Redefining Womanhood in the West: How Yoga Helps Women Transcend Damaging and Limiting Perceptions in Western Society

by

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Dedication

For my mom; thank you for being my guiding light and for teaching me love and acceptance in this world.
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I want to graciously thank, first and foremost, my family for their endless support and love. You all keep me sane and smiling.

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Abstract

Western society often subjects women to damaging perceptions and expectations. For instance, there is a deeply unhealthy focus on women’s physical appearance; also there are normative roles and ways of behaving that are very limiting. As a consequence, women suffer repercussions that are often severe, such as body image issues and gender stereotyping. Through true stories intertwined as a métissage, this study aims to shift the ways in which Western society negatively views women and the ways that women are conditioned to perceive themselves, using yoga as the catalyst for that change. Focusing on the lived experiences of four female yoga practitioners who are the study’s participants, this study illustrates how the physical and mindful practice of yoga helps women transcend to more positive perceptions about their selves, lives and bodies in a society that has otherwise contradictory beliefs about women.

Keywords: women, yoga, Western beliefs, societal, transforming knowledge, métissage.
**Introduction**

Yoga came into my life in 2008. I decided to try it, partially out of curiosity. It seemed like studios were popping up on every street corner. The apparel and accessories were being sold all over. Yoga was everywhere and it captured my attention.

Yet, I truly believe that yoga came into my life out of sheer fortuity. At the time I was suffering from some very deep and painful personal issues.

I have struggled with low self-esteem and a negative self-image throughout most of my life. I always felt pressured to fit within certain standards because I am female and I like being thin and pretty, among a long list of other traits. I saw myself conforming to the expectations created by society and the world around me that surrounded my physicality, sexuality and gender. I thought this was normal; this was how I had to be. Yet, trying to fulfill these expectations had extremely damaging consequences for me.

In 2008, at twenty years old, I was battling depression, anxiety and an eating disorder; I felt a devastating sense of hopelessness.

A good friend encouraged me to try yoga, which took a lot of convincing. Although I had always been curious about yoga, I could never get myself through the doors of a studio because of the shame I felt about myself and my body. At that point I knew I was in dire need of help, though I refused professional treatment because I was too afraid to confront my issues. My friend begged me to try yoga as an alternative to medical treatment. She told me it would help me recover, heal and begin to see myself in a new light. I was skeptical. Stretching and breathing was the answer to my issues? Yeah right. “This is how I will always be and how I will always feel,” I thought. Yet, somehow, I found myself entering a yoga studio with a mat slung under my arm.
The first time I stepped into the yoga studio where I now regularly practice and onto my mat was an intensely life changing moment. Observing men and women of all different ages, races, shapes and sizes, gathered together in the still, calm of the practice room I was in awe. I felt comforted. It was such an odd feeling to be in a place that felt safe and without judgment. As the practice began I became aware of everyone moving in unison. I felt an overwhelming sense of liberation as I breathed together with everyone else in the room. It was the first time I truly became conscious of my body. For a long time I had seen myself as imperfect, ugly. Moving into different postures I noticed how strong and incredible my body really was. In those moments my preconceived judgments had disappeared and I felt happiness and contentment just being myself.

Six years later I continue to practice yoga and it has not only become part of my daily routine but also engrained in my life. Yoga has helped me heal from years of pain I inflicted upon myself. It has taught me to overlook the damaging perceptions I once had about myself and instead find the acceptance and respect for who I am as a woman in this society and in this world.

My personal experiences are what inspired me to explore yoga within this thesis. This study explores how yoga is a catalyst that helps women transcend from the damaging and limiting beliefs Western society creates for them, such as the focus on physical appearance and normative roles and ways of behaving, into more positive and comfortable perceptions about self, image and bodies.

On a personal level this topic is deeply significant for me because through my own yoga practice I have developed a more healthy sense of self, a self I feel comfortable and at peace with. This topic is also significant to the participants in my research, the backbone of this study
so to speak, whose experiences within their own lives and yoga practices have allowed them to create more positive perceptions of themselves as women within Western society.

Currently there is a gap in the literature dealing with the relationship between yoga and women. While there are existing studies that explore the topic of yoga and the linkage to aspects such as self-image, body image, disordered eating practices and societal/cultural attitudes of Western women, this study is unique in the way it approaches these ideas as it utilizes arts-based research to explore these issues, intersecting human experience, memory, identity and culture. Many previously conducted studies are quantitative, focusing on concrete and testable data, and, while these studies have provided beneficial research, they lack the essence of human experience. This study takes a qualitative perspective, focusing on the personal experiences of the participants involved, “moving away from rigidly structured research which artificially fragments individuals’ experiences” in order to construct understandings about women and their “identity as a [transition] from the modernist understanding of ‘self’ as enduring, immutable essence, and a growing interest in the way that identity is shaped in interaction and through discourse” (Elliott, 2005, p. 36).

Focusing on yoga as it currently exists in Western society, this study contributes to “the growing conversations” and understandings about women and yoga (Horton et al., 2012, p. 178) and acknowledges the “complexities and problems within [our] contemporary world” and in our society, and the urgent need to challenge and change them (p. 56).

**Literature Review**

Out of “all the concerns women face growing up in the Western world, the changing relationships women have with their bodies is one of the most challenging” (Rice, 2002, p. 147). Throughout their entire lives, Western women are subject to “a confusing range of messages”
(Rice, 2002, p. 147) “enforced by complex social forces” (p. 154) that “strongly affect a woman’s developing sense of her body as well as an evolving sense of self” (p. 147). According to Rice (2002) “from early adolescence into adulthood” (p. 154) the process of becoming a woman is extremely challenging because throughout her entire life she is taught “how she is supposed to look and act, and what is acceptable and taboo” (p. 155). Unquestionably, this leads to serious issues such as “body dissatisfaction” (p. 156) and a complicated understanding about one’s own identity as a consequence of trying to live up to societal conceptions and expectations. What is needed are new ways to think about the way in which society conditions women, so that women can be more accepting of and comfortable with their bodies and selves.

The following literature review is broken into three sections. The first explores the ways Western society subjects women to negative and damaging conceptions and how “transformation of knowledge” is needed so that we can rethink “dominant traditions” and create new frameworks (Minnich, 2004, p. 29). The second section will explore current discourse within the growing field of modern yoga studies. The literature discussed within this section supports the aims of this study, focusing on aspects such as self-image and body image and how yoga is a catalyst for creating positive ideas and beliefs about these self-concepts. Importantly, this section illustrates how existing ideas about women (preeminentely those concerning Western- based expectations) have already been rewritten, so that we can begin to rethink “dominant traditions” and conceptualize new frameworks (Minnich, 2004, p. 29). Lastly, a brief history about yoga, including its goals and objectives and the eight limbs of yoga, will be discussed to explain how it helps women release societally caused “habitual grasping and contradictions” to acquire more accepting and positive perceptions of themselves (Stone, 2008, p. 21).
The Makings of a Woman: Societal Vocations and Beauty Myths

As I mentioned, growing up in the West, I felt so much pressure to assume a specific identity because I was a woman. I grew up believing that if I wasn’t pretty, slim, smart, polite, soft-spoken, delicate (the list goes on) that I wasn’t a real woman. I saw so many women as cookie-cutter versions of one another and I thought this was normal. It was only when I started going through some very personal issues that I began to question why I had such problematic perceptions about myself and other women. Why did I feel the need to wake up every day, put on makeup and curl my hair? Why, when I dressed up for any occasion, did I need to wear dresses and high heels? Why did I feel condemned by my body? Why did it seem like women in particular faced such strong limitations and restrictions in Western society? Was I doomed to feel this way from the moment I was born? Exploring these questions is important for framing the context around the ways Western society restricts women and the damaging effect it has on them.

