable when considering the following two facts: (a) this is a free activity that emerges at a time

⁵ Internal rules such as not using the class to ‘flirt’ with other inmates—which was especially an issue in mixed-gender classes—or to exchange letters (often ‘love letters’) between inmates living in different units. Several inmates were expelled for these reasons.

⁶ When designing the surveys we had doubts about whether or not to include a question about this. However, due to security, confidentiality, and ethical reasons we decided not to ask. However, we got to know almost everyone’s offense after some weeks of fieldwork since usually inmates themselves or prison personnel disclose it in informal conversations or interviews.

of economic crisis and crowded prisons; (b) it is perceived as an activity in line with the therapeutic dimension of the institution, and as a suitable means of pacifying inmates (Rucker 2005). In other words, yoga is also seen as a form of social control and a power device aimed at lowering tensions and fostering docility within the complex world of the “total institution” (Goffman 1961).

Theoretical Framing: Yoga, Holistic Spirituality, and Embodied Experiences of Transcendence

My analysis of the practice of yoga by inmates is anchored in two theoretical observations. First, I argue that the popularization of yoga in Western societies can be addressed as part of the development of a new religious genre broadly known as “holistic spirituality” (Heelas et al. 2005). The second observation is that the Alfred Schutz notions of “finite province of meaning” and “stock of knowledge” are appropriate to capture the multifaceted nature of the practice of yoga and account for the relationship between the body, the mind, and the social context. Next, I will briefly discuss both observations.

According to Heelas et al. (2005), “holistic spiritualities” are the clearest exponent of the changes in the Western religious field and indeed appear as a new dominant form of religion in contemporary Western societies. The term “holistic spiritualities” refers to a broad range of beliefs and practices that are oriented towards “the attainment of wholeness, health and well-being of body, mind and spirit” (Harris 2013: 531). A burgeoning body of literature describes and examines this phenomenon from the perspective of the sociology of religion (Fedele and Knibbe 2013; Dawson 2011). This literature emphasizes the experiential and emotional dimension of “holistic spiritualities” (Cornejo 2012) along with their affinity with the process of the privatization of religion (Luckmann 1967, 1990). “Holistic spiritualities” are conceived as a characteristically religious form of the late-modern consumer society that has a strong “individualistic emphasis upon the self as the ultimate arbiter of religious authority and the primary agent of spiritual transformation” (Dawson 2011: 310f.). Woodhead argues that the growth of holistic spirituality since the 1960s should be perceived “as the sacralisation of the wider cultural turn” (Woodhead 2007: 116). Likewise, from Luckmann’s perspective, the growth of holistic spiritualities goes hand in hand with the increasing relevance of themes such as “self-realization, personal autonomy and self-expression” (1990: 138) and is based upon diminishing forms of transcendence. The so-called holistic milieu includes a wide range of practices, therapies, and beliefs, including Reiki, yoga, meditation, astrology, channeling, contemporary shamanism, and many others. There are considerable differences between all these practices, activities, and therapies, but there is also a “family air” (Wittgenstein) that allows us to analyze them as belonging to the same meaningful universe.

However, one might object that yoga does not constitute a religion per se or a spiritual practice, nor does its performance automatically imply the experience of transcendence. Thus, my starting point is to take yoga as a *possible* vehicle for experiencing transcendence which, in some circumstances, may—or may not—work as

a gateway to a holistic spiritual imaginary. Therefore, my analysis focuses on the “reception” side of yoga classes instead of the transmission side. The vague and amorphous institutional form of holistic spirituality, along with its attribution of authority to the inner self, also justifies the relevance of focusing on the subjects’ experiences. That is to say, there is a need to focus on the individual understanding, appropriation, disposition, and use of yoga practice in order to avoid its over-interpretation in religious/spiritual terms. In a similar vein, in his research on modern postural yoga, Klas Nevrin argues against simplistic generalizations about the nature and meanings of yoga by making a plea to not restrict the understanding of modern yoga in Western societies to a health-centered individualistic practice. In keeping with this, Nevrin argues for the need to “look more closely at the relatively private reflections involved within these practices, which in turn also requires a more complex view of how the body is involved within these practices, and then also how all this relates to so-called ‘spiritual’ experiences and practices of sacralization” (2007: 3).

The need to capture and elucidate the role of the body and of embodied experiences in constructing social realities in yoga becomes a crucial argument in privileging a socio-phenomenological exploration over other approaches. From this perspective, the body is not just treated as “our vehicle for perceiving and interpreting our world” (McGuire 1990: 284) but also a vehicle for the making of our world. We ‘co-produce’ the world that we inhabit (Berger and Luckmann 1966), and this is not merely an intellectual task. The corporeal dimension of our selves is not detachable from the rest and phenomenological approaches are deeply aware of this (Merleau-Ponty 1962). In this manner:

(...) the reassessment of the body as a philosophical problem *sui generis* is indeed a major achievement of phenomenology. Whereas the body has been denounced for being a marginal condition or even a confinement for the subject’s individuation in the metaphysical tradition, phenomenology retrieved it as a constitutive condition of subjectivity and experience. (Staudigl 2007:238)

