Evolving Social Representations of Yoga

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Abstract

Yoga is an ancient practice that has gone through many reincarnations over the thousands of years that it has existed, both in India, and much more recently, within American society. In his book, *The Science of Yoga: The Risks and Rewards*, William Broad (2012) intimately explores this evolution of yoga across various cultures and societal sub-groups, while also scientifically evaluating the numerous claims that invested parties have made about its therapeutic benefits and visceral effects. In this essay, I use Moscovici's (2008) *Psychoanalysis* as an archetype model to superimpose Social Representation Theory (SRT) on top of Broad's findings. Leveraging SRT concepts such as the public sphere, cognitive polyphasia, anchoring, and objectification, I reinterpret his yoga study through the perspective of social representations and their symbolic dynamics.

Evolving Social Representations of Yoga

In Moscovici's (2008) seminal book, *Psychoanalysis: It's Image and It's Public*, he presents an intriguing study that intimately illustrates how an obscure psychological theory, known as psychoanalysis, caught the imagination of French society, and eventually the entire world. Through this case study, he demonstrates how scientific knowledge dramatically changes during its assimilation into everyday language and the collective minds of the general public. Using all the rich concepts of his Social Representation Theory (SRT), Moscovici traces the development of scientific ideas as they are contextually transformed into common sense. He also analyzes the influence that mass media, political parties, and religious groups had on these social representations when they attempted to use psychoanalysis as a tool to serve their own interests.

In *The Science of Yoga: The Risks and Rewards*, Broad (2012) takes an in-depth look at the history of yoga, exploring its evolving representations. He chronicles yoga's transformations as it became rebranded by Hindu nationalists, exposed to the Western world, and eventually co-opted by competing American entities. Meanwhile, Broad evaluates the countless hyperbolic claims that have been made about yoga, both from a scientific and a cultural standpoint. Finally, he analyzes the relationship between scientific knowledge and popular beliefs about yoga within the practicing community, the broader general public, as well as the mass media.

In this paper, I will discuss the origins of Moscovici's SRT, explain the central aspects of his theory, and then relate each of these aspects to Broad's sociological analysis of yoga. Through this exercise, I will demonstrate how SRT can be used to interpret a particular cultural phenomenon (i.e. yoga); similar to the way that Moscovici explored the emerging social representations of Freud's psychoanalysis.

What Are Social Representations?

Social representations (SRs) can be defined as group beliefs that individuals share via communication and mutual construction (Moscovici, 1988). They are a product of everyday values, practices, and ideas (Wagner et al., 1999). SRs are formed through a diverse combination of critical thinking, cultural tradition, folk beliefs, religious doctrine, political ideas, and historical experiences. Thus, SRs offer individual actors a coherent narrative to jointly define and continuously construct the social reality that they share. More importantly, SRs allow participants to name and classify both objects and fellow group members in a way that is socially meaningful. They allow people to explain behavior and make sense of events (Moscovici, 1988; Wagner et al., 1999).

In short, an SR consists of hierarchically structured meaning that can be generalized across a group to concretely define unfamiliar objects, ideas, events, and behavior. The development of such an SR involves first symbolically linking (anchoring) the unfamiliar phenomena to more universally understood objects, and then eventually the new phenomena takes on a symbolic life of its own as it is assimilated into the group's everyday reality (Wagoner, 2008).

The Motivations Behind SRT

Social representation theory (SRT) was created by Moscovici in an effort to transform social psychology and evolve past the rigid dichotomy between individuals and society that dominated social psychology for so many decades (Jahoda, 1988; Moscovici, 1988; Wagner et al., 1999). His goal was to build a theoretical framework that allowed social psychology to act as a bridge between what many psychologists and sociologists saw as two mutually exclusive domains: the individual person and the collective society.

In essence, SRT as a reaction to cognitive psychology's overemphasis on isolated individual perspectives and pure rational thought (Jovchelovitch, 1995). Moscovici strategically designed his theory to more explicitly bind social psychology and cognitive psychology together. Cognitive psychology had previously focused too narrowly on the internal processes, and supposed pure logic, of the individual mind, without paying enough attention to the ways in which social interactions are connected to these processes. Consequently, research became narrowly focused on the isolated, associative errors that humans make in various situations (Moscovici, 1988).

Moscovici takes a broader approach. He insists that semiotic-driven cognition, including symbolism, classification, and comparison, would be impossible outside the realm of social awareness, influence, engagement, and context. These are necessary factors in human sensemaking (Moscovici, 1988). His model treats thinking as an everyday social activity, thus taking into account history, tradition, interactive dynamics, and their influence on interpretations of reality (Wagoner, 2012). Even the attributional errors that preoccupied cognitive science for so long may actually reflect legitimately disparate, but socially meaningful representations of reality (Moscovici, 1988). Moreover, Moscovici (1988) truly sees all reality as socially constructed:

> In these exchanges, all representations are at the interface of two realities: psychic reality, in the connection it has with the realm of the imagination and feelings, and external reality which has its place in a collectivity and is subject to group rules. (p. 220)

Moscovici also subscribes to Piaget and Winnicott's theories that the very core of self-identity is dependent on being situated in a social environment. Humans cannot fully define themselves as individuals without first understanding how they relate to the society they are a

part of. In other words, one must have a concept of "we" in order to fully grasp the concept of "I" (Jovchelovitch, 1995).

It is very important to Moscovici that his theory be applicable to tangible social problems in the world. He doesn't want it to just be another theory that academic elites endlessly debate about, within a vacuum. Rather, he hopes that SRT will lead to true discovery about how meaning is socially constructed by collaborating individuals within everyday life (Moscovici, 1988).

By positioning SRs within the context of everyday thinking, Moscovici attempts to provide an integral structure to the ideas that people have about the world. This definition is significant because it allows one to see the links between religion, politics, legend, superstition, natural environment, innate biology, and historical context. SRs are both influenced and composed of all these various elements. Thus, SRs are really a composite snapshot of a group's constructed worldview at any given point in time (Moscovici, 1988).

Theoretical Influences of SRT

Moscovici's General Philosophical Position

Moscovici is an empiricist in that he believes knowledge arises from both senses and experience, especially within a social context. However, he is anti-positivist, as he does not subscribe to the idea that knowledge can be authoritatively derived from sensation and individual cognition alone (Moscovici, 1988). He also is aligned with Kuhn in dismissing absolute scientific truths: "Observation has shown us that scientific representations are centered, although in a different way, on the scientific community and the society of which it forms a part…Thus, I conclude that all representations are sociocentric" (Moscovici, 1998, p. 242). Like Kuhn, Moscovici was greatly influenced by the phenomenological philosopher, Koyre, whom he

studied under. Koyre sees scientific discovery as merely a theoretical shift in perspective; a new way of viewing the world and how it works (Kritzman & Reilly, 2007).

SRT Inspired by Durkheim's Collective Representations

Moscovici's SR theory was centrally inspired by Durkheim's concrete dichotomy between individuals and groups, as well as his insistent separation of psychology and sociology (Jovchelovitch, 1995). He took particular issue with Durkheim's concept of collective representations. Moscovici found the idea of collective representations to be very limiting because of its rigid, overly global, and simplistic definition. He thus determined it to be quite inadequate for the study of social cognition. It left no room to explore the symbolic structures that are negotiated in everyday social life (Jahoda, 1988).