A major feminist text, The Second Sex (2011), is a good starting point for this discussion, explaining how a woman’s “success in living their human condition does not come easily” because they are brought up in a world and a society that teaches them how to assume their femininity and destiny (p. 280). While the text was originally published in 1949, much of it still holds true to contemporary issues, such as the oppression of women through gender bias and characterizations.

In The Second Sex, Simone de Beauvoir famously says, “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (de Beauvoir, 2011, p. 283). She suggests that it is not physical biology that defines “the human figure [of a woman] in society” but society itself that shapes and defines a woman (p. 283). According to de Beauvoir, there is a “passivity that characterizes [men and
women] from their earliest years. But it is a false claim that therein lies a biological given; in fact, it is a destiny imposed on them by their teachers and by society” (p. 294). Ultimately, men and women are acknowledged and shaped through the norms and restrictions imposed on them by society, and are also conditioned through “the gaze of others” (p. 283).

The gaze of others that de Beauvoir refers to suggests that, from birth, children are conditioned into distinctly gendered ways of being in the world. According to de Beauvoir, at a very young age, boys are taught to “carry out the apprenticeship of [their] existence [by being] independent; tough; to climb trees; be proud of his muscular body; his sex organ; play sports; test his own virility” (p. 294). Whereas, on the other hand, the first thing girls are taught is that they have to be “true women” (p. 295). So, girls are “given other little girls as friends, books and games are chosen for her that introduce her to her destiny, her ears are filled with feminine wisdom [and] feminine virtues are presented to her…such as charm and modesty” (p. 296).

Essentially, women are denied the “freedom to understand, grasp, and discover the world around” them on their own terms (p. 294). Instead, they are taught to please others, and to be [someone’s] “object; therefore renouncing [their] autonomy” (p. 294). From this, “strict repressions” and feelings of “subjective affirmation and alienation” are created which affect and dictate a woman’s entire life (p. 296). De Beauvoir’s conclusions are echoed in this study.

Another way society limits women is in the way it teaches them to perceive their physical bodies. Naomi Wolf (1990), in The Beauty Myth, says that out of all the feminine ideologies society creates to control women, perhaps the most powerful and troubling of all are the ways it idealizes women’s beauty and sexuality (p. 10). According to Wolf, Western society has poisoned our notions of beauty and has caused many women to struggle with “self-hatred, physical obsessions, terror of aging, and dread of lost control” (p. 9). Wolf says that much of this
is the fault of “society, culture and the consumer industries” (p. 11) which have created a particular image of women and have taken away a “woman’s right to choose what she wants to look like” which forces her to compromise her freedom and self-worth (p. 11). Western women are controlled by various ideals surrounding femininity and ‘womanliness’ that are completely misconstrued and, because women have been taught to believe these ideas throughout their entire lives, they are put in a jeopardizing position where they have no other choice but to believe that they are true (p. 271). Whether one agrees or not, the misconstrued ideas surrounding norms of gender within Western society do not allow women (or men) to develop and express a full range of characteristics and feelings. How will we be able to reconceptualize?

In Transforming Knowledge, Elizabeth Minnich (2004) explains that as human beings we are meant to inspire new meanings, challenge existing ideas and create new horizons (p. 1). The ideas within Transforming Knowledge are aligned with the aims of this study in exploring the need for transforming and rewriting meanings about gendered ways of thinking, specifically about women (p. 1). Minnich talks about how past curriculum and discourse have represented women poorly and that there is little understanding about women outside of what we have accepted as societal norms (p. 28).

According to Minnich, one of the biggest issues we (as a Western society) face is that we have been conditioned to believe everything that society teaches us, especially about gender. Western knowledge has imagined perceptions of gender for us, and, in consequence, faulty generalizations about human experience and traits. She notes the danger of this, saying that if we continue to abide by societal perceptions then women will be driven into omission and neglect (p. 28). She urges the importance of acknowledging “multiple contexts [and meanings] so that we can change these ideas” (p. 1). In other words, the transformation of knowledge comes
through acknowledging the diversity of human experience and not privileging one kind over the other. Minnich suggests rewriting existing ideas of femininity through literature, scholarship and curriculum and placing women back into them so that we can begin to rethink “dominant traditions” and create new frameworks (p. 29).

Creating a new framework in place of the “dominant traditions” about women is exactly what this study aims to do, by using the holistic and lived experiences of the participants within this study to challenge existing ideas and knowledge (p. 29). The research design and findings will be explored more within the methods and results sections. First, it is important to explore how yoga is the catalyst for transforming these perspectives.

**Discourse Surrounding Yoga and the Transformation of Knowledge: The Reinvention of Self through Yoga**

Before delving into a definition or historical context of yoga, current research and discourse within the growing field of modern yoga studies have been explored. These bodies of discourse are relevant to this study for a few reasons. For one, they have accomplished what Minnich has suggested, and what this study also aims to do, in transforming ‘traditional’ perceptions about women through literature and narrative. Secondly, they credit yoga as the catalyst for that knowledge transformation.

Currently there are “multi-dimensional conversations” (Horton et al., 2012, p. viii) about yoga which have resulted in “experiments with new ways of writing about yoga” (p. 40). Horton’s book, *21st Century Yoga* (2012), was created in order to “reach multiple constituencies” (p. 40) because yoga has “transformed and shifted” so much over time, especially within Western culture, which has also “changed dramatically over time” (p. 31). Intertwining aspects of “social, political, economic and environmental crises” the book embraces yoga as a way of
“engaging with [changes and] complexities and problems within the contemporary world” through a compilation of essays written by researchers, thinkers, theorists, teachers, therapists and yoga teachers and practitioners (p. 56).

Two essays are particularly relevant to this study. The first essay, “How Yoga Makes you Pretty: the Beauty Myth, Yoga and Me,” is written by a feminist writer, blogger and avid yogi, Melanie Klein (2012), who makes a strong connection between yoga and feminism and explains how both cause shifts in societal perceptions about gender. In this essay, Klein bridges the connection to yoga and feminism by explaining that both in their own ways essentially create “paradigm shifts” (p. 31). Klein recalls studying feminism in college and how she quickly made the connection between feminist ideas and yoga. She expresses how yoga mirrors feminism in some ways by drawing out aspects such as the relationship between women and their identities, and attitudes towards the self and body. According to Klein, her studies in feminism re-taught her everything she had been previously conditioned to learn about herself and other women. She realized that, “maybe there wasn’t something wrong with [her] body but maybe there was something wrong with the messages that mainstream media and culture proliferated – contorted and unrealistic messages that were raking in profits from [her] insecurity and from the body image issues of girls and women around [her]” (p. 31). Klein credits her yoga practice for initiating this epiphany, where she was able to unravel “years of social conditioning and replace [them] with a message of acceptance and love” (p. 28). Through every practice, Klein found she was “able to wipe the fog from the mirror and see the truth of [her] being more clearly and accept it” attributing “feminism and yoga as two complimentary systems for suturing the emotional and physical wounds and saving [her] life” (pp. 30, 40).
In another essay, “Starved for Connection: Healing Anorexia Through Yoga” by Chelsea Roff (2012), Roff recounts her “five-year long battle with anorexia nervosa” and how yoga not only helped her through recovery, but allowed her to rethink the ways in which she perceived her body, beauty, self-image and femininity (p. 74). According to Roff, yoga was crucial not only for her recovery but for “shifting the way [she] related to [her] body and self” (p. 81). Through Roff’s practice and experience, she was “provided an opportunity to explore [her] past through [her] body” (p. 84), “explore and heal from the trauma” she had endured and inflicted on herself (p. 83), to “experience her body as a vessel for the woman [she was] becoming” (p. 83) and rebuild the neural connections between the brain and the body which allowed her to “be with [her] body rather than deny its existence” (p. 82).