As I will show later on, Alfred Schutz’ concept of “finite province of meaning” is useful when accounting for the role of physical work in engendering transcendent experiences in prisoners. Schutz draws on William James’s theory of sub-universes of meaning to develop his concept of “finite provinces of meaning”. The central idea is to acknowledge that as human beings we spend most of our time living in the ordinary reality of everyday life. This world of everyday life requires, in Bergsonian terms, a certain “*attention à la vie*” and a pragmatic approach. As Natanson proposes, “the social world is primarily the world of everyday life as lived and appreciated and interpreted by common-sense men carrying on the cognitive and emotive traffic of daily life” (1970: 102). Sometimes, however, the continuity of everyday life is interrupted and the subject enters a new and different sphere of reality. “Finite provinces of meaning” can be identified as a certain set of experiences with their own cognitive style, experiential consistency, and a particular tension of consciousness. The concept of “finite province of meaning” can help to understand the experiences of inmates practicing yoga, and the spiritual meaning that the practice acquires in the context of prison.

Yet, in order to avoid the essentialization of transcendent experiences, there is also a need to comprehend how actors discursively articulate these experiences and reconstruct them in a meaningful way. Following Tavory and Winchester (2012: 3), I argue that it is indispensable to understand how individuals socially anchor and intersubjectively (re)create these experiences in discursive practices. Thus, it is important to understand how the concepts and ideas learned in the yoga class are incorporated into one's "stock of knowledge," and gradually become taken for granted. The concept of "stock of knowledge" helps to understand how the social production of knowledge is articulated with everyone's set of typifications, and used to interpret the past and the present (and, even, anticipate the future). Therefore I will further show that combining Schutz's concepts of "finite provinces of meaning" and the "stock of knowledge" can help us to grasp both the embodied and the discursive dimensions of yoga in their concrete articulation and constitutive interplay.

Main Findings

Yoga, the Body, and the Finite Provinces of Meaning

Every total institution can be seen as a kind of dead sea in which little islands of vivid encapturing activity appear. Such activity can help the individual withstand the psychological stress usually engendered by assaults upon the self. (Goffman 1961: 68)

Miguel⁷ is a 36-year-old Colombian man and advanced yoga practitioner. He has already spent more than 15 months in confinement. He is waiting for his trial. For bureaucratic reasons, his trial has been postponed three times, but he does not lose hope of being released without any sentence soon. He was the first to talk to me after I introduced myself in the first day of the intensive course in the remand prison. He asked me about my work and advised me not to sit at the back with a notebook. He invited me to put my mat next to his mat and to follow the class from there. "If you sit at the back," he said, "you'll be taken for one of them" (i.e. the prisons' social educators). From this day on, we almost always sat together in the class and had friendly conversations at the beginning and the end of the lesson. He wishes to become a writer and, from time to time, he brought me copies of his writings. We often talked about my research, and I frequently explained my impressions and doubts to him. Miguel also takes art classes and sport lessons in prison. Our conversations often concerned the particularities of yoga and the similarities/differences with other activities. From his point of view, yoga has similar effects to smoking marijuana and also some parallels with a religious ritual but he also thinks that it has some resemblance with bodybuilding. However, what he values the most is that the practice of yoga has the capacity "to make you feel that you are somewhere other than prison for a while".

⁷ All the personal names used in this article are pseudonyms.

When the inmates participating in the courses were asked in the interviews and in the surveys about what they value most about doing yoga, the majority referred to the possibility of transcending their constrained here-and-now. Indeed, the leap into a new reality is described in terms of “freedom”. In one of the surveys, David wrote that yoga and meditation enabled him to forget that he was in prison while Joan observed that yoga enabled him to “disconnect” from his immediate surroundings and bring him into a different reality. One day, after the yoga class, the art teacher asked the inmates to draw their feelings when doing yoga. One of the inmates painted himself with wings and wrote: “I represent myself with wings because I felt that I was not here during the class, it was like being in another dimension, I felt like I was a plane, seeing everything from the sky, but without the plane” (Frederico, remand center).

Several attempts have been made to understand the interaction between the physical exercises, the feeling of well-being and the spiritual experience of transcendence (Mold 2006; Winchester 2008; Pagis 2010; Kapsali 2012). Marcel Mauss (1973) was among the first scholars to note the close link between mystical states and body techniques such as yoga. He highlighted the relevance of paying attention to the “moral, magical and ritual effectiveness” of these body techniques (1973: 74). The work of the cultural anthropologist Benjamin Richard Smith is one of the most accurate in this regard. Taking a phenomenological approach, Smith shows the relevance of dealing with “spiritual, as well as bodily and mental aspects of practitioners’ experiences, and work[ing] towards a description of aspects of practice and experience that, from the perspective of many Western practitioners, seem indescribable” (2007: 31). Smith, like the Swedish philosopher Klas Nevrin adopts a critical stance against privileging “psychologized models of human being” (Nevrin 2008) and advocates giving a more central role to the body and to the modes of experiencing the physical work involved in yoga. Drawing on authors such as Merleau-Ponty, Leder (1990), and Csordas (2002), Smith argues that the key element that explains the feeling of having a “spiritual” moment is the experience of *encountering oneself*. Smith contends that “beyond the development of physical ability to execute difficult poses, and the calmness of mind required to undertake the practice fully, this ‘encounter’ with the embodied self brings about moments within *asana* practice which practitioners identify as ‘spiritual’” (2007: 40). It is in these moments that, according to Smith but also my own observations, one has the feeling of “really doing yoga” (Baranay 2004: 205, quoted by Smith 2007: 40). The aim to sociologically capture and explain the experience of “really doing yoga”—which practitioners usually consider as a “spiritual experience”—is what Smith takes as the *explanandum* of his research. I also consider these feelings of experiencing transcendence to constitute the singularity of yoga. As I have already stated, these “acts of transcendence” are the most appreciated component of practicing yoga in prison.⁸