Durkheim believed that the study of individuals belonged in the realm of psychology, while the study of groups and society belonged in the world of sociology. Moscovici is convinced that this is a superficial division; one that blinds social psychology from the dynamic relationship between individuals and the social context they reside in (Wagner et al., 1999). He strongly feels that Durkheim's hard line separation of individuals and groups don't fully account for diversity of interpretations, or the complex interactions that occur between individuals who make up a social group (Moscovici, 1988).

While Durkheim opts to treat representations as simple ideas, originating top-down from the collective group, Moscovici views them as structures that are constructed in a much more complex manner. With SRT, Moscovici had a grand vision for how social psychology should evolve and mature from a behaviorism-dominated field to one that is driven by the study of interactive cognitive processes within a participatory social environment. In order to achieve this, he had to crack open the black box that was Durkheim's collective representations. Moscovici

insists that it is critical to explore the rich internal structure and elaborate constructive process that forms, evolves, and perpetuates these representations in the first place. He states that Durkheim's oversimplified collective representations could only truly exist within a closed society, containing absolutely no public discourse (Moscovici, 1988).

Other Major SRT Influences

According to Wagner (Wagner et al., 1999), SRT is inspired and shaped by Wundt's Völkerpsycholgie. While Wundt is famous for creating the first experimental psychology research lab, he spent his later years writing volumes about this more ethnographic methodology. He believed it was necessary to get outside the lab and into the context of people's everyday lives, in order to understand how elements of culture (e.g. language, myth, religion, magic, etc.) impacted cognition and shared representations.

Bartlett's ideas have also had a considerable impact on Moscovici. Along with French anthropologist, Lévy-Bruhl, Bartlett shaped Moscovici's philosophy about the social/cultural causes of primitive thought and the mythical primacy of western thought (Wagoner, 2012). Additionally, many of Bartlett's descriptions of everyday thinking and its distinctions from more contrived, "closed system" thinking have seeped into SRT (Jahoda, 1988; Wagoner, 2012).

Alfred Schutz's concept of co-opting "strange," new experiences or objects and transforming them into something more "familiar," influenced Moscovici's SR theory, in regards to anchoring and objectification (Jahoda, 1988). Once again, Bartlett played a role in this theoretical development as well. Bartlett's serial reproduction concept involves some of the same mechanics as Moscovici's anchoring. Also, both similarly refer to the activity of "naming." Along the same lines, the assimilative properties of Bartlett's "conventionalization" process are easily recognizable in Moscovici's "objectification" stage of SRT (Wagoner, 2012).

Finally, despite the fact that Moscovici doesn't mention it, ethnomethodology appears to color SRT in a significant way. Elements of conversation analysis can be found in the constructionist and sense-making qualities of SRT. The way Moscovici describes the social negotiation of reality and meaning that occurs during public discourse should be immediately familiar to any ethnomethodology scholar (Jahoda, 1988).

The Public Sphere and the Thinking Society

The public sphere is a critical setting for Moscovici's SRT; a realm that mediates between the "private sphere" and "sphere of public authority" (i.e. the government, police, or ruling class) (Habermas, 1991). This is the staging ground where SRs are conceived and continually reproduced in an ever-evolving manner (Jovchelovitch, 1995).

The public sphere, as a concept, is somewhat of an idealized social space that is based on ancient Greece, where the buddings of democracy emerged. Moscovici extracts this notion from the writings of Habermas and Arendt. In this public setting, politics, tradition, and speech end up front and center. Through language and narratives, (a) symbols are created and defined; (b) diverse perspectives are discovered and negotiated to consensus; (c) self identity is established; (d) shared history is imprinted and preserved; (e) social accountability is maintained; (f) SRs are constructed to produce a common reality that all participants can understand and agree upon (Jovchelovitch, 1995).

Moscovici carries forward the lofty ideals of Habermas and Arendt when discussing the requirements around dialogue within the public sphere. He prescribes that it should be open and accessible to all citizens, and it must only deal with issues of common concern. In addition, participants are expected to act as peers and always remain on equal ground. The societal status hierarchy does not have a place in this domain. Unfortunately, in practice, the public sphere

rarely reaches such a quintessential state, especially in regards to aspects such as gender and racial equality (Jovchelovitch, 1995).

One way in which Moscovici (1988) makes the public sphere idea his own is by leveraging it as "a protest against the widespread view of an 'unthinking society'" (p.224). He believes it is inaccurate and overly simplistic to assume that the majority of society acts solely as a mouthpiece for the talking points of elites within the sphere of public authority. Rather, when people are given the opportunity to converse in an inviting, safe, and collaborative setting (e.g. a cafe, pub, or civic meeting hall), SRs can be openly conceived, developed, and propagated (Moscovici, 1988).

Moscovici does not subscribe to the opinion that the mind of the crowd is something irrational, which should be dismissed or discounted in favor of "expert" perspectives that are prescribed by those within the elite class. Here, his empiricism and skepticism about positivist, scientific truths shine through. Therefore, he is unwilling to automatically favor certain types of knowledge or beliefs over others (Jahoda, 1988).

How Yoga Captured the Public's Imagination

When discussing the public sphere and Moscovici's 'thinking society,' yoga is a great case study. Unlike religion, modern medicine, and other more conventional Western practices, yoga teachers are not required to go through rigorous school programs. There is hardly a uniform licensing system, and there is no real government oversight. Because of this, the public sphere must work harder to collaboratively understand and uncover the truth about the benefits and risks of yoga (Broad, 2012).

Yoga is perpetually susceptible to anecdotal stories of miraculous healing and transcendental bliss. This inspires social representations of yoga, objectifying it as a peaceful

activity that originated in an exotic, far-away place: one full of wisdom and an elevated level of

self-awareness. It is perceived and portrayed as a mystical, holistic remedy that helps wash away

the chaotic, urban tension and pressures associated with large American cities (Broad, 2012).

Regardless of the claims that science does or does not support, personal narratives can be

irresistible within the public sphere. In this social space, individuals share their physical,

spiritual, and sexual experiences in a compelling, passionate manner, thus propagating beliefs

about yoga, and iteratively producing new interpretations along the way.

The Origins of Knowledge and Belief

Defining Knowledge and Belief Systems

One of the central aspects of SRT is the definition of knowledge and how it may or may

not be distinguished from belief. For those in the positivism camp, knowledge traditionally

connotes objective truth, and it is often linked with the promise of purified scientific certainty.

Belief, on the other hand, is frequently downgraded, and treated as a less legitimate form of

knowledge. It is associated with unsophisticated bias, lack of expertise, and tenuous evidence

(Jovchelovitch, 2002). Irrational beliefs are often dismissed as attributional errors or "defects"

that are inherent within human cognitive processes (Jahoda, 1988).

As an anti-positivist and skeptic of absolute scientific truth, Moscovici shies away from

putting scientific knowledge and belief in separate categories. Rather, he views this as an

arbitrary value judgment (Jovchelovitch, 2002). Drawing from Kuhn's ideas of scientific

revolution and paradigm shifts, Moscovici recognizes science as an organized, dominant

knowledge system that happens to be powerful enough to command preferential treatment over

other types of beliefs (Kuhn, 1996; Moscovici, 1998). However, as he illustrates through his

study of Psychoanalysis's transformational assimilation into popular culture, belief is really just

a different type of knowledge than science (Moscovici, 2008). Belief is used for different purposes than science within the social world - namely to impart commonsense meaning, define identity, and provoke action in daily life (Jovchelovitch, 2002).