Much of what Klein and Roff discuss within their essays share common themes about the perception of gender, women, beauty and self-image that are discussed later in the métissage. They also elicit a personal narrative in order to create and reconstruct new ideas and meanings. Both authors take an in-depth look at yoga as it currently exists in Western society (p.xvi) where “reflection, writing, and dialogue are necessary components of the process” (p. 178) responsible for contributing to “the growing conversations” and understandings about women and yoga (p.178).

This study also aims to follow in this tradition by offering ideas, discourse and knowledge about yoga and women through reflection and narrative. As in these essays, this study examines the possibilities of how yoga can create “paradigm shifts” (Klein, 2012, p. 31) surrounding the perceptions of gender and ways that women see and relate to their bodies, self-image and selves (Roff, 2012, p. 74).
Yoga: From the Ancient Tradition to Transcendence and the Reunification with Our Selves

Yoga first emerged thousands of years ago in India. Today, it has become a “spectacularly multifaceted phenomenon” and is practiced worldwide (Feurstein, 2008, p. 654). For this reason, yoga is difficult to define because the practice has become so widespread with new branches and schools emerging all the time (p. 654). Yet, every branch and school of yoga shares the same ideas in that they are concerned with evoking a “state of being or consciousness” (p. 654) and the idea of a transcendental self (p. 655).

Yoga itself is an “ancient practice that derives from the Sanskrit root *yuj*, which means “to unite, join, harness, yoke and connect” (Muni, 2001, p. 1). Essentially, yoga “unifies the individual self with the universal self, the healthy body with a spiritual mind and yokes together body, mind and spirit” (p. 1). Yoga also establishes a connection between the finite and infinite, the microcosm and macrocosm, and the inner being and the divine Supreme Being (p 1). Thus, “it can be said that an overall objective of yoga is to aid and guide a person to transcend temporal limitations and break the barriers that separate one’s individual self from the universal self” (p. 7).

Expanding on the concepts of ego and universal self, Ingalsbe (2001) says our ego self (individual self) is derived from conscious and unconscious ideals that are constructed from concepts and patterns within our world, society and culture. Whereas, the universal self is the seat of the soul, the core of our being where our deepest thoughts and emotions reside, the place where we are our true and pure selves (Ingalsbe, 2001, p. 164). Yoga bonds both the ego and universal self, as the two are often separate, and helps us find the fluid balance between the individual self and the universal self, where we are able to operate purely from our truest self without the opposition of external forces (Ingalsbe, 2001, p. 164).
So, how exactly does yoga allow us to accomplish balance, transcendence and the fluid balance between the ego and universal self? The eight limbs of yoga are what “orients the practitioner to their practice and life of reunification” (Stone, 2008, p. 48). The eight limbs are part of the early teachings of Patañjali, who is considered one of the founding fathers of yoga. Perhaps the most influential of all Patañjali’s scriptures are the Yoga Sutras where the eight limbs are outlined. Patañjali says these eight limbs are not only foundational to yoga, but pivotal in helping people achieve the all-encompassing limb/goal of yoga: Kaivalya, which means solitude and/or equanimity in Hindu (Stone, 2008, p. 43). These eight limbs consist of the Yamas (external restraints), Niyamas (internal restraints), Asana (posture), Pranayama (breath), Pratyahara (withdrawing of the senses), Dharana (absorption), Samadhi (integration), and Kaivalya (Stone, 2008, p. 43).

In these eight limbs, one learns how to navigate relational existence in general (Stone, 2008, p. 43). One also comes to a total realization of self-reference and self-understanding (p. 43), opening up to a greater internal awareness (p. 7). Ultimately, the eight limbs allow one to achieve detachment and let go of negative and opposing forces within one’s life and the world. These ideas that provide a theoretical foundation for yoga bring to light some of the important themes that will arise later on within the métissage such as references to the ego, detachment, solitude and contentment.

Aside from the more traditional understandings of the practice, Michael Stone, who is a writer and philosopher, has captured some of my personal understandings of yoga, particularly in his book The Inner Tradition of Yoga (2008). According to Stone (2008), the deep and personal connections we forge in our yoga practice are pivotal for facilitating self-realization and delivering people from pain and suffering. Stone believes this to be as the all-encompassing
purpose of the practice and he goes further to say that pain and suffering are also most often how we come to yoga in the first place. He explains that pain and suffering can manifest within a person for a variety of reasons, one of the reasons being our world, society and/or culture, as we explore in this study (pp. 18-26).

One particular section in the book, which discusses how yoga helps us become deeply connected to ourselves, is most relevant to this study. Stone (2008) says “yoga begins not only in the present moment, but with the recognition of stress, discontent and dissatisfaction which characterizes much of our moment to moment experience” (p. 18). He further explains how yoga exists because it is the answer to what we are yearning for and what we seek to be free of, the stresses that affect our daily lives and cause so much dissatisfaction for us. “For many of us the longing to practice yoga has to do with aspiring to live a life free of habitual patterns of conditioning” and transcendence from the places where “there is lack, constriction and discontent” (p. 19).

For many Western women, this is exactly what yoga does for them— it allows them to confront contradictory and often damaging conditions imposed on their lives and guides them into more positive perceptions of themselves. This is evident in the métissage piece to follow, where four women offer their own insights about how yoga offered them transcendence, healing and unity. According to one participant, yoga allowed her to “address the hardship and suffering within her life” so that she could come to “important self-realizations” that allowed her to cope, heal and eventually let go of negative emotions and feelings. Through the participants’ stories, what Stone says is reiterated, showing how yoga is a way out of “habitual grasping and contradictions” (p. 21) and is a way to “free ourselves from what obstructs and entraps us” (Stone, 2008, p. 26).
**Research Methods**

This study utilizes arts-based research, a “breed of qualitative research,” (Rolling, 2010, p. 103), as a way to explore the topic as well as to provide epistemological and theoretical groundings (Leavy, 2009, p. 6). With creativity and human/cultural experience at the core of its approach, this study was conducted outside of the more traditional, scientific, quantitative approaches so that ideas can emerge through a new perspective (p. 103).

There are many reasons why the arts-based research method has been chosen for this study. For one, the approach draws on creative, artistic and “powerful aesthetic forms” in order to create new understandings, “vicariously re-experience the world,” and “see social phenomena in fundamentally new ways” (Barone, et al. 2012, p. 20). As previously discussed, this study aims to create new understandings about how the “feminine” gender is perceived within Western society. It aims to shift perspectives of how we (those who live in Western society) perceive feminine gender characteristics and how women perceive themselves. This is aligned with arts-based research as well, as it is concerned with “identity work” and “involves communicating the experiences associated with differences, diversity and prejudice” to “confront stereotypes that keep groups disenfranchised and biased” (p. 13). Using narrative as a “powerful aesthetic form,” new ideas are fundamentally created that allow aspects of the social world (specifically about gender) to be seen in another context (p. 20).