⁸ This is reflected in the surveys conducted by the authors to course participants’ in the last week of the courses. They described it in terms of “inner peace,” “connectedness,” “flying,” “mental and spiritual well-being,” etc.

However, notwithstanding its usefulness, I consider Smith's notion of "self-encounter" as insufficient to fully capture the complexities involved in the practice of yoga. I argue that Schutz's notion of "finite provinces of meaning" is better suited to account for the spiritual dimension of yoga and to explain its interrelatedness with the physical, psychological but also social dimensions of the practice. Yoga is viewed by inmates as pushing the subject out of ordinary reality into a specific reality, into a "finite province of meaning". In this regard, it is exactly the breaking with the "paramount reality" that permits Miguel to say that the practice of yoga bears similarities to smoking marijuana. Thus viewed, yoga becomes a way of escaping from the ordinary life of the prison and figures as an entrance into a new reality.

As Schutz pointed out, the crossing to another "finite province of meaning" implies the experience of a "shock" that carries the subject from one reality to another. Schutz distinguishes between three different modalities for crossing borders, and one of these is the shock-like transfer that occurs "while changing the mode of experience, such as falling asleep, going to the bank, opening a book or starting a word processor" (Sebald 2011: 345). Yoga belongs to this category and the physical performance of *asanas* and the breathing exercises are the primary activators for this shift. As inmates express it, the workout routines allow one to place the mind in a "state of fluidity". At some point, this fluidity is experienced as a "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi 2000; Bloch 2000) or as an experience of "connection with oneself" (Smith 2007)—an experience in which the perception of time and space is modified. According to Ricard, a Catalan-born economist confined in the remand prison, yoga is practically achieved as a "different reality" through the combination of intense exercises and meditation practices. In this vein, he stated:

Yoga provokes a kind of explosion in your body in a very short time. The physical exercises are very intense, very difficult and quite hard. After this, your body becomes relaxed and you can start to meditate (...) I wonder if I could get the same feelings by running for twenty minutes and then meditating. I guess not. Yoga also involves stretching, focusing, breathing exercises (...) All this is necessary to be able to meditate and to silence your mind, and this is what makes yoga special.

In becoming able to experience what is described by inmates as "connectedness," "self-awareness," or "flow," the feeling of release from the constraints of the paramount reality is engendered. This involves a feeling of wellbeing that, interpreted in mystical-philosophical terms, can be read as offering spiritual comfort. Not all inmates at all times are able to experience this kind of feeling of gaining access to a different level of reality; but, according to them, there are moments that are especially conducive to this, e.g., after physical exertion, when the body is calm and repetitive exercises such as singing mantras or meditation are being performed.

The shift to a "finite province of meaning" is not only induced by the physical effort nor can it be identified as just an embodied and isolated individual inner experience. On the contrary, we have to consider it as a collective and relational phenomenon. Participant observation has revealed that the switch to another reality is fostered by the role of the co-participants. The act of moving beyond the paramount reality is eased when the yoga class becomes a *collective* experience.

Drawing on Spickard (1991) and Neitz and Spickard (1990), we can apply Schutz's distinction between "polythetic" and "monothetic" experiences in order to shed light on the social and intersubjective character of transcendence experiences. The notion of polytheticity refers to the meaningful living through of an experience in the inner time from the beginning to the end. Yoga, like music or poetry, is a polythetic experience that requires sequential experiencing, one *asana* after another, and from the beginning until the end of the class in order to fully accommodate its significance. Indeed, this concept gains special relevance in the case of Kundalini yoga, since in this yoga tradition the specific sequence of poses in the class (the *kriya*)⁹ is not incidental but is usually defined to serve a specific purpose (e.g., the Kriya for elevation or the Subagh Kriya for prosperity).

Finally, how is yoga's polythetic character related to its collective dimension? Spickard develops this very clearly when noting that "experiences are patterns of inner time; like all patterns in inner time, they can be shared. People experience time together in many religious settings, but especially in rituals" (1991: 197). From this perspective, the yoga class can be considered as a pattern of inner time that is orchestrated by the yoga instructor and reproduced and shared by the participants. Therefore, as Spickard continues:

(...) rather than focusing on rituals' cognitive contents—their theologies and symbols—a Schutzian approach could focus on the ebb and flow of their activity. Rituals, in this view, help people "tune-in" to one another, to share an inner state of consciousness. Seen in this light, the experiences people have in religious settings are profoundly social—and in a quite basic way. (1991: 197)

To some extent, if Smith describes the yoga practice as a mechanism to "tune in" *to oneself* through the body, Spickard underlines the process of tuning in *to others* through the experience of a shared inner time (*durée*). The observation of the class enables us to highlight the importance of the group in favoring and sustaining the shift to another reality.