Everyday Thinking vs. Closed System Thinking

It is for this reason that Moscovici, like Bartlett, chooses to focus on everyday thinking. Bartlett describes everyday thinking as a process of expediently filling in information gaps, especially when great uncertainty exists. In this public, social environment, some form of critical thinking and logical debate may very well occur, but individuals aren't making a purposeful effort to be "scientific." They are simply responding, in a natural manner, to complex, ambiguous situations (Moscovici, 1988; Wagoner, 2012).

Bartlett distinguishes open, everyday thinking from closed system thinking, which is more contrived, and involves very straightforward exercises (e.g. solving a puzzle), that tend to have a clearly-defined, single solution (Wagoner, 2012). In these scenarios, a person is playing a very specific role, attempting to be logical and deliberate in both thought and action. Most knowledge, including science, creative or artistic thought, and practical commonsense does not occur within closed systems (Wagoner, 2012). Therefore, it cannot be isolated from the context in which it was conceived.

Science ambitiously aims to approximate a closed system in order to appear more objective and "truthful" than other forms of knowledge systems. However, as Kuhn illustrates, this is a mirage. Scientific knowledge is also deeply connected to the social environment it is conducted in. Thus, it is susceptible to the same history, politics, cultural preferences, and other biasing factors (Kuhn, 1996). From this perspective, it appears that all knowledge is inherently

biased because it is based on specific, symbolic representations, which are only cognitively

accessible within that knowledge's native context (Jovchelovitch, 2002).

Yoga vs. Science

When discussing knowledge and belief systems, yoga is a particularly interesting topic to

explore. Like the psychoanalysis phenomenon that Moscovici (2008) explored, Broad's (2012)

investigation into yoga's myths and scientifically determined benefits helps illustrate the

elaborate interplay between popularized beliefs and supposed scientific truths (Broad, 2012).

For decades, at least in the West, the science of yoga was fairly limited. Early on, India

produced a rigorous body of research, but many of those findings never made it overseas to

America. Outside of India, there have not historically been many big financial sponsors to fund

major studies, like there has been in other fields of healthcare, pharmaceuticals, physical therapy,

and fitness. More importantly, yoga teachers and famed gurus have a surprising dearth of

knowledge when it comes to empirical investigative reports (Broad, 2012).

Yoga is a practice that originated in the East, in a Hindu culture that was immersed in

mysticism and an ideal of wholeness. It was now being projected onto a culture that highly

values individualism, physical beauty, and scientific solutions to both health and fitness.

Through the lens of science, yoga predominantly became a secular, physical activity for the

masses. It was no longer the introspective, sensual, or spiritual practice that it once originated as

(Broad, 2012).

In the Western world, science is elevated as an elite, pure form of knowledge that can

uncover objective truth, while simultaneously maintain immunity from confounding biases.

Despite this obsession with scientism, everyday thinking still incorporates other competing belief

systems, and this is especially true when it comes to yoga. Through science, certain

physiological myths have been able to be legitimately disproved. For instance, yoga advocates have long heralded the exercises as an efficient, effective way to burn calories and lose weight. It has also been touted for being able to flood the body with oxygen. Both of these claims have been repeatedly proven as false. Yoga is not a very effective aerobic activity or fat burner. Practicing it is more likely to slow down the metabolism and encourage weight gain than to speed it up and help with fat loss. Yoga breathing does not flood the body with oxygen. In fact, certain breathing exercises vastly increase the relative levels of carbon dioxide in the body. Still, the beliefs persist within the social representations of yoga, and experts continue to propagate this sort of misinformation to their students. Practitioners and the general public hold onto ideas reinforced through political, marketing, and PR propaganda, as well as popular mass media, anecdotal experience or simply personal conviction (Broad, 2012). According to Broad:

> In popular culture, yoga went on its merry way, oblivious to the conclusion of science, believing deeply in its aerobic powers, often selling itself as superior to sports and exercise as the one and only way to attain that most fashionable of goals—ultimate fitness. (p. 73)

Scientific research has actually proven that there are considerable health benefits in yoga, including less back pain, better immune systems, improved sexual performance, and significantly reduced stress. However, mainstream publications, like *Yoga for Dummies*, instead often focus on disproved benefits such as oxygen increase in the body. This misguided affirmation has encouraged yoga teachers and their students to keep repeating talking points, claiming that yoga is the best fitness activity there is. In addition, well-respected gurus, such as Iyengar, create more confusion by using lots of medical terms in their writings, while only citing personally observed anecdotal evidence to support their claims. This creates an illusion of scientific authority and

reinforces the idea that yoga is a medicinal panacea. People tend to automatically trust these gurus, simply because of their respected social ranking and recognized expertise within the yoga community (Broad, 2012).

The Western scientific community also has challenges when it comes to fully investigating and understanding the benefits and risks of yoga. Beyond social logistics like funding and politics, one issue is their inherent assumption that the human body is a fixed biological entity, where the various parts and functions are pretty much the same across all the people. This is clear from any anatomy book or the belief that certain genes can make physical disorders (e.g. Obesity, arthritis) and mental disorders (e.g. Depression) virtually inevitable. Yoga starts with a very different premise. Practitioners see the body as a constantly changing system that can be dramatically impacted by certain thoughts, physical movements, and breathing. The dominant paradigm of quantitative, experimental science in the West also makes it hard to investigate the true psychological, spiritual, and creative experience that yoga provides. The complexity of analyzing meaning in human mental life makes it difficult for experimental researchers to isolate variables or reproduce results within a lab environment. This is, in fact, a problem that science has with holistic medicine as well. There are simply too many factors at play, and thus the context matters greatly (Broad, 2012).

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The Influence of Culture

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Culture and Symbolic Meaning

As we have seen so far, context is a critical component of knowledge. The culture that an individual or group resides in centrally defines this context. Moscovici clearly states that cultural differences have a tremendous impact on SRs. Whether the SR is focused on scientific ideas, beliefs, or practical, everyday objects, culture will play a role in its makeup. This is because all

SRs are constructed within a rich social environment, surrounded by culturally-embedded myths, history, morals, ethics, religious doctrines, political arguments, and pervasive ideologies (i.e. Individualism) (Moscovici, 1988). Piaget recognized this link between knowledge and culture, believing that this is the basis of all rational thought. Therefore, rationality is, in essence, a social knowledge that is accepted by the group or society as a whole (Jovchelovitch, 2002).

Culture can be understood as a structured system that produces symbolic meaning (Jahoda, 1988). It is transmitted via language. More specifically, culture is practiced through the telling of stories and the continuous reproduction of traditional rituals. These are all mediation processes that symbolically connect the natural world to the world of the human mind, ultimately allowing us to find meaning in existence and make sense of our environment (Jovchelovitch, 1995).