Arts-based research is also used because of its liberal research design. Without question, I would not have had the same freedom to present my research by any other method, especially from a more traditional and quantitative perspective. My aim was to create a narrative out of the interviews I conducted from the participants in this study and I felt that arts-based research
allowed me to do that uniquely and imaginatively, “presenting a look at the empirical world – the world of practical experience in an astonishingly new way” (p. 14-19).

It was also vital that arts-based research is rooted in its capacity to fulfill human needs by valuing participant experiences and the researchers interpretations of data (p. 17) which urges the “re-creation and openness to the possibility of alternative perspectives on the world” (p. 16). Bringing focus back to the idea of transforming knowledge, this method opened doors to create new ideas surrounding existing theories about gender, society, culture and yoga. It allowed “a fundamental shift in the conventional understandings about our social world” (Barone, et al. 2012, p. 14) and an “openness to the possibility of alternative perspectives” (p. 16).

This was accomplished through the most important aspect of the study: the methodology of métissage. As Leavy (2009) argues, the “telling, retelling, writing, and rewriting” of stories is an “integral part of the social research which is responsible for the construction of knowledge” and “knowledge transmission” (p. 25). Métissage is beneficial for structuring the narratives collected from the participants to make one fluid, cohesive narrative that merges text, experience, memory, identity and culture (Hasebe-Ludt, et al., 2009, p. 3). In line with this, a métissage piece is both a methodology and textual practice which braids together language, tradition, culture, and vernaculars, and incorporates autobiographical stories within “dominant traditions of literacy” (Hasebe-Ludt, et al., 2009, p. 142). As a communication and knowledge-building device, it also played an important part in “knowledge transmission” and “reframing and redefining” ideas (Leavy, 2009, p. 25) as well as reproducing “the lived experience of a gendered self” (Leavy, 2009, p. 25) by focusing on the inner and daily experiences of a gendered self and life through the textual production and reproduction of lived experience.” (p. 19). Thus ideas around gender
and women are at the forefront of this study so that they can be examined, explored and re-created through the literature.

Data and Data Gathering Tools

Research was conducted through a series of interviews. I initially interviewed ten women, but only chose four of those interviewees to be represented in this study. I chose a smaller, more intimate group of participants because I wanted to fully represent the depth and detail of each interview and ensure that I could properly capture everything in them as I weaved their interviews into a narrative. Simply, I did not have enough space to properly represent all ten interviews.

The participants are of varying age groups ranging from their mid-twenties to late fifties. Their ethnicities and backgrounds are mixed and they are from all over Canada. Each has different passions, interests, goals, hobbies and careers, and they have unique experiences and stories. What bonds these participants together is that they all have at one time or another felt painful pressure placed on them by Western society because they are women. For instance, many of the participants have suffered from issues surrounding their perception of self and body image or were troubled by gender-specific roles, which they felt placed unnecessary and limiting restrictions on them. All of the women attribute yoga to shifting these perceptions and helping to create new ideas about themselves.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face, on the phone (which included Skype and iChat) and through email. Participants were asked questions regarding their experiences as a woman, attitudes about gender, and their yoga practice. Before each interview, each participant was reminded that they were entitled to their anonymity (their identities are protected by a pseudonym), they didn’t have to answer any questions they didn’t want to or felt uncomfortable
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answering, and they could withdraw from the study at any time. The duration of each interview was no longer than 90 minutes. In some instances, some interviewees were contacted for a second interview for clarification purposes.

The interviewees were asked a series of questions with ideas reaped from the literature review. They are as follows:

- Describe your upbringing, childhood, and the place where you grew up. What do you remember most about this time and about these things?
- In your childhood and throughout your adolescence, did you ever have any instances where you felt negatively about yourself or your body? If yes, what do you think influenced this?
- What have been your passions and life goals throughout your life? Have they changed over time? If so, what made them change?
- How does our society’s perception of women affect and impact the ways that you look, feel and behave?
- In what ways have you struggled with negative feelings or thoughts about yourself as a woman because of our culture and society?
- Explain or describe moments where you have felt insecure or uncomfortable toward your gender, identity, body, self-image, or entire perception of yourself?
- Describe your favorite yoga pose. Take me through what is happening in the class, the steps you have to take to get there and what you feel while doing it.
- How does yoga affect your perception about women, body image and beauty? How has it changed your perception(s)?
I asked each woman to answer the questions as if they were telling a story, to be creative and excessive with detail and to avoid being formal. This ensured that there was a flowing dialogue, which made it easier to construct the métissage.

During the interview, each of the interviewees’ responses was recorded on an audio device and then transcribed so they could be analyzed, rewritten and worked into a narrative. After each interview, each participant was reminded that their responses might be edited, reconstructed or rewritten so that their interviews could be constructed into a narrative. They were reminded that although their first names would not be used, their story would be told from the first-person perspective using words like “I,” “my,” and “me.”

**Method of Analysis**

Once all interviews were transcribed, excerpts and pieces from them were chosen to construct a narrative. In some cases, parts from a participant’s interview may have been omitted, rewritten or reconstructed, but only after the participant consented. This was the case for some participants who were audio recorded and, for instance, lost their train of thought (saying “um,” “ah,” and “like”) or repeated answers within a question. However, I still ensured each narrative “retained the integrity and distinctiveness of the individual texts/voices” while “at the same time creating the new text” (Knowles and Cole, 2008, p. 142)

Once the interviews were transcribed using a voice-to-text application, I began weaving each participant’s interview together to create one fluid story. With the literature review in mind, I focused on drawing out the aspects that aligned with it. For example, I focused on drawing out ideas about oppression and negative attitudes toward body dissatisfaction and gender stereotyping, which all women felt, in some way or another, were a consequence of societal and
cultural forces. I also focused on each woman’s experience with their yoga practice and how yoga ultimately helped these women overcome their issues.

In the end, the métissage that follows weaves the unique stories of four women and how yoga helped them transcend societal and cultural boundaries into more positive perceptions about themselves.

**Yoga for Redefining Womanhood in the West: Stories for Transforming Knowledge**

*Putting ideas into reverse: an excerpt based on Laura’s experience*

“Widen your stance and extend your arms. Spin your right foot out 90 degrees, and turn your left toes and upper body to the back left wall. Lunge your left leg deeply. Run your right fingertips down your back right leg and extend your left fingertips to the sky. Look up. Receive energy. Open your heart. Feel yourself become grounded into your mat. Focus on your *drishti*. Let go of the negative, bring in the positive.”

I listen to my yoga instructor’s cues as I position myself into reverse warrior. Looking up past my fingertips towards the ceiling, I imagine looking right through it up at the sky. This is my *drishti*, my point of focus that keeps me concentrated while I hold the pose.

“I want to hear you breathe,” she instructs. “Breathe into the pose.”

I breathe in and out deeply, making ocean wave sounds through my throat.

“Acknowledge the feelings that come up, what do you feel?”