Likewise, the empirical material from the interviews reveals the importance of what Collins (2004) calls the "collective energy," which is considered as decisive for experiencing transcendence. Therefore, despite the fact that most of the advanced yoga students state that they also practice when alone in their cells, they also attest that it is in class that they are closer to "really doing yoga".¹⁰ In this regard, it is interesting to note that while Knoblauch is absolutely right in emphasizing that currently the most popular forms of experiencing transcendence "are not to be had vicariously (not even in many Catholic charismatic movements)

⁹ As Spickard notes, "the meaning of a written passage, however, can be grasped all at once—monothetically to use Husserl's term. One understands a philosophical conclusion without having continually to recreate its proof. Unlike conceptual thought, however, art is polythetic: it takes as much time to reconstitute the 'meaning' of a piece of music as it did the first time one experienced it" (1991: 197).

¹⁰ In a similar fashion, McGuire observes, "if we combine Schutz's insights about the complex way people can transcend everyday boundaries between self and other with Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the immediate connection between a person's body and consciousness, we get clues about how religious experience can be a deeply subjective yet shared experience" (2008: 113).

through the mediation of religious virtuosi [...] [but rather that] each person is expected to have, even to have had, such an experience” (2008: 143), it appears also crucial to emphasize that the co-experience of others eases the shift to another (transcendent) reality.

In the case we are dealing with, the entrance to a “finite province of meaning” is not a momentary experience but a longer period characterized by a specific tension of consciousness, including a definite tone of feeling, and with the beginning and the end clearly demarcated. In our case, the start and end of the class mark the temporal boundaries of the experience. Nonetheless the shift to another “reality” does not mean entering a totally uniform, stable and homogeneous reality, but rather a sphere wherein individuals experience varying degrees of tension punctuated by peak moments.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that there are other factors that play a role in facilitating the transition towards a “finite province of meaning”. The fieldwork has revealed that there are three specific contextual elements that significantly contribute towards strengthening the inmates’ capacity to transgress the boundary between the “ordinary” and the “extraordinary” reality, which are the *scenography*, the *affective regime*, and the *order of sociality*.

Firstly, the *scenography* of the class plays a significant role in facilitating the shift towards another province of meaning. Catalan prisons are crowded, dirty, and noisy settings where social relations are mainly founded on indifference, conflict, and rigidity. The yoga class reverses the institution’s symbolic order by converting the class into a “haven of peace and tranquility,” as one inmate put it. In this context, the use of music—live or recorded—together with the scent of incense sticks and the soft lighting of the room helps to build an “extraordinary” atmosphere. As Neitz and Spickard observed, “religious rituals manipulate sensory stimuli to focus their participants’ concentration” (1990: 22). This is exactly what happens in the case of yoga classes, too. Secondly, the dominant *affective regime* of the institution is challenged in the class. This is illustrated by a yoga volunteer being interviewed after class: “Today’s class was extremely beautiful. I’ve met them all, holding their hands and making a circle. I think it is difficult to do this in a prison. They were all smiling and quite excited”. Holding hands, hugging or lying with one’s eyes closed are extremely rare practices in the prison context and they are far from what is considered as normal in this setting. Likewise, the penitentiary *order of sociality* is also a contested terrain in the class. After a two-month course, one of the inmates expressed that what he liked the most was “the feeling of being away from everything that relates me with my criminal status and feeling valued as a human being by the people who manage everything related to yoga”. To some extent, the yoga class becomes what Crewe et al. have termed an “emotional zone” that challenges the “normal”, i.e., “unwaveringly sterile, unfailingly aggressive or emotionally undifferentiated” prison environment (2013: 2).

Spiritual Stock of Knowledge, Biographical Relevancies, and Meanings

Yoga connects me with the divinity. Years ago I smoked marihuana, I have also taken drugs (...) and with yoga I have felt similar sensations. However, this is not a drug, this is not false, this is not hypocritical, and this is not

happening because someone else is giving me drugs. This doesn't come from outside. This comes from inside of me, it comes from my own serenity, and I feel happy with myself (...) I feel happy, and I am able to understand my context, I see how things really are (...) and I say to myself: Uauh, I feel so good!. (Miguel, remand center)

The practice of yoga in prison works as a catalyst for experiencing transcendence and for moving oneself beyond everydayness. However,

[...] the kinds of transcendence with which modern consciousness is concerned or the ways in which it is concerned with them—or both—differ conspicuously from the kinds of transcendence with which religions in traditional societies were concerned, as well as from the way in which this concern was translated socially into belief, dogma, ritual, and institution. (Luckmann 1990: 127)

Given this, it seems evident that yoga neither constitutes in and of itself a religion, nor are the implications of becoming a yoga practitioner equivalent to being a member of a “traditional” religion in terms of beliefs or institutional membership. Nevertheless, this does not imply that these modern forms of transcendence are free-floating phenomena completely detached from institutional affiliations, structures of belief, or expressions of theodicy. Physical yoga exercises do not exist alone but are surrounded by words, metaphors, stories, and narratives. Our fieldwork observations have shown that every class starts with a brief explanation of the purpose of the day's lesson. Each new *asana* is explained, contextualized, and commented upon. Indeed, yoga teachers usually make general comments aiming to encourage inmates to hold difficult poses or guide the final relaxation. Likewise, the meaning of mantras is explained and, sometimes, short stories are told to account for the meaning of some difficult concept. The teacher even, in some cases, devotes several minutes to providing a reflexive philosophical-spiritual comment on the nature of life.