Primitive Thinking vs. Science

Similar to Bartlett, Moscovici has criticized social psychologists for inappropriately elevating western cultures over what are considered to be more primitive cultures. The problem is that psychology has often sought absolute behavioral principles and a single, unified story within primitive cultures. Bartlett and Moscovici prefer to look at where ideas, thoughts, and behavior are relatively situated in the community. They want to understand how history, tradition, religion, politics, and other cultural artifacts have an impact. Bartlett asserts that social groups create conventions that enforce or guide both thoughts and behavior (Wagoner, 2012).

Durkheim and Piaget both believed that knowledge is an evolution, and that science allows superior, higher-minded thinking to replace more primitive thinking, including myths and superstition (Jovchelovitch, 2002). However, Moscovici disputes the way science is assimilated into society, and the way it is interpreted. In modern, Western societies, tribal rituals and

superstitions are simply replaced by scientific myths. Scientific concepts and theories become transformed as they permeate throughout popular culture, and they take on a new life of their own (Wagner et al., 1999).

The Impressive Power of Culture, Symbolism, and Mythology in Yoga

Yoga is very much a product of its social environment, both in its ancient origins and modern reincarnations. It began as a periphery cult shrouded in mystery, spiritualism, and eroticism. The majority of practitioners were unconventional individuals (e.g. gypsies, drifters, and carnies), who typically resided on the fringes of society. Yoga was centrally focused on Tantra, or sacred sexual pleasure and enlightenment. The community also propagated many legends of miracles, magic, and supernatural powers in relation to the practice of yoga, such as surviving live burial for days, walking through walls, and immortality. At the same time, the elites in Indian society saw yogis as unproductive members of society that were possibly even dangerous criminals. Meanwhile, Orthodox Hindus charged that yoga enthusiasts were using spirituality as a front for engaging in hedonistic behavior (Broad, 2012).

Through modernization and Westernization, yoga was recast as a conventional, but superior health and fitness activity. Within the context of certain politics, marketing, cultural taboos, and societal priorities, the sexual and magical aspects were expunged from yoga. It became popularized when celebrities, such as Marilyn Monroe and Greta Garbo, openly embraced the Eastern practice. More recently, the sexual aspects of yoga have come back into the forefront, but in different sorts of ways. It is often portrayed as more superficially kinky and erotic, rather than spiritually tantric. Accumulating media stories about celebrity yoga leaders being involved in sex scandals with their students have only bolstered this image (Broad, 2012).

Kundalini, an instinctual, spiritual energy that is often associated with both intense pain and orgasmic pleasure, holds a prominent place within the yoga community (Broad, 2012). This aspect is interpreted very differently, depending on the cultural lens it is presented through. Kundalini is an intriguing example of how cultural influence and supposed "primitive thinking" can significantly shape social representations or ultimately what is considered to be common sense.

The psychological community has tried to scientifically approach the Kundalini phenomenon. Still, these analyses have mostly hovered at a theoretical, philosophical, and anecdotal level. Jung looked at it from the perspective of a Western psychotherapist who must diagnose any sort of extreme, unorthodox behavior as abnormal. Therefore, he held a negative view of Kundalini. He even warned people to stay clear of it because it could only lead to psychosis and immense suffering. However, it should be noted that Jung also seemed to be personally obsessed with this concept, based on some intensely intimate and frightening experiences that he had, while attempting to explore the phenomenon within his own life.

Sannella, on the other hand, looked at Kundalini through a different cultural lens, despite the fact that he was also a psychiatrist from the Western world. Incorporating elements of Eastern philosophy and Hinduism, Sannella saw Kundalini as a rebirth process. He thought that the psychological symptoms are mistakenly diagnosed as pathological because they aren't understood, in a broader context, as a means to a happy, enlightened end. He framed Kundalini as a tough journey, with a worthy, spiritual reward at the finish line: transcendent and continuous bliss. The uncomfortable symptoms are just a natural part of the process, similar to any sort of physical detox or cleanse (Broad, 2012).

The Influence of Mass Media

Through urbanization and advances in communication technologies, the mass media eventually came to play an increasingly greater role in Western societies. In this new social environment, mass media became a surrogate for direct conversation within the public sphere, leading people to passively observe rather than actively participate (Jovchelovitch, 1995). Today, symbolic coping, which involves managing unfamiliar phenomena through anchoring and objectification, primarily occurs through the media rather than personal interactions (Wagner et al., 1999). The Internet, and the advent of the read/write web may have helped to reverse this trajectory, but mass media still plays a significant role in the development of social representations (Shirky, 2008).

Most of the knowledge and ideas that are disseminated through the mass media originate from science. In order to appeal to the broadest possible audience, and penetrate everyday conversation within the public sphere, ideas must be abstracted and transformed. Through the use of metaphors and imagery, the mass media must find a way to relate scientific ideas to people's identity and personal interests (Moscovici, 1988). The mass media tends to communicate ideas in 3 major ways. Diffusion is used when the goal of the media is to develop opinions. Propagation is used when the goal is to create attitudes. It is an authoritative style of communication. Finally, propaganda is used in an effort to create stereotypes, concretely painting ideas and people as good or bad (Wagoner & Oldmeadow, 2008).

Media-Driven Perceptions of Yoga

Yoga is often communicated in the mass media via diffusion. For all the reasons discussed in this paper, yoga is a fascinating topic to people, and thus producing content about it usually leads to increased website page views, as well as increased sales in books, magazines, and DVDs (Broad, 2012). Moscovici (2008) explains that a chief goal of diffusion is to appeal to

the broadest audience possible. The author plays an outsider role, exploring the topic in the same

way that a local news reporter might showcase an emerging new trend. The story's author may

even use joking or humor to create distance, thus demonstrating a more objective and less

invested position. The goal is to simply keep the audience tuned in, as they curiously follow the

latest fads and quirky news within the world of yoga (Broad, 2012).

Similar to the way Catholics strategically adopted psychoanalysis, both yoga-specific and

general fitness publications use a propagation style of communication to create particular

attitudes about yoga (Broad, 2012; Moscovici, 2008). Not surprisingly, *Yoga Journal* and other

insider magazines portray the underlying principles of yoga in a very positive manner.

Meanwhile, fitness and health periodicals often talk about how to effectively incorporate yoga

poses into a cross-training schedule that includes many other types of workouts. Yoga is

portrayed as something that can enhance sports and other exercise activities through greater

flexibility, balance, and agility (Broad, 2012).

Throughout the twentieth century, activists and marketers have used the mass media to

propagandize yoga as a miraculous panacea that has an endless number of basic health, as well

as specific therapeutic benefits. However, as the practice became progressively more popular

throughout the general American population, the medical community began reporting a huge

increase in serious yoga-related injuries. In 2002, the mainstream media caught wind of this

epidemic, and their coverage of yoga suddenly shifted to a much more negative tone. For the first

time, the ancient sport was painted as a dangerous, risky activity. Bikram was particularly

attacked, because the style encourages intensity and competition over self-awareness and inner

focus. Bikram's hot room temperatures were also thought to increase the risk of overstretching.

All of this bad publicity forced even the friendliest publications within the yoga community to address safety issues in regards to certain poses (Broad, 2012).