I feel fatigued as I lunge deeper and my legs begin to tremble. It takes so much will power not to straighten my lunged leg or move out of the pose. I am sore from my yoga practice the day before and all of my muscles are throbbing. Sweat beads down my forehead and into my eyes. I try not to wipe them away even though each trickle distracts and tests my focus.
“What do you feel?” she asks again. “Acknowledge those feelings. If you feel that you can no longer hold the posture, know that you can. Turn your negative self-talk into positive. Push and challenge yourself. You are more than what you know and feel.”

Her words help me find the empowerment I need to refocus and push harder into my legs. I suddenly become aware of my body and its strength. I feel every muscle tightening and my belly expanding and retracting with each breath. Bending myself backward even deeper, I stretch my right fingertips further down my leg until I can grip my calf, pushing myself as far as I can go for the final seconds that I am in the posture.

“What do you feel now?” she asks again.

I feel euphoric and indestructible.

“Think of your own personal mantra to help guide you fluidly out of the pose.”

Unwinding myself, I say, in my head, the mantra that has become a motto for my life - something that has taken me years to say and actually believe.

“I am strong and beautiful. I am the most perfect version of myself.”

Emily

I grew up in a small town in Manitoba called Killarney, which has a population of about 2,100 people. Growing up in a place like that made me feel like I was living apart from the rest of the world. You know when people say that places are so small it’s like living in a little bubble? This is what Killarney was like. Everyone knows each other. You can’t go down the street without at least a half-hour conversation with someone you know. Everyone is friendly and accepting, and I always felt safe and protected there.

I grew up with the same group of friends throughout my entire childhood and unlike most other girls we weren’t concerned with “being girly” and worrying about what our hair looked
like or what we wore. Killarney really only had one hair salon and one department store to buy clothes from anyways, so we all had the same haircuts and dressed in the same clothes. We didn’t care—I didn’t care. I never read *Cosmopolitan*, wore makeup, or fancy clothes, because girls in my town didn’t waste their time reading that stuff or painting their faces. We spent our days playing outside rather than obsessing over our vanity.

Growing up, I think I was shielded from the pressure system of Western society. I lived in a place and grew up around people that didn’t give a shit about what the rest of the world did when it came to women and their beauty or physicality. I think I truly realized this when I moved to Calgary when I was twenty years old.

I moved on a whim after being offered a position with an events management company that I couldn’t pass up. It was an incredible opportunity and I wanted to be independent, spread my wings, and experience the world on my own terms. I had also never lived in another city before, or really even traveled that much within or outside of Canada, so the thought of calling another place home other than Killarney was exciting.

On my way to work on the first day of my new job, I was standing on the corner of the street at a red light waiting to cross along with a dozen other people who were also on their way to work. I remember studying the figure of this beautiful girl, who was about my age, dressed in a tight black dress and sky-high red heels. Her hair was perfect, her body was perfect: she was perfect. I felt this pang of jealousy, which honestly I’d never really felt toward any other woman or person before. I looked down at my trousers and pair of black platform shoes, that I had felt fine about putting on earlier that morning, and suddenly felt disgusted, uncomfortable and inadequate. I thought to myself, in order to fit into this city I have to change the way I look. Somehow, I have to be beautiful.
I’ve lived in Calgary for over four years now and during that time I’ve changed a lot. I traded in my cut up jeans and converse shoes for designer dresses and high heels. I put on lipstick before I leave the house now. In some ways I’ve really come into my femininity, which I enjoy. In other ways, though, it is exhausting and I feel like I continuously have to keep up a persona.

One of the benefits my work offers is paying for employee gym memberships because they encourage people to exercise and be fit. This is a backhanded gesture though because it insinuates that in order to work there you have to have a good body and look a certain way. This applies to me especially because I am in a role where I have to entertain clients visiting from out of town. I have to chauffeur them around the city, take them for dinners and to sporting events, and I am expected to put on a front where I am always ‘on.’ I have to be energetic, happy, and most importantly I always have to look my best. I am the only woman in my department and I feel even more pressure to fulfill this standard because the other three people on my team are men. I feel like I have to always fit the part because my job might be at risk.

But I’ve never been interested in running on a treadmill for hours or lifting weights, so I rarely ever go to the gym. I’ve become self-conscious about my body too, because I am surrounded by beautiful people all the time—especially in the industry I work in. I constantly compare myself to other women. The last place I want to be is at a gym where I would be judged among fit, beautiful women.

I would often diet to keep myself thin. I started having health issues though, like high blood pressure and stomach sensitivities because I was depriving my body and was stressed out all the time thinking about it. My doctor finally said to me, what’s most important is being healthy. To him it was simple: just eat well and exercise.
Out of coincidence, a hot yoga studio is attached to the building where I work. I decided to try it as an alternative to the gym because I had heard that yoga has so many good benefits for your body. When I tried my first class, I didn’t realize it would give me so much more than just the body benefits.

The first time I tried yoga something really strange happened. I remember being in camel pose, where you’re sitting on your knees and stretch your upper body backward and try to grab the back of your ankles or feet with your hands. I felt a wave of emotion take over and all of a sudden I started crying. I was embarrassed because I couldn’t stop, and I was surrounded by a group of strangers, but no one else in the room even blinked an eye. The woman beside me smiled at me, almost as if she was saying, “It’s okay.”

After the class, the instructor asked me what emotions I had been keeping inside. Without even thinking, I told him I had bottled up a lot of self-doubt and negativity over the past few years that I hadn’t realized were so painful. I told him that I felt uncomfortable in my skin, was self-conscious about the way I looked, and felt pressured to keep up a persona because I was a woman. “I never used to be this way and now I can’t stop,” I told him.

He told me it was normal for emotions to come up so strongly and common for a lot of people to cry because yoga signifies the act of letting go, shedding negativity and pain. We shed our judgments and find acceptance; we find ourselves.

He was right. I think the first few months going to yoga I cried every time. Every time I got into that room and sat down on my mat though, things got easier. I’m not saying that my insecurities are fully gone yet, because I’m still learning to move and breathe through them. I’m still learning to accept myself. This is hard, because I’m constantly surrounded by things that can make me feel shitty about myself. As a woman I think there will always be pressure to be a
certain way, especially in Western society. I’m not sure that’s necessarily unavoidable. But yoga has helped me deal with the insecurities I have about myself.

When I have a bad day, I’ll go to yoga and I’ll let it all out. I’ll cry, laugh, sigh, and scream. It’s my release. Most of all, it is something which has helped keep me grounded and realize my beauty and potential in a world that has some really skewed perceptions; from now on that’s something I’ll hold inside.

Laura

I grew up absorbing a lot of information about how girls and women are ‘supposed to be’ based on the television I watched and the advertisements I saw, and these things had a huge hand in dictating how I came to perceive myself. I was drawn to pictures of women in magazines and commercials who sold perfume and clothing and twirled around with their hair flowing and big, stupid, wide-toothed lipstick smiles on their faces. I always questioned why I wasn’t as beautiful or as happy as them. Maybe if I bought the skin cream they were selling I could be?

These things communicated very false truths about who I was supposed to be, and about other women, and I spent a lot of my adolescent and adult life trying to achieve a very unachievable standard because of them.