From class to class and from word to word, a complex system of meaning is transferred to inmates, who, thus, become gradually familiar with it. Therefore, although there is no formal and explicit transmission of a belief-system, a tacit socialization in a specific universe of meaning is evidenced. The invisibility of this socialization process does not render it irrelevant—quite the contrary. Through the lessons, concepts like *energy*, *karma*, or *chakra* become familiar to inmates without any suspicion of brainwashing or indoctrination being aroused. These notions are approached with normalcy and are gradually taken for granted by everyone involved (Goffman 1971). Yet, this appearance of normalcy is precarious and has clear boundaries that become visible when being transgressed. The following vignettes are illustrative of this: in one of the intensive yoga courses one of the invited professors extended his talk for more than 20 min giving advices to inmates on how to face the pains of imprisonment and give meaning to their future. The tone was quite normative. During the talk, some of the inmates started to whisper among themselves, and others looked distracted. After the class, many inmates, but also social educators, expressed discomfort about what they considered and labeled as an

‘inappropriate religious sermon’. In another case, a yoga volunteer decided to distribute a fragment of the Bhagavad Gita to the participants of the course. As I was there, one inmate, who declares himself a Muslim, asked me what the text was really about. I felt a bit uncomfortable but I explained to him that it this was a traditional Hindu text. Then, he insisted by saying: “But is this a religious text?” The social educator heard the question and also joined the conversation. After a short silence, the only thing that came to my mind to say was: “I guess you can give it back to Maia [*the yoga teacher*] if you want”. The differences between spirituality, religion, and philosophy, and the respective labels, are understood and lived in a different manner by the actors in the field.¹¹

It is extremely difficult to develop a coherent and ordered exposition of the knowledge disseminated in the lessons since it is transmitted in bits and pieces and in a highly fragmented manner. In addition, every yoga teacher works with a slightly different approach since each has his/her own formative journey in yoga but also in other holistic domains such as Reiki, the Akashic Records, or Vipassana meditation, to name just a few. However, there are some points in common that are generally shared by everyone. The most common is the idea that every person has an inner authentic truth that constitutes one’s genuine selfhood. This notion is associated with the conviction that this “authentic self” has been (and is being) constrained, hidden, and even denigrated in the course of our lives. Fear, anxiety, or other “bad” feelings—generated by our social and personal circumstances or even by factors located beyond this world’s reach—have blocked the access to our “inner self” and have inhibited our capacity to live in harmony with it. There are different techniques to reach this “inner self”¹² and release its potential, and yoga is considered to be one of those. Being “in contact” and connected with your “inner self” is considered to be of great importance since authentic wisdom is said to exist in the realm of the inner world. This conviction is harmonious with the so-called “subjective turn” widely explored by Taylor (1991), which has strong implications for the revised concept of the self and bears consequences for the ways to face life. In this sense, “I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else’s. But this gives a new importance to being true to myself. If I am not, I miss the point of my life, I miss what being human is for me” (Taylor 1991: 29). Observations in class revealed the centrality of these views in the teachers’ speeches. Here, ideas concerning the self are underpinned by “Eastern” notions such as *dharma*, *karma*, or *reincarnation*, and with more contemporary concepts such as *holism*, *synchronicity*, or the *law of attraction*. All these notions construct a spiritual imaginary that offers inmates a new repertoire of knowledge, which is incorporated into their individual “stock of knowledge” and helps to give meaning to their extraordinary situations.

Sociological literature initially identified “holistic spiritualities” as belonging to the private sphere and to be weakly institutionalized. This approach was widely influenced by Bellah’s (1985) idea of *sheilaism*, which tends to hide the public,

¹¹ We have developed this aspect in more detail in Griera and Clot-Garrell (2015a, b).

¹² To some extent, it is said that in order to find harmony, balance, and peace it is necessary to become connected to the “all-pervading ‘Force’ or ‘Energy’ which is seen to be sacred and which is not believed to be separate from the individual” (Rose 1998: 13).

intersubjectively-shared and institutionalized dimension of new spiritualities. In contradistinction to this position, I argue that the relevance of yoga in prison lies precisely in the fact that it is not only a body technique that provides inmates with private ways of experiencing transcendence but that it also offers a gateway to a specific universe of meaning that is gradually gaining public acceptance. The interviews conducted have shown that the practice of yoga is not an isolated activity but has to be situated in a wider frame and connected with a spiritual stock of knowledge. This “stock of knowledge” conforms a rather coherent set of beliefs that, as Aupers and Houtman pointed out, “is in fact unambiguously individualistic and less privatized than most sociologists hold it to be” (2010: 158).