Diverse Thinking and Minority Influence

Cognitive Polyphasia

One of the most important aspects of SRT is Moscovici's concept of *cognitive polyphasia*. He coined the term to represent the multiple forms of thought that exist within a society and how they interact with each other. Beliefs and there rationalizations can vary greatly across participants within a group. People have many different cognitive styles and worldviews. This means that neither knowledge nor logic can be concretely treated as universal or absolute. In fact, different types of logic are used by individuals, depending on a given situation or the purpose which motivates them (Jovchelovitch, 2002). Competing thought systems co-exist within the public sphere. More importantly, they often borrow from each other, as they constantly evolve together (Wagoner, 2012).

Collaboration and interaction can ultimately lead to temporary forms of consensus, but they may also increase plurality of thought. This is especially true in modern societies, where polarized groups are increasingly likely to form. Thought systems become fragmented, as people become more reliant on mass media than direct discourse within a live public sphere (Wagoner, 2012). The Internet makes people more aware of these isolated social groups within society, but it doesn't necessarily build bridges between the emerging islands of "truth" (Manjoo, 2011).

The Power of the Minority

Moscovici disapproves of social psychology's historically biased focus on conformity and the majority voice. He thinks that it masks the actual diversity of thought within social groups and society as a whole. He recognizes that social norms can greatly influence thoughts

and behavior. He also understands that certain general beliefs maintain a basic level of cohesion within collective circles. However, the majority voice does not offer a comprehensive picture of a culture. In fact, it is often full of bias, irrationality, prejudice, and unwarranted assumptions (Moscovici, 1988).

For this reason, Moscovici (1988) believes it is a mistake to ignore the powerful impact that a minority can have. Minorities can generate impressive social movements that eventually lead to dramatic, transformative change and innovation. The more persistent and consistent pressure that a minority places on the majority, the more likely it is to put the majority in doubt about their beliefs. This doubt can sometimes catalyze fundamental changes in the way that the majority thinks (Wagoner, 2008).

The Many Faces of Yoga

In yoga, both cognitive polyphasia and minority influence are quite evident. Depending on the sub-group, profession, functional objective, situational context, or other factors, yoga is represented and rationalized in very different manners. A few pioneers, within these sub-groups, have creatively incorporated yoga into their practices. In many cases, these innovators have pressured the majority to reevaluate their conventional techniques, and become more open to alternative ideas.

A large number of urban women, including suburban moms, now see yoga as the perfect workout to stay thin, shapely, and sexy. Furthermore, pregnant women often share success stories about using yoga as a valuable prenatal care tool. Meanwhile, an increasing number of doctors have begun studying yoga and using it as an alternative healing technique, replacing or at least pairing it with more conventional medical procedures. In New York, Dr. Freeman prescribes carefully targeted yoga poses like other physicians would prescribe a particular drug.

By doing this, he has been able to heal rotator cuff injuries, stimulate bone growth in osteoporosis patients, and fight arthritis-induced stiffness. Similarly, certain psychologists have begun leveraging yoga as a treatment for depression. Meanwhile, artists, such as writers and painters, use yoga to get their creative juices flowing and fight through blocks. In the same vein, a handful of musicians have discovered that yoga can calm their nerves and decrease performance anxiety before they go on stage (Broad, 2012).

Within the fitness industry, "yoga had morphed into a confusing array of styles and brands" (Broad, 2012, p. 5). The minority influence of yoga evangelists lead to considerable changes in the way that many Americans view working out. During this process, however, competing groups also marketed yoga in ways that greatly transformed the way it was originally viewed in India. In an effort to appeal to Americans looking to get in shape and lose weight, the spiritual and slow meditative aspects of yoga were downplayed, while physical fitness benefits were touted instead. The objective was to squeeze yoga into the paradigm of conventional gym workouts (i.e. Group classes). Marketers sold it as the most superior form of exercise in the world, and the only physical practice required to stay fit. Meanwhile, Bikram Choudhury aggressively pushed his own brand of yoga, while simultaneously condemning other forms of sports and exercise as "childish" and harmful to the body. Today, yoga is ubiquitous throughout the world of fitness. Even when yoga is not practiced exclusively, various poses are often borrowed, modified, and incorporated into all kinds of group workout classes and personal training sessions (Broad, 2012).

Unfamiliarity and Disruptions to the Status Quo

The primary purpose of SRs is to offer groups and their members a sense of stability, commonality, and familiarity (Wagoner, 2012). Having a shared representation of reality is

reaffirming, and it also makes people feel safe. When faced with unfamiliar phenomena, people tend to become frightened. The instability that a novel event creates can be very disruptive, as it threatens group ID and possibly undermines social conventions (Wagner et al., 1999). It may cause individuals to become more rigid in their thinking, as they attempt to restore not only the group order, but also possibly even their own sense of self. This is why, during uncertain periods, people gravitate toward familiar routines and tend to support the status quo. Unfortunately, rigid thinking and a desperate need to make sense of an unstable situation can also lead to biases, stereotyping, and prejudice, as some resort to profiling and more superficial schemas (Moscovici, 1988).

Cognitive dissonance and unfamiliarity can arise in two ways. Entirely novel phenomena can be introduced from outside the group. In this case, individuals initially have no frame of reference to make sense of the foreign object or event. Consequently, a group must deliberate and creatively work together to assimilate the unfamiliar thing into their existing knowledge frameworks. Alternatively, a familiar thing can reveal itself out of context, still creating uncertainty and tension. In this case, the group needs to find a way to cognitively reorganize their social representations in a way that allows them to continue making logical and predictable sense of their world. With both scenarios, the group must symbolically transform something non-intuitive into something intuitive; and in this way, new meaning is generated (Wagoner, 2008).

What we learn from these processes is that groups do not exist in isolation. Interactions with both nature and other social groups can create disruptions. In this way, groups influence each other by forcing structural changes to each other's representations of reality (Wagner et al., 1999). Jahoda (1988) adds that unfamiliar ideas act as a trigger, kicking off one or more rounds of group dialogue. Through these interpersonal communications, the unfamiliar is co-opted and

incorporated into new or updated SRs. Such social negotiations are driven more by memories and tradition than reason and simple logic.

Why Should I Practice Yoga and What Makes it Good for Me?

When yoga was first brought to America from the East, it was very much an unfamiliar phenomenon to the general population, and the culture did not yet know exactly where such a practice might fit into a commercialized Western society. There have been many legends, myths, and rumors about yoga, but the true risks and rewards have often remained elusive. It also hasn't always been unclear as to what sort of audience may benefit the most from the practice. In order to make sense of yoga, and its growing popularity within American culture, various sub-groups attempted to assimilate it into knowledge frameworks that people were already comfortable and familiar with. Sometimes, this co-opting was done strategically for the sake of capitalistic opportunity, but other times it was done in a genuine effort to expand alternative treatment options for clients or patients (Broad, 2012).

At the time that yoga first became popular in India, almost no females practiced it, and it was not primarily recognized as a workout routine. After it was brought to the United States, marketers and yoga evangelists took advantage of the unfamiliarity amongst Americans, and begin positioning yoga as an ideal fitness activity for young urban women, suburban moms, and even older women looking to keep in shape or regain pain-free mobility. Furthermore, because of the fitness trends of the times, yoga was assimilated into a more familiar and conventional aerobic paradigm. Thus, promoters falsely claimed that yoga was the ultimate and only exercise routine necessary to maintain peak aerobic fitness. Some practitioners bought into these claims and begin to exclusively use yoga as their only workout method. Others ignored the dogmatic

claims, but still managed to incorporate yoga into a broader exercise regimen that also includes weightlifting, running, and other forms of physical activity (Broad, 2012).