I struggled to find a comfortable and truthful level of happiness because I was obsessed with trying to be a certain way and for a long time I lost myself in my obsessions. I wanted to be beautiful like the girls in the magazines and was petrified about being shunned by my friends, peers and community if I failed to be just that. I was also afraid of being shunned by society, because society is what created the expectations of what women have to be like. I was afraid of being an outcast. I spent a fortune on lipsticks, hair products, creams, jewelry, shoes and clothes so I would fit the standard. I ate salad so my jeans would fit, and if they didn’t I threw up or
crash dieted. If I ate a big meal that wasn’t healthy like a salad or vegetables or low in calories I would get anxiety and, after I threw up, would go to the gym for hours on end.

I feel like I was cheated of a normal adolescence because I was so focused on trying to fulfill these disgusting standards in our society. I feel like my freedom to mold myself into the woman that I wanted to be was taken away.

I was living in Vancouver and attending university when I was at my worst. I was eighteen. Living in Vancouver was very hard because I felt like a lot of the people who lived there were focused on their outward appearance. Girls would come to class dressed like they were ready for a night out with their hair and make-up done. They all dressed in designer clothes. A majority of the women in the city were skinny and under a normal weight range. Many acted uptight and prissy. Women like this were a stereotype in Vancouver. It was really hard being yourself when you had to see all these women who were these superficial, yet beautiful people; they got paid attention to. So, of course I tried to be the same way.

I was diagnosed with an eating disorder and signs of depression when I came home for Christmas one year. I was the thinnest I’ve ever been. I only ate one meal a day and was over exercising. My parents almost didn’t let me go back to school. They agreed to let me go back only so long as I saw the campus psychologist at a minimum of once a month.

The first few sessions didn’t go very well. I was uncooperative. I didn’t want to talk. The psychologist made a deal with me after not getting any headway with our first few sessions and recommended that I try a yoga class at the campus recreation center. She said if I tried a class, she would count that as one of our sessions. I agreed.

The class I went to was a Yin yoga class, which was relaxing with mostly seated postures in comparison to Hatha (traditional yoga) classes that have quick and intense movements. We
started out lying on our backs in *savasana*, the corpse pose, where you lay completely still on your mat with your feet splayed wide and your palms facing the ceiling. The instructor led us through a meditation while we lay there. I remember her saying something that really resonated with me. She said something along the lines of, “What expectations about yourself are you holding on to? Why carry these things? These feelings and thoughts do not serve you. They cause you unnecessary pain and suffering. Let them go.”

We were then told to sit up for some breathing postures. First we had to acknowledge ourselves by looking into our own eyes through the mirror that wrapped around the front of the room. I looked into my eyes, and at the face and body reflecting back at me. I looked like an empty and lifeless shell just sitting there. My eyes were dark and my clothes were hanging off me. At that moment I realized what I really looked like and I was shocked. Maybe it’s because our instructor encouraged us to be in the moment, be as we were right there and then. Maybe it was the atmosphere, the spiritual aspects of the practice. Maybe it was all of my emotions, all the years of pain finally boiling over. Whatever it was, something in that yoga class snapped something within me into place.

With each posture during that class, I felt like my body was becoming restored. I felt stronger mentally and physically, breathing in and out and letting go. I have never been aware of myself in that way before. I had been an avid exerciser for years but never experienced that type of physical and mental release from running, biking or weight lifting. I guess that’s because when I exercised, I wasn’t acknowledging the way I was feeling at that moment because I was only thinking about the calories I needed to burn in order to fit into my clothes. Yoga encouraged me to think about and acknowledge my feelings, to let go of the negative and create positive.
I continued to go to yoga classes after that. A few months later I also joined a support group for women who suffered from eating disorders. It was a good feeling being around people both at yoga and at my support group that were battling some of the same issues and to know that I wasn’t alone. I found that I was able to detach myself from the stereotypes and judgments that had affected me so much and learn to just love myself. Each time I sit up and acknowledge my own eyes in the mirror in front of me I think back to the first time and realize how far I’ve come.

I try not to pay attention to magazine spreads or advertisements, or worry about what other women look like anymore. It was hard admitting that I will never look like them, but I’m more focused now on just being me. I’ve come a long way to try and erase the effects that our society has had on me. I’m still bitter, and I still suffer from feelings of insecurity at moments, but yoga has helped me. I’m finally in my own comfortable and truthful element of contentment and happiness.

*Bridgette*

It’s funny that any issues I’ve ever had with myself only began in my early fifties. I didn’t really suffer from the same issues in comparison to a lot of other young girls and women when I was growing up. I was never really ever concerned about my body or any issues like that. I don’t have any secrets on how to achieve the feeling of satisfaction I had with myself because I think that, sadly, women battling negative issues is a very common thing and a lot of the time, inescapable. Maybe I managed to avoid succumbing to societal pressure because I was focused on my life purpose above anything else.

I started a family when I was twenty-five years old. It was always my biggest goal and passion to have a family and raise children. Raising my children brought me so much joy and
kept me levelheaded. I spent all of my energies and attention on my family because nothing else was important.

But, as my kids grew up and started getting lives of their own, I started having these awful ideas that I had no purpose in my life or in the world anymore. What other purpose in life is there for women, especially those at my age who are stay at home moms and housewives, other than being nurturers mothers or housewives? Within the few years that all my kids left home and I turned fifty-five is when I started having negative thoughts about myself. I became depressed. I felt like I didn’t have anything left to contribute to society or the world because my job as a mother and a woman was done. There was nothing left for me. There was this constant question of, “What now?”

I saw an advertisement for yoga classes on the wall of a coffee shop. A woman in the neighborhood was a certified yoga instructor and was teaching out of her house. The classes were a couple days a week during the afternoons and were specifically for women who were fifty or older. Yoga was something I always wanted to try, but as I had gotten older my body had changed drastically and I was worried that I wouldn’t be able to do a lot of the poses even though the classes were catered to older women. Being a bit depressed, I had also put on some weight and I was worried that my body would be too heavy to gracefully move into the postures. I had a moment of insecurity where I thought about other women who might take the class and how they were probably graceful and beautiful in comparison to me.

I decided to go anyways because I needed something to occupy my time. I was also drawn to the fact that yoga could help people overcome depression and although some of the poses looked hard I decided to try it anyway. Our instructor had a yoga studio built in the basement of her house. There were six of us in the class and we began with our instructor
reading a quote that was about one’s life purpose and we were to keep the quote in mind throughout our class. She said, “If you can’t find your purpose, find your passion because that will lead you to your purpose.” How could she know that I was struggling with this? I felt right then, that there was a purpose for me being there.

The first class was tough. I had a hard time moving into some of the poses and got frustrated. I found my mind wandering at times, thinking about my kids or what I was going to make my husband for dinner. I also thought about what the instructor had said at the beginning of class and realized that I didn’t have a purpose anymore. My emotions started running high. I got angry and sad. I ended up crashing onto the floor during one of the postures and sat out the rest of the class. By the end of it, I had decided that was it, I wasn’t going back for another class. I told my instructor, “Thank you, but I don’t think yoga is for me.” She asked me if she could give me a private session and told me that yoga was for me, all I had to do was let go of my ego.

I started going to her house weekly for private sessions. She helped me move into headstands and arm balances, things I thought I could never do. These postures are considered the kings of all postures and the fact that I could do them at my age made me feel like I could do anything. Yoga became therapeutic for me. I was happier. I also started realizing a lot about myself because I was tuned into my true emotions and feelings. I started seeing myself in a new light. I learned to embrace my age and the fact that my kids were grown up and moved away, I was happy that they were out in the world making their own lives. I realized that it was my time.