Many of the most experienced yoga inmates describe the class as the starting point of a “spiritual journey” in which books are crucially important. One of the inmates, Carlos, described it very memorably by observing that “something very magical has happened to me since I started the yoga class: what I’m reading in books harmonizes with what I’m studying in the yoga class and with what I’m feeling at this precise moment. So, I guess that I am awakening (...).” Paulo Coelho, Osho, Dyer, and Eckhart Tolle are some of the most popular spiritual authors among yoga students, and their books are also widely read within the prison walls. Prison libraries hold a significant number of this kind of books and inmates also frequently exchange them or ask their families to buy them for them. Books not only provide a discursive repertoire that helps to better narrate the yoga practice but also offer new “inspiring” practices for the inmates’ ‘spiritual journeys’. This is evidenced by an inmate who proposed and guided a ritual of love described by Coelho in a therapy group or by another who learned new yoga *asanas* and meditation techniques in a book from the prison library. All this knowledge is not absorbed in isolation but shared with other yoga students and discussed at the beginning and end of the lessons in small groups,¹³ within a process of mutual intersubjective validation of recently acquired notions and conceptions (Hervieu-Léger 2001; Clot-Garrell 2011). As Chandler argues, “life spirituality shares a sufficiently common spiritual-philosophy, or lingua franca, that makes it possible for life spiritual seekers to communicate and interact in mutually agreeable ways” (2010: 84).

At this point, it appears important to note that the yoga class is the tip of the iceberg or merely the starting point of the inmates’ process of familiarization with a complex spiritual “stock of knowledge”. Our interviews suggest that the plausibility of a spiritual “stock of knowledge” is grounded not only in yoga classes and books, but is also anchored in the everyday therapeutic context of the prison. Talk about energy, self-realization, or holism is not an exclusive feature of the yoga class but prevails in the therapeutic language of rehabilitation activities or art programs, too. Although holistic spirituality is not addressed directly in these contexts, it is indirectly infused in the vocabulary and in some therapeutic practices. The increasing existence and plausibility of such a spiritual “stock of knowledge” in the penitentiary setting is open to a twofold explanation.

¹³ Through our research the crucial role of intersubjectivity in the acquisition of new knowledge and the construction of new life meanings becomes evident, a fact that raises more arguments against practices such as solitary confinement (Guenther 2013).

Firstly, many educators, psychologists and social workers interviewed appear familiar with holistic spirituality, some of them being expert practitioners of Reiki, mindfulness, etc. Thus, they are able to speak the same language as yoga students and are also members of the scattered community of “New Agers” (Chandler 2010). We do not have precise data concerning the proportion of the staff involved with the holistic imaginary, but according to our interviews it is not a tiny minority but a growing proportion of the therapeutic staff. The personal inclination of educators, social workers, and psychologists toward such imaginaries contributes to the greater sway of this “stock of knowledge” since they also employ “spiritual resources” in their daily work.¹⁴ Amelia, a committed social educator, gave us this example:

With regard to the kidnapping of hundreds of schoolgirls in Nigeria we decided to make a ball of energy instead of praying. So we made the ball of energy and sent it to the little girls in Nigeria. We formed a circle, made the energy ball and sent it to Nigeria. Is this Reiki? I guess it is but it will not be called this here nor will the board be told.

In the same vein, Ismael—a yoga student who is also in detox therapy—reported that the psychologist who runs the group therapy sessions also teaches them some yoga and Pranayama exercises. These cases show that the semantics of the holistic universe are silently and gradually gaining ground in the prison setting.

Secondly, there is also a more structural explanation for the growing plausibility of the holistic universe in prison, i.e., the existence of an elective affinity between the therapeutic *ethos* and the holistic spirituality. As Sherry and Kozinets point out, “with the spread of the ‘culture of authenticity,’ the rise of ‘expressive individualism,’ and the flourishing of the therapeutic ethos—each coinciding with, if not originating in, the consumption ethic of late capitalism—a ‘reflexive spirituality’ of ‘lived religion’ has attracted legions of converts in the past few decades” (2007: 120). There are indeed strong connections between the “triumph of the therapeutic” (Rieff 1966) and the growth of holistic spiritualities in contemporary societies. We can also refer to a sort of continuity and similarity between the conceptualization of the idea of the subject in both worlds, as well as in the language used to make sense of “disrupted” biographies. The rise of the therapeutic *ethos* is also highly visible in penitentiary settings, where it contributes to strengthening the plausibility of the holistic universe. To some extent, as Illouz propounds, “the therapeutic discourse has crossed and blurred the compartmentalized spheres of modernity and has come to constitute one of the major codes with which to express, shape, and guide selfhood” (2008: 6). This affinity between the therapeutic *ethos* and holistic spiritualities becomes especially clear in the context of contemporary penitentiary institutions where prisoners are encouraged to take responsibility for their own self-improvement and ‘good order’ (Bosworth et al. 2005). Drawing on Foucault et al. (1988), yoga can be conceived as a “technology

¹⁴ Indeed, as stated in Grier and Clot-Garrell (2015b) the role of the prison staff is crucial in promoting and guaranteeing the success of yoga and holistic activities in prison. The success of these types of activities in the current penitentiary institutional context would not be possible without a strong personal interest in making it succeed.

of the self” that instills inmates with the ideal of self-improvement, thus internalizing the disciplinary regime of the institution.