When first encountering yoga, William James, Carl Jung, and other psychologists focused more on the spiritual and mood-enhancing aspects of this exotic practice. James was particularly interested in yoga's potential to revitalize the spirit, reduce stress, promote relaxation, quiet obsessive thoughts, and release pent up emotions. Similarly, some progressive medical doctors saw potential in yoga as a low-risk, non-invasive treatment for physical ailments and diseases that could be used as an alternative to pharmaceutical drugs and surgery. They subscribed to the notions of Gune, an early Indian yoga researcher and teacher. He was convinced that specific poses could be prescribed to patients, based on specific diagnosed symptoms (Broad, 2012).

Anchoring and Objectification

The heart of SR generation is anchoring and objectification. This is how the unfamiliar become familiar. SRs are made up of symbols. These symbols are used to create new, shared realities out of existing ones. SRs symbolically tie new, unfamiliar objects to existing objects in order to inject meaning and make sense of it. This is all done through language and communication (Jovchelovitch, 1995).

Anchoring: Coping with Unfamiliar Phenomena

When encountering an unfamiliar phenomenon, the first mediation stage is to anchor it to something that is familiar and already ingrained within the group psyche (Jovchelovitch, 1995). This is how a group initially handles ambiguous stimuli in order to make it more relatable within the symbolic realm of their culture (Wagoner, 2012).

Anchoring involves *displacement*: assigning the reference of one object to another. This is a social, creative process driven by language and culture. It requires imagination and playing around with meaning (Jovchelovitch, 1995). Here, Moscovici borrows from Bartlett's concept of "naming" (Wagner et al., 1999). Anchoring allows a group to classify something unfamiliar and make it fit into a commonly recognized reality framework that is already known (Jahoda, 1988; Jovchelovitch, 1995).

Objectification: Generating Concrete Meaning Structures

The second mediation stage is objectification. This step involves a process of *condensation*: symbolically combining heterogeneous images together to form a brand new, unified meaning structure (Jovchelovitch, 1995; Moscovici, 1988). Objectification is partially inspired by Bartlett's "conventionalization," which deals with converting an abstract idea into something tangible that can be easily socialized and widely discussed (Wagoner, 2012).

Metaphors are often used in order to make the new idea more concrete and recognizable. After this constructed object becomes projected into the world, people increasingly refer to and interact with it as if it literally has the metaphorical characteristics being symbolically afforded to it (Wagner et al., 1999; Wagoner & Oldmeadow, 2008). In this way, objectification can be both constraining and creatively liberating. The process co-opts new ideas into old ways of thinking, but it also helps people look at existing paradigms in different ways, as new connections are made (Wagoner, 2008).

Social representations are the vehicle in which objects are shared and related to within a community. Objects are inherently social. Therefore, they are bound to both the interactive context and unique social characteristics of the group that is utilizing the object for behavior or communication (Moscovici, 1988; Wagner et al., 1999).

Using Symbols to Make Sense of Yoga

Many specialized fields or social groups attempt to symbolically anchor yoga to concepts that are already familiar to them. This anchoring can be accomplished, both by showing how yoga is similar, and how it is different from another referential object.

In the realm of fitness, instructors have presented yoga as an optimal aerobic activity by downplaying static postures in favor of more vigorous, rapid, flowing movements that heat up the body and make you sweat. Yoga was originally contrasted from other forms of exercise by emphasizing unique aspects such as controlled breathing, sensitivity to energy flows, and an internal hyperawareness of body position. The deliberate manipulation of breathing is symbolically portrayed as a form of human hibernation, while the breath, itself, represents a person's "life force" (Broad, 2012).

Mental health professionals compare yoga to a sedative drug that enables relaxation and combats anxiety caused by over stimulating urban life stresses. Jung metaphorically described a relationship between inner struggles and outer physical struggles that are encountered during difficult yoga poses. In this way, yoga is being understood and represented within the realm of psychological constructs. In a similar manner, it has become anchored to the concept of pharmaceutical prescriptions. Like a drug, it can be therapeutically employed to manipulate hormone levels, improve moods, and enable more restful sleep (Broad, 2012).

Because of yoga's historical connections to sexual enhancement (i.e. Tantra), it is often anchored to sexual concepts. For example, a typical class follows a similar progression to sexual intercourse. It starts out gently and increases steadily into more intense tensions and flexions, eventually reaching a peak, extreme level of exertion. With all tension finally released, the class ends in savasana or corpse pose, where practitioners lie in complete relaxation and silence. The

hit television show, *Sex and the City*, even managed to popularize the term, "yogasm," in an effort to label this sensual yoga experience. Such a name overtly anchors yoga practice to the act of sex (Broad, 2012).

In Hinduism, the meditative and reflective aspects of yoga, clearly lend themselves to religious connotations. From the very beginning, yoga has been symbolized as a mystical activity that can ultimately lead to enlightenment, greater spirituality, and revelations about the meaning of life. Through this prism, yoga can be understood in the same manner that prayer and other common religious practices are commonly recognized (Broad, 2012).

For artists, yoga is anchored to creative states of mind, in which instinct, intuition, aesthetics, and emotional expression dominate the mental landscape. Yoga gurus teach their students to turn off the analytical, logical parts of their brains that obsess over past and future events, intricate details, judgments, and facts. Practitioners are encouraged to remain in the present and make improvisational adjustments to poses based on generalized impressions of how they feel at any given moment (Broad, 2012).

Over time, yoga has become a more permanent and ubiquitous part of American culture. During this assimilation, yoga has been objectified in universally recognized ways. Yoga has emerged as a global icon of serenity: the antithesis of modern, urban life. Therefore, it is often understood as an anecdote to the flood of information and stimulation encountered everyday within the city. In Cambridge, Massachusetts, the city even began printing yoga postures on parking tickets that meter maids handed out. This was implemented as a subtle psychological intervention to calm angry recipients that may have had their day ruined by finding a ticket on their windshield. This is a clear example of yoga, as a constructed object, being projected into

the world. Just the image of a yoga pose on a ticket may encourage calm reflection, offering a subconscious reminder of tranquility in the face of present stress or conflict (Broad, 2012).

The Construction, Communication, and Transformation of SRs

Sources and Propagation of SRs

SRs are inherently social and thus they are always constructed and propagated within a social setting. There are 3 pathways that SRs are conceived and projected across a society: hegemonic, emancipated, and polemical. Hegemonic SRs are handed down from the top levels of a group by authoritarian figures in the government, church, or executive level of a company. Typically, but not always, these hegemonic SRs are shared by all members. Emancipated SRs emerge when subgroups interact within close proximity of each other. This commonly occurs within a university or professional field. As information is disseminated across subgroups, SRs continually morph and evolve based on the frame of reference that each subgroup member approaches a social object. Polemical SRs form as a result of social conflict or controversy, typically between two distinct groups. These SRs are not as widespread as the other two types, since they are only shared amongst the parties involved in the conflict (Moscovici, 1988).