After two years of practicing yoga, I decided to go to India with a group of ten other women. They were all in their mid-fifties and many of them like me were searching for purpose and meaning within their lives. Some were divorced, had husbands who had passed away, kids that were grown and had families of their own, and some were just soul searching. We all stayed
in an ashram together in Goa where we practiced yoga and meditated every day. It was there that I found my passion and life purpose. I discovered that, like my own yoga instructor who had helped me begin yoga and through my yoga practice, I was meant to help people. I decided to take a yoga teacher training course there and extended my trip by a month to receive my certification.

I now teach yoga to women who are fifty and older because I think a lot of women at and around that age often go through intense and painful life transitions. At that age there are still so many unfair pressures that our world and society places on women, it’s not just when we’re young. It doesn’t stop there. There’s an expectation that women are supposed to carry out three main things in their lifetime, if nothing else: get married, have children and raise them. After that it seems like there’s nothing left for women to do and that there isn’t any more purpose for them. I fell into depression and disregarded the fact that I did have potential and a purpose because I thought this was true. Yoga made me realize it’s not. Yoga urged me to connect with my inner self and realize the power and potential that I have in this world. It allowed me to let go of what I believed was true about myself, the biased ideas we all have, the expectations and standards that have been created about us and just be.

Alexis

I was about thirty-five when I first started practicing yoga. It is said that trauma and suffering is what leads people to yoga and this was the case for me. We had a break-in at our house, which left me immobilized. I felt violated because my personal space, the place where my family and I called home, suddenly felt unsafe. My personal belongings were ransacked and stolen; my kids’ bedrooms were rummaged through. I couldn’t be alone in my house afterwards
without putting on the alarm system for all hours of the day. I didn’t even let my kids go outside to play. I felt like I was living in a prison inside of my home and my body.

After a few months of living in a state of fear, I thought to myself, “There must be more to life.” I knew I needed help to get over what had happened but I didn’t want to see a therapist, that wasn’t what I needed. I didn’t need to talk about it. I needed something deeper. I read that yoga is therapeutic for a lot of people suffering from traumatic events, so I got a yoga instructor to come to my house. We practiced a few times a week for a year. It was the best decision I’ve ever made for myself. I was surprised when my instructor suggested that I take teacher training. Yoga, at that point, had become so important in my life but it wasn’t something that I had ever thought about doing for a living. But my instructor saw something in me. She thought I would really connect people and help them live their lives with a deeper purpose. So, I went blindly into my next step of my yoga journey and got certified in teacher training.

I am certified in three branches of yoga: Hatha, which is a form of more traditional yoga in the sense that it focuses on postures and awareness of breath; Kundalini, which initiates deep breathing techniques, meditation and mantra along with posture; and Nidra, which is a type of yoga where you are guided into a yogic sleep through meditation. I decided to be certified in these branches of yoga specifically because I feel like they really encompass my life. Before I began practicing yoga, I was out of synch. I didn’t breathe properly. I was unaware of the world around me. I never stopped to take a moment to be quiet, still, calm, and go into my inner self and address what I was feeling. Yoga taught me to stop and notice the world, to be present. I am also more accepting of myself and of others. I see that beauty radiates from the inside, from the core of our being. These are the things I try to teach to others through my yoga; it is important to
realize these things and live this way because it’s such a freeing way to live, without expectations or standards.

I am in a good place in my life because of yoga. I feel solid in my skin. When I was younger I definitely used to have body issues and I didn’t feel as secure, but I can honestly say that I feel happy and content with my body now. The only aspect in my life where I don’t feel comfortable and have insecurities is with my family, especially my kids. I think being a mother is the hardest role a woman has to fulfill because there’s so much pressure to raise your children right, to be as nurturing and loving as possible and most importantly to always be there for them. This is where I struggle with expectations in my life. There are so many expectations placed on women who are mothers and the expectations I have about myself and my kids make me constantly question myself. I compare myself to other women who dedicate every moment to raising their kids and I fear that I will be judged by other women and by society for failing in my duties. I’m there for my kids, but only as much as I can be because I have a career on top of teaching yoga — and I am as dedicated to that as I am to my family. I think it’s important to have a life and work balance. Women shouldn’t have to give up their careers for their families or to raise their kids, but the rest of the world doesn’t often see it that way. I know that the world is more accepting now of women who have careers but I still feel like when women have kids there’s this expectation that the kids should be all and everything that a woman focuses on; her maternal duties are all she should focus on.

But, I realize that I can’t dwell on these thoughts. Instead, I need to work on the things I am unhappy with and bother me and learn to accept. Yoga is the art of finding peace and solitude and whenever I feel like these things are being compromised because outside forces are causing me to lose balance, I turn to yoga to confront these issues. I tap into my inner strength through
Nidra, flow it out in Hatha, or breathe through it in Kundalini. Yoga is always there, grounding me, bringing me back to the present. It is always there to calm my ego and tell me that, aside from anything else in this world, “It’s okay to be me.”

A Discussion of the Narrative

There are multiple themes and ideas within each narrative that are also consistent within the literature review. For instance, each narrative discusses ideas about body dissatisfaction, self-image, gender roles and stereotyping, and demonstrates how Western society has a major influence on shaping these concepts through the ways it portrays and conditions women. In Emily’s story, she describes being affected by societal expectations about her beauty and body image, which made her feel the need to conform to these standards by dressing more “femininely,” wearing makeup and exercising in order to be considered beautiful. Similarly, Laura discusses how the ways that women are portrayed in the media and advertisements created insecurities about her own appearance, causing her to become obsessed with her self-image. These ideas are reinforced in the literature review, where it explores how the misconstrued and idealized notions about women’s beauty, sexuality and femininity (de Beauvoir, 2011, p. 11) and the pressures from “culture and the consumer industries” (Wolf, 1990, p. 10), have poisoned our notions of beauty and caused many women to struggle with “self-hatred, physical obsessions, terror of aging, and dread of lost control” (de Beauvoir, p. 9).

These ideas also support de Beauvoir, who focuses on how society and “the gaze of others” shape and define a woman (2011, p. 283). She states that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (p. 283). In Emily’s story, she describes that, growing up in her hometown, she felt protected from the negative influence of Western society because there were different perceptions there about women and femininity. She explains that she and her peers were not
concerned with media, magazines, makeup, etc. and, because there was no judgment or pressure to conform to a certain identity, she managed to avoid negative perceptions and stereotyping for most of her young life. Yet, her perception changed upon moving to a bigger, more metropolitan city where there were evident expectations and standards about women. She admits to feeling like she had to keep up a certain persona because of the ways that other women looked and dressed, and because her job would be compromised. She mentions how her work paid for employee gym memberships, which made her feel pressured to be physically beautiful. Similarly, Laura says that her own perceptions about herself were based on the appearance and behaviors of the women in the city she lived in, who all looked and behaved similarly. She admits to trying to adhere to the stereotype because there was so much pressure to conform. Essentially, these women’s identities and perceptions were shaped and defined through societal pressures and the influence of others.