The practice of yoga in prison: a doorway to a spiritually shaped journey of self-improvement

Well, I think that when people are ready for change, to take that step, to look for something else, yoga helps because yoga makes you see that there is something more. At least, this is what happened to me. Yoga helps you to look within you and to seek to improve yourself. (Ander, remand center)

The acquisition of new spiritual concepts, ideas, and beliefs is not inconsequential or trivial but rather has an impact on inmates’ everyday lives. This impact can be assessed principally on three different levels: in their everyday coping with life in prison, in their relations with others and in their use of new categories of biographical articulation. First, the acquisition of this new “stock of knowledge” has an impact on the conduct of inmates in prison, which is apparent in the way they handle daily activities such as waiting in line or doing their work. In this regard, Miguel said that since he started this spiritual journey, when “I have to wash the elderly [*he works in the prison nursing home*], I do it with love, with all my heart. If I do it in this way, I feel this lovely energy”. In a similar fashion, Marco stressed that “while I’m cutting the lettuce I do breathing exercises and I get to enjoy it”. On a more complex level, Ismael said: “Here, if you guide yourself by your animal instincts you never get out because you fight, you are in a bad mood (...) I decided to stop all of that. Why? Because yoga changed my way of being, my way of thinking; one thinks in another way”.

Secondly, the holistic universe not only gives practical resources to cope with unpleasant jail experiences, but it also offers guidance in building a code of interpersonal conduct. Along these lines, Antonio argued that

(...) there was a confusion inside me. I couldn’t understand why people hurt each other or why some people are good and others bad, and then I understood that we hurt each other because of ignorance [...] and all of these answers came to me thanks to meditation, yoga [...] because before this there was confusion within me and I was very aggressive.

Most yoga students report that their personal relations have improved since they have taken part in the class. In some cases, this is attributed to the fact that they are ‘more relaxed’; in others, such as Antonio, a new ethics of conduct along with a pseudo-philosophy of action is seen as the cause.

Thirdly, as already mentioned in the previous section, there are different degrees of acquisition or immersion into this spiritual universe. These also have consequences in the way this knowledge repertoire is used to interpret one’s life situation and biography. The inmates most deeply committed to this spiritual world show a process of alternation (Berger and Luckmann 1966) that favors the use of new categories to understand their own biographical path. One common pattern concerns the activation of a “self-reflection” process that enables one to reflect their past, present, and future. In Miguel’s terms: “This is the moment when everything ceases to be mechanical and you ask yourself: Why am I doing what I am doing?”

Yoga and the related spiritual “stock of knowledge” help to provide answers to this question and scripts for understanding the past and facing the future. As Schutz argues, “at times, we revise our former schemes of knowledge when special motivations emerge, such as the irruption of a ‘strange’ experience not subsumable under the stock of knowledge at hand or inconsistent with it” (1973: 228). Imprisonment indeed is a deeply problematic situation that can cause a revision of our former beliefs and a search for new categories of biographical articulation. The holistic spiritual imaginary is a resource that can help inmates “[...] to transform those imposed relevancies, which prevent [them] from achieving projected aims, into disposable volitional ones” (Staudigl 2007: 243). Marco’s words are illustrative of this: “It sounds a bit cruel but sometimes we need to get to places like this [*the prison*] to land, to start to learn”. Similarly, another inmate stated: “It took me getting here before I could start to understand that I had a ‘mechanical’ life, that I didn’t know where I was going”. Füredi similarly puts forward the idea that therapeutic culture celebrates “personal troubles and dysfunctions” as milestones toward a spiritual awakening (2004: 43). Here, the “spiritual stock of knowledge” creates the possibility for inmates to reinterpret their painful situation as part of a spiritual path that can lead to spiritual awakening.

Thus viewed, yoga can be conceived as a technique to foster “cognitive transformation” (Giordano et al. 2002) by favoring a refashioning of self-identity and “changes in the meaning and desirability of offending” (Farrall et al. 2011: 22). For some inmates the study of yoga has an even more direct and material appeal since it appears as a viable future employment option. *World Prem* offers inmates with more yoga experience the possibility to become instructors when released from jail.¹⁵ Mireia, a prisoner participating in the second yoga quarantine, is one of those who expressed her hopes of becoming a yoga teacher. When asked to write down why she decided to participate, she stated:

(...) *my main reason is to improve my quality of life*—in physical, emotional and spiritual terms. Yoga is an intelligent way of giving meaning to our lives that are too contaminated by the western way of thinking. Yoga enables me to gain mental balance. Yoga has already helped me to overcome hypertension. Yoga also helps me to control my emotions. Now more than ever I need that my emotions not to overwhelm me. I am going to be released very soon after 11 years in jail!! But above all, I WANT YOGA—AND THE TEACHING OF YOGA—TO BECOME A WAY TO REDIRECT MY LIFE IN THE FUTURE [capital letters in the original].