An SR is rarely just blindly accepted and internalized when broadcast from the top-down. Subsets of information must first be carefully selected, processed, interpreted and reconstructed within a frame that is relevant to a particular individual or group (Jovchelovitch, 2002; Moscovici, 1988). This orientation and attachment to an SR can only occur through peer-to-peer conversation and co-construction that is not necessarily controlled by those at the top of the social hierarchy (Jovchelovitch, 2002).

Generating and Validating SRs

Representation is an ongoing, communicative activity designed to generate symbols, which ultimately can be used to make sense of the world and produce true human meaning (Jovchelovitch, 2002). People must act out their own realities, within the context of their immediate social context (Moscovici, 1988). This is the realm where definitions can change and be reinterpreted in a variety of ways. Moscovici (1988) states, "The multitudinous forms of knowledge and beliefs with which we deal every day are the outgrowth of a long chain of transformations" (p. 215). Bartlett refers to this phenomenon as "serial reproduction" (Wagner et al., 1999). What this tells us is that social thinking and is hardly based on strict logic or direct observation. Instead, it is creative, figurative, symbolic, and associative. In this way, thinking is necessarily social, involving multiple people; not just the mind of single individual (Moscovici, 1988).

SRs are critical to understanding reality because the human mind cannot make sense of perceived objects in the physical world without using symbolic representation as an interpretative filter (Jovchelovitch, 2002). Consequently, SRs contain Gestalt-like properties, in that the whole is different than the sum of its parts (Jovchelovitch, 1995). Producing symbols requires mutual co-construction through an elaborated performance of communications and actions. Only by generating symbols and linking these symbols together can practical meaning finally be extracted (Jovchelovitch, 2002).

Moreover, because SRs are, by definition, filters, they are opportunistic and selective. During the constructive and performative process of generating SRs, only a subset of information and facts are incorporated, based on relevancy that is mutually perceived by the group. This creative cherry picking is ultimately justified by rules of logic that are retroactively applied to fit within the framework of the SR that has been generated. The new knowledge is reified and

reinforced during the objectification phase, when the SR is fully incorporated into everyday practices. At this point, objects and their properties take on a life of their own and begin to be recognized as common sense (Moscovici, 1988). Once again, in Gestalt terms, an object is like a figure, superimposed against a social ground of tradition and beliefs. Thus, individual thought and interpretation is always embedded within a context of social life (Wagoner, 2012).

The Evolution of SRs, Communication, and Society

It is important to remember that SRs are never static. Rather, they constantly evolve, each time they are re-thought or re-enacted through behavior. As SRs morph, so does society. In this way, SRs can be disruptive and produce challenges, but they can also help groups resolve conflicts and solve problems. As the world becomes more globalized and accessible, culture clashes are more inevitable. This forces individuals to handle many new situations by adapting their representations and modifying their perceptions. Because of the ever-increasing speed and range of communication technologies (e.g. the Internet), these transformations also occur more quickly. As a consequence, innovation and progressive values can often take priority over simply reestablishing past cultural traditions, even though such cultural traditions do remain an influential force (Moscovici, 1988).

The Dynamics of Yoga's Continual Transformation

Early on, back in India, yoga was co-opted by political and religious leaders so it could be repurposed as a tool to combat the myth of Western, white superiority that often accompanied British colonial rule. This was a calculated, hegemonic campaign designed to build Indian national identity. Elites in India leveraged yoga's reputation for ancient mysticism to propagate an aura of expert, enlightened knowledge about physical and spiritual well-being. Ironically, yogi drifters actually had a very low social status in the eyes of many Indian citizens, and they

were considered a detriment to the Hindu religion. Many Hindus were particularly embarrassed about yoga's primary focus on sex and magic. Consequently, yoga was propagandized as a superior fitness practice that is similar to martial arts, gymnastics, and wrestling. It was represented as a clean, healthy, and therapeutic activity that is soundly based on good science. Yoga was also deliberately hitched to the Hindu religion in order to enhance its image as a peaceful and spiritual endeavor (Broad, 2012).

Corporate-imposed images of yoga can also be considered a form of hegemonic SR. Broad calls this influence the "yoga industrial complex." Similar to Indian Hindu nationalists, capitalistic organizations also use propaganda to sell the idea that yoga is the perfect fitness routine that can offer a hard, toned body, aerobic fitness, spiritual tranquility, and overall better health. Eastern tradition and history are leveraged to surround yoga with an exotic mystique and heightened credibility, but mostly yoga is glorified as a supreme way to workout. Unlike Indian elites, however, American businesses are not shy about selling the apparent sexual benefits of yoga, as well, because they recognize it as profitable. There is strong clinical evidence to suggest that yoga contributes to increased testosterone levels, enhanced desire and arousal, better circulation, and stronger orgasms. At the same time, it is interesting to note that there are many scientifically discovered benefits that yoga commercial enterprises fail to fully recognize or publicize, because they don't necessarily fit into the traditional fitness-marketing model. For instance, yoga has been proven to combat depression, as well as reduce stress and performance anxiety. This is a good example of an SR being constructed as an opportunistic filter that only highlights information perceived as relevant to the industry's primary interests, objectives, and goals (Broad, 2012).

Emancipated SRs of yoga arise when expert subgroups within realms such as medicine, psychology, exercise science, and music conduct experiments and share research or anecdotal experiences. Together, these subgroups co-construct and evolve new SRs of yoga, as they attempt to make sense of or assimilate new external information about the practice. Fitness instructors may tell their students about the mood enhancement effect that yoga has, in an effort to bolster the case for why yoga is such a beneficial exercise program. Meanwhile, physicians have managed to raise awareness among certain yoga activists about the hidden epidemic of severe yoga-related injuries. In response, these activists have sought to tweak poses, redesign flows, and replace dangerous movements with safer ones. Additionally, teachers stopped pushing students beyond safe physical limits and, instead, encouraged awareness and mindfulness, reminding them to ignore their egos (Broad, 2012).

Throughout yoga's history, it has been surrounded by a great amount of controversy, social conflict, and competing interests. Consequently, polemical SRs of yoga are often constructed. As stated earlier, Hindu nationalists once associated yoga with dirty, hedonistic drifters and thus sought to reinvent it as a bourgeois, hygienic sport, grounded in science and designed with fitness and spirituality in mind. In the West, some doctors see yoga as a threat to conventional medical treatments. As a result, they simply denounce it as unsafe and detrimental to one's physical health. Meanwhile, Jung warned that Kundalini, a central aspect of yoga, is psychologically dangerous and has the potential to drive a person insane. Polemical SRs are also fueled by celebrity yoga gurus and commercial enterprises, who compete in the marketplace by making bold claims that their style is vastly superior to any other. Choudhury Bikram is famous for his eccentrics, calling Ashtanga, Vinyasa, and other styles "bogus yoga" or "Mickey Mouse yoga." He insists that these competing approaches are watered down and that they do not

authentically respect ancient tradition, like his brand of hot yoga does (Broad, 2012). In response

to Bikram's militaristic and intense style, yet another competing approach emerged, within the

past 10 years. Moda is a kinder, gentler alternative to Bikram, in which the room temperatures

are not quite as hot, the sequence of poses is more flexible, and students are encouraged, rather

than shamed, for taking water breaks (Rubin, 2013). These philosophical differences and

competing political interests vividly illustrate how polemical forces play an important role in

shaping and defining yoga.