Interestingly, some ideas that are not explicitly covered in the literature review also came up, particularly those pertaining to motherhood. In Bridgette’s story, Bridgette expresses being deprived of purpose after her children grew up because her all-encompassing role as a woman — to fulfill her maternal duties of starting a family and raising her children — was already accomplished. Similarly, in Alexis’s story, Alexis discusses feeling insecure in her duties as a mother because of trying to balance a career at the same time as trying to raise her children, which she suggests is sometimes viewed as not up to par for women who are mothers. These two narratives bring up issues around women, gender roles, and motherhood, illustrating how society can also create very problematic perceptions and expectations in regard to maternal duties such as raising children, being nurturing and loving, and being devoted to family life.
These are not issues that I initially thought would be discussed, perhaps because I am not a mother. While the literature review touches on examples of how society creates specific expectations about female gender roles, like being housewives, they did not discuss any expectations about motherhood. There is, of course, an even larger scope of limitations, expectations and pressures than I initially anticipated, further suggesting the need for rethinking “dominant traditions” (Minnich, 2005, p. 29).

What’s most compelling about the métissage, however, are the ways it illustrates how these women transcend societal boundaries and eventually detach from the opposing influences and forces in their lives. Through their holistic and lived experiences, new ideas that challenge “dominant traditions” are indeed formed (p. 29).

Each narrative begins by illustrating the boundaries and limitations within each woman’s life and their understanding that it is possible to overcome them as they turn to yoga. This is where the idea about yoga beginning “not only in the present moment, but with the recognition of stress, discontent and dissatisfaction” is reiterated (Stone, 2008, p. 18). Each woman expresses how, in some way or another, she is in a state of distress and communicates the desire to change and break free of the beliefs which create pain and dissatisfaction in her life. This is supported in the literature review where Stone (2008) explains that yoga sets people free from the beliefs that affect their daily lives, breaking habitual patterns of conditioning and creating “transcendence from the places in which there is lack, constriction and discontent” (p. 19).

For example, Emily describes her first yoga class where she realizes that she was suffering from “self-doubt and negativity” and was “uncomfortable in [her] skin, self-conscious about the way [she] looked, and pressured to keep up a persona because [she] was a woman.” Alexis discusses how she came to yoga because of stress and trauma, and how her practice was
able to help her heal from these things as well as provide her with ways to deal with other
insecurities in her family life and raising her children. She says that yoga helped her find
contentment and realize it was okay to be herself.

What is apparent is that yoga not only helps these women address their deepest struggles
through physicality but helps them arrive at pivotal realizations which let them deal with their
struggles mentally and emotionally. According to Stone (2008) yoga encourages the realization
of self-reference and self-interest in which a person becomes deeply aware of who they are (p.
43), opening them up to a greater internal awareness (p. 7).

The descriptions of the actual practice — the postures, breathing techniques and
meditative aspects — are also important for explaining how women are able to release destructive
views in order to create new perceptions. For example, the opening excerpt of the métissage
illustrates Laura’s experience during one of her yoga classes as she is instructed through reverse
warrior posture. Laura’s instructor tells her to breathe through her pain and discomfort,
acknowledge her feelings, and challenge herself. She encourages Laura to push harder within her
inner self and within the posture by tuning into her internal thoughts and abolishing any negative
feelings or emotions; to let go of the negative and retain the positive. She instructs Laura to open
her heart and receive energy. It is evident that this is accomplished in the Laura’s mantra, “I am
strong and beautiful. I am the most perfect version of myself.”

Similarly, Bridgette describes being able to do arm stands and arm balances. She sees that
being able to do these postures, considering her age, proves that she is capable of doing anything,
reaffirming her purpose. Through her practice, Bridgette says that she is able to not only connect
with her inner self, but she realizes her power and potential by being able to let go of her
preconceived assumptions.
The women’s stories are linked to the eight limbs of yoga, which, as previously discussed, are what help people achieve detachment and equanimity (Stone, 2008, p. 43). The eight limbs which, again, consist of the Yamas (external restraints), Niyamas (internal restraints), Asana (posture), Pranayama (breath), Pratyahara (withdrawing of the senses), Dharana (absorption), Samadhi (integration), and Kaivalya (solitude/detachment) (Stone, 2008, p. 43) are heavily present throughout the métissage. Much like they are the foundation of yoga, they are also the foundation for each woman’s story. Bridgette reflects on how her own perceptions about herself have changed as a result of practicing yoga. She acknowledges how she was depressed and discontented until yoga “urged [her] to connect with [her] inner self and realize [her] power and potential.” She says, yoga “allowed [her] to let go of what [she] believed was true… and just be” herself. Alexis says that “yoga is always there, [to ground her]…calm [her] ego and tell [her] that aside from anything else in this world it’s okay to be [herself].” Similarly, Emily reflects on how yoga helps keep her grounded in a world that has so many pressures and challenges for women and allows her to “realize [her] beauty and potential.” Each story presents a discussion about how a woman overcomes her own external and internal restraints through yoga, posture and breath, which allows her to withdraw herself from the negativity and oppression in her life so that she can come into new and profound realizations and achieve peace and unity.

Conclusion

The objective of this study was to demonstrate how yoga helps women transcend the damaging and limiting beliefs that Western society places on women, allowing them to move into more positive and comfortable perceptions of their self-image and bodies. The métissage, where four women share their powerful individual experiences of transformation, accomplishes
this goal. While each woman has a unique story, they all share a commonality in that the limiting and damaging oppositions they face derive from conceptions in our culture. Also, they all attribute yoga to helping them overcome societal limitations and boundaries.

This study aimed to transform the current understandings and knowledge about the societal perceptions of women. This was illustrated through both the literature review and the narratives, where ideas surrounding “dominant traditions” are challenged and new frameworks are created (Minnich, 2005, p. 29). This study also aimed to create multi-dimensional conversations about yoga in “experimenting with new ways of writing about yoga” (Horton et al. 2012, p. 40) and also contribute to “the growing conversations” and understandings about women and yoga (p. 178).

Some limitations within this study are that the initial scope of the research changed as results were gathered, becoming more broad. This suggests that perhaps more studies on this topic with a broader focus are needed. One idea that came up in the narratives was difficult expectations on women in fulfilling their role as mothers. More research exploring the perceptions and expectations surrounding certain gendered roles, like mothering, would help to provide an even deeper understanding about the more specific limitations that women face. Another suggestion for future research is that, while this study values the narratives, voice’s and stories of the participant’s involved, there was limited room for an extensive group of participants to be included. This encourages the need for more voices and stories to be heard in additional studies and research.

Ultimately, this study offers “an in-depth look at yoga as it currently exists in Western society” with “reflection, writing, and dialogue [as a] necessary component of the process” and is significant not only for contributing to “the growing conversations” and understandings about
women and yoga (Horton et al., 2012, p. 178) but for acknowledging the “complexities and problems within [our] contemporary world” and in our society, and the urgent need to challenge and change them (p. 56).

I hope that the research presented in this study will contribute to more qualitative studies about yoga and its impact on an individual level, for women, in exploring the linkage between yoga and a healthy sense of self, as well as its significance within Western society. Finally, I hope this study will be shared, published and contribute to additional research and future studies about the relationship between women and yoga, and how yoga helps women transcend socio-cultural boundaries and assumptions.

At the very least, I hope that this study will act as a resource for women who struggle to find acceptance and comfort because of societal pressures. During the interview process, one participant, Laura, stated, “I think it’s important to talk about the challenges that women go through, not only so that we are aware and others become aware… but also so that we can give other women support, so they know they’re not alone and it’s possible to overcome the limitations that we are faced with.”
References