A period of reflexivity—together with the “envisioning of an appealing and conventional replacement self” (Giordano et al. 2002: 999 quoted by Farrall et al. 2011) and “the exposure to some opportunity to change” (Farrall et al. 2011: 224)—is almost always the first stage of a desistance process (Cusson and Pinsonneault 1986). Our research did not cover an adequate time-span in order to assess whether

¹⁵ In this regard, the most shared petition among inmates after the second yoga quarantine in the prison was to be able to get training for becoming yoga instructors while in prison. Inmates perceive it as a suitable future employment option. *World Prem* volunteers positively received the petition, and started to explore its feasibility.

yoga can become a real tool for fostering crime desistance, but some inmates described it as such.

Conclusion

Yoga has become a very popular activity worldwide and its popularity has also penetrated the penitentiary context. Yoga, along with meditation, has gained presence in the penitentiary settings of many different countries like the US (Rucker 2005), Switzerland (Becci and Knobel 2014), Chile (Rabi Blondel 2011, 2012), the UK (Bilderbeck et al. 2013), and many others. The introduction of yoga into the penitentiary context has been legitimized by scientific research that underscores its efficacy in lowering depression and anxiety among prisoners by emphasizing its capacity to foster emotional self-control and self-esteem (Bowen et al. 2006; Samuelson et al. 2007; Sumter et al. 2009, 2007; Harner et al. 2010, Bilderbeck et al. 2013).

However, from the perspective of the sociology of religion, the analysis of yoga raises questions concerning the definition of *religion* in contemporary society and how to demarcate the boundaries between religion, spirituality, health therapies, and sport. Knoblauch's (2003, 2008) emphasis on the centrality of transcendence experiences in contemporary religious forms is particularly pertinent for this examination. The research presented here has shown that the vast majority of inmate yoga students identify "transcendence experiences" as the most singular aspect of the practice of yoga. According to the inmates' narrations, yoga is able to transport inmates to a "finite province of meaning" where reality has a different taste, texture, and color. At first sight, however, there seems to be no radical difference between what yoga and other physical exercises such as dance or running offer. The distinction becomes apparent only once we analyze the language used to describe these experiences and parse the discursive dimension of this practice. This shows that a clear *emic* difference between yoga and other sports exists for yoga students. One of the inmates explicitly addressed this in an interview: "This is something different. When you do sport you can stretch but here you see your own true self"; another inmate added that "this gives meaning to your soul, it is a divine experience". Accordingly, I argue that yoga is not only physical work but also, in some cases, a doorway to a "spiritual stock of knowledge". While it provides inmates with a specific language to make sense of the transcendence experiences in class, it also offers an entry into a more expansive spiritual semantic framework. Indeed, physical movements and spiritual accounts constitute one another in the practice of yoga, thus opening up a pathway into a different reality; movement and spiritual discourse inform one another — and it is precisely in this reflexivity that "transcendence experiences" are created and yoga is made meaningful and important in the improvement-setting of the prison.¹⁶

¹⁶ I owe this formulation to an anonymous reviewer whom I thank for the comment.

For some inmates the practice of yoga is the starting point of a “spiritual journey” into a holistic spirituality that can lead the subject to immerse him/herself to an alternation process (Berger and Luckmann 1966). In these cases, a transformation of the personal system of relevancies and categories of biographical articulation, as well as a process of changing habits, attitudes, and routines takes place. Thus, from these inmates’ perspective, yoga becomes something more akin to a religion—a religion considered as a symbolic universe (Berger and Luckmann 1966), as an “objectivated meaning system that relates the experience of everyday life to a ‘transcendent’ layer of reality” (Luckmann 1967: 43)—than to a simple physical exercise. This observation also demonstrates that while it may be said that holistic spirituality does not have a formal institutional structure, it is far from being a totally private and individual form of religion. It is, rather, a socially forged, culturally grounded and intersubjectively sustained system of meaning that blurs the boundaries between the therapeutic, the spiritual, and the popular culture. Furthermore, it is also important to remember that there is not one single path toward this spiritual universe but multiple points of entry. However, yoga is particularly conducive to it in the context of prison. As Becci suggests “prison life affects the most basic aspects of the inmates’ selves: the control over their own body” (2012: 91). The conditions of detention bring one to experience the loss of the capacity to govern one’s body, while the ongoing practice of yoga offers the feeling of recovering control over one’s body and mind (Baarts and Pedersen 2009). Hence, the “absent body” (Leder 1990) becomes a “present body” again and the raising of an awareness of the physical sensations experienced is often connected to a spiritual universe co-constituted by teachers’ comments, participants’ conversations, and books. Here we touch upon a process in which a correspondence is being generated between what the body feels and experiences, and the available linguistic resources that give meaning to the physical symptoms. The bodily sensations serve to authenticate the universe of meaning that is being acquired while this “stock of knowledge” is used to name and interpret what is being experienced in the class. Or, as Miguel expressed it: “Books give me the answers, yoga gives me the practice and the results are being felt in my body”.

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