Sub-groups are continuously influenced by each other as they actively communicate and

construct new representations of yoga. Social thinking leads to both a symbolic and practical

evolution of the sport. New ideas, whether they come from science, mythology, marketing

claims, or anecdotal experience, create disruptions to the established order and eventually morph

established definitions. As those in the public sphere attempt to make sense of all this competing

information, the transformation of yoga continues: how it is practiced, how it is perceived to

benefit or harm us, and where it fits into everyday culture.

Assimilating Scientific Knowledge

One of Moscovici's primary concerns is how scientific knowledge is transformed into

public common sense (Wagoner & Oldmeadow, 2008). Science is a specialized knowledge,

produced by a sub-group within academia. Any scientific idea that is considered relevant to

members of the general group (outside of the specialized sub-group), will become assimilated in

the culture, but not before it is transformed considerably (Moscovici, 1988). Moscovici

demonstrates why layman, common sense interpretations of scientific theory cannot be

trivialized as ignorant or distorted thinking. Rather, this everyday thinking is situated within an

intricate, contextual logic, and it requires a full breadth investigation of the culture in order to

truly understand it (Wagoner, 2012).

This process of selection, transformation, and assimilation does not necessarily involve the same rigid, formal rules that the scientific community attempts to place around the generation of theory and experimental results (Moscovici, 1988). In fact, conclusions hold more weight and interest than the original premises (Wagoner, 2012). Non-specialists tend to be more opportunistic, and their creative interpretations become driven by both the social context and their functional objectives within this social space (Moscovici, 1988). At this point, science becomes common sense. Common sense is a socialization of science and it is used to drive communication while shaping behavior. This means that the technical details are less important to non-specialists than the concepts and their practical implications (Wagoner & Oldmeadow, 2008).

There are three phases that a new scientific idea goes through, from when it is first conceived to when it becomes disseminated and digested by the general public. The scientific phase is when a new theory is presented exclusively within academic circles. Next, in the representative phase, society at large is exposed to the scientific theory. Here, the ideas may present a disruption and a threat to the way people see the world. As the theory is diffused, it must be co-opted or integrated into an SR. This is the constructive, creative process that builds from the ground up. Finally, during the ideological phase, one or more sub-groups construct a logical, top-down justification for the SR. The goal, at this point, is to re-legitimize the theory by making it feel scientific again. Ideologies take socially constructed interpretations of a scientific theory and make them official so that they can be used to advance the interests of the social group (Wagoner & Oldmeadow, 2008). Together, these three phases demonstrate how SRs are

really an evolutionary product that transforms scientific theory into common sense, and eventually into ideology (Jahoda, 1988).

Reconciling Science and Common Sense Within the Yoga Community

One of the chief purposes of Broad's book, *The Science of Yoga*, is to break down the myths about yoga, explore the clear scientific findings that exist, and lay out the specific areas where more research needs to be conducted. He feels strongly that for yoga to mature, its teachers, gurus, and devoted advocates must begin aligning themselves more closely with the scientific community.

Unlike the psychoanalysis phenomenon that Moscovici explored, yoga did not begin as a scientific theory at all. Despite his controversial status, Freud was firmly entrenched within the academic world and the scientific community. More importantly, the general public perceived Freud as a legitimate theoretical psychologist who was an expert in his field. Yoga, on the other hand, rose from the ranks of gypsies and vagabonds, who traveled around using yoga to perform circus-like feats of magic, mysticism, and superhuman powers. Yoga had many roots in superstition and spirituality. Its followers were prone to cult-like behavior, and unabashed sexuality also played a major part within the community of those who practiced it (Broad, 2012).

When the Hindu nationalists sought to co-opt and sterilize yoga for their own political purposes, they leveraged science, to a great extent, in order to elevate yoga to a higher social status within fitness and healthcare circles. However, when yoga was introduced to the Western world, its new American promoters swiftly cast science aside, and blind dogmatism prevailed once again (Broad, 2012).

The interesting thing is that a lack of scientific origin never seemed to matter much to everyday Americans, who naively became exposed to the exotic world of yoga. Celebrity gurus

cavalierly went around making bold claims and assertions about the amazing things yoga could

offer people, but rarely even attempted to back these claims up with scientific literature

references. Instead, their wild promises were based on personal, anecdotal experiences and

hearsay. Moreover, yoga had no centralized governing body, consistent training curriculum, or

established licensing bureaucracy. Even so, this hardly stopped eager new students from fully

trusting in their teachers and believing in all the hype about yoga's inflated health benefits

(Broad, 2012).

One might interpret this as the scientific phase being skipped altogether. However, one

also could argue that the rigorous conventions of science were temporarily replaced by a

different kind of intellectual authority or expertise. From a social representation standpoint, the

very idea of science may have been redefined or broadened within the public sphere. Because of

yoga's ties to ancient tradition and the "wisdom" of the East, yoga and its leaders appear to enjoy

an aura of implied scientific legitimacy, in the same manner that herbal medicines, reflexology,

and acupuncture are increasingly accepted across the Western world. Still, it is surprising that

opportunistic marketers, within the "yoga industrial complex," can repeatedly get away with

making many spurious claims about yoga that science has unequivocally proven to be false (e.g.

aerobic benefits, oxygenation of the body). Yoga activists, and leaders in the community,

cheerfully propagate these statements while totally ignoring the contradictory scientific evidence

(Broad, 2012). This points us back to the controversial debate within social psychology about

primitive thinking vs. scientific thinking, and the embedded cultural dynamics that go along with

it (Wagoner, 2012).

As the public sphere establishes a common sense understanding of yoga, these

interactions illustrate how polemical, emancipated, and hegemonic forces continue to influence

the construction of common sense, even while SRs solidify and transition into a supposedly more

stable ideological phase. Disruptions to established beliefs can occur at any point in the

transformational process, whether they come from science, religion, product marketing, media,

or influential minority peers. This is why SRs cannot help but remain fluid and ever changing.

Conclusion

Moscovici's SRT offers a very rich and powerful set of concepts, which can be used to

qualitatively explore the dynamic process of social conflict, collaborative sensemaking, and

evolving public consensus about unfamiliar ideas, as they gradually become assimilated into a

society's culture. As I have demonstrated in this paper, the study of psychoanalysis that

Moscovici conducted can be used as somewhat of a blueprint for exploring other types of

phenomena (Moscovici, 2008).

In this particular case, I chose to break down Broad's (2012) cultural and scientific

investigation of yoga, and reinterpret it through the filter of SRT's core concepts. This theoretical

exploration enabled me to uncover a complex interplay between science, mythology, and

common sense that has lead to dramatic transformations, both in the way yoga is publicly

perceived, and in the way yoga is practiced amongst various social groups. When looking at

Broad's study from this angle, the parallels to Moscovici's famous study become overwhelmingly

clear. Similar to the cultural phenomenon surrounding psychoanalysis, science, politics, religion,

marketing, and popular culture have all historically played a major role in yoga's evolving social

representations. Furthermore, there is little doubt that these sociological forces will continue to

shape the definition of yoga for many years to come.

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