

**EXPLORING THE CONSENT TO TOUCH IN THE MODERN POSTURAL  
YOGA CLASS: PERSPECTIVES IN THE ERA OF #METOO**

by

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## Abstract

This study explores the issue of touch in yoga classes in the context of #MeToo. Presently, there are no ethical standards which guide yoga teachers in “adjusting” or “enhancing” bodies in a yoga class. The use of touch as a teaching method in Modern Postural Yoga (MPY) classes has increasingly been a topic of discussion in the broader yoga community, particularly through the rise of #MeToo. The purpose of this study was to explore how yoga teachers are approaching touch during yoga classes and if yoga teachers have changed their “hands-on” teaching practices in response to #MeToo. I recruited eleven yoga teachers in Kingston, Ontario and divided these teachers into two focus groups and four individual interviews to explore why yoga teachers touch their students, how yoga teachers approach touching students, and what yoga teachers think about the issue of consent in yoga. Five themes emerged from the data: trust, intention, observation, power, and scope of practice. For the teachers in this study, #MeToo was not a factor in their decision to use or not to use touch during a yoga class. This study suggests that yoga teachers do not follow a consistent approach to receiving consent when offering hands-on assists during a yoga class, but that many yoga teachers would like to challenge existing standards in order to enhance teachers’ qualifications and skills in the areas of safe practice, ethical teaching, and student-centered instruction. The results show that a teacher’s decision to touch is informed by their personal intentions related to teaching, their relationship with students, and their careful observation of students’ bodies during a yoga āsana (shape). While some teachers are questioning the use of touch in relation to social context and social movements like #MeToo, this study suggests that yoga teachers may benefit from evaluating their teaching practices (including touch) in relation to broader public movements like #MeToo.

## **Acknowledgements**

I dedicate my work to those who are suffering with trauma and abuse. There is a way forward. Although the pain does not go away, we can all learn and grow and flourish with time, patience, and self-compassion. We can produce meaningful work that may be healing for us and helpful to others.

Thank you to my supervisor, Mary Louise Adams, for inspiring me to be a student again. You are a true mentor and teacher. Your humour and kindness make the challenging work of graduate studies worth exploring. I am grateful for the opportunity to be part of your socio-cultural “lab.”

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## List of Abbreviations

CF	Consent Form
DMT	Dance Movement Therapy
LOI	Letter of Information
MPY	Modern Postural Yoga
PI	Principal Investigator
RAINN	Rape Abuse Incest National Network
RYS	Registered Yoga School
RYT	Registered Yoga Teacher
TIY	Trauma-Informed Yoga
YA	Yoga Alliance

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

## Introduction

### The Touch of Yoga

Let me situate this thesis with a story of my personal connection to yoga. I started my yoga practice in my mid-20s. I had always been involved in physical movement: swimming, aerobics, and running. My early intentions to move were rooted in a desire to control my body shape and physique. A day without movement left me agitated and feeling incomplete. Increasing my heart-rate was a means to delay automatic thoughts of insufficiency, low self-esteem, and body dissatisfaction. But eventually, my physical body started to fatigue. I became plagued by pain. Yet, I continued to erode my body with repeated physical demand.

On a whim, I attended a yoga class. I was enamoured: the movement and warmth soothed my pained muscles. My attention suspended as I persevered through beads of perspiration. A few weeks after this first class, I signed up for a 30-day yoga challenge. There is not a day that I have been absent from the practice since. Eight years ago, I took a yoga teacher training program. I have been teaching yoga here in Kingston ever since.

Drawn to the practice to ease a physical need, I now approach my practice as a means to align my physical body with my mind. Over the years, I have developed a nuanced understanding of *feeling* my internal experience. I *listen* to my body with compassion. I *breathe* into my body to slow rapid thoughts and tend to internal care. A large component of this practice has been connecting inward. For many years, I

experienced a dissociation between my physical experience, my thoughts, and my emotions. Guided by my teachers, yoga became a method to uncover experience, permit thoughts, and express emotions.

One of the ways my teachers helped me engage with this process was by using touch. Prior to yoga, touch was a cold concept to me: it was associated with pain and recoil. My body (in both physical and mental health) was scarred by the trauma of assault and a lingering eating disorder. I did not want to feel this trauma or hear its call for healing. But, over the course of several months, I softened to the warmth of touch.

The space of the yoga room was a place of safety. The air of the heated room embraced my skin. The words of my teachers invited deeper inhalations. With warm, saturated lungs, I felt supported. I began to enjoy slowing down and *feeling inward*. The touch of my teachers evoked a sense of belonging. Instead of recoiling, I felt their touch as guidance, acceptance, and progression. Not only did touch enhance my experience in *asana* (yoga posture), but also my experience of trust. For me, being touched in a yoga practice was a moment of connection. It was an opportunity to exchange kind energy and compassionate observations.

### **Questioning Touch through the Lens of #MeToo**

On October 15, 2017, American actress Alyssa Milano, prompted a global dialogue on the scope of sexual assault and harassment across industries and workplaces. The dialogue has since ignited a larger movement (“metoo,” n.d.). Milano asked those who had experienced sexual abuse or harassment to join together in tweeting two words: me too. People followed: celebrities, politicians, business executives, and community



members from all walks of life shared their sexual assault, abuse, and harassment stories (Gillaspie, 2018; Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2018). Milano, attempting to expose the problematic culture of patriarchal power in Hollywood, encouraged people to speak out against abuse that has long been kept quiet. Those who participated in #MeToo galvanized a spirit to confront the issues of sexual assault and violence against women.

The months following the call to tweet #MeToo brought momentum in the awareness of sexual assault and abuse. The tweet garnered social media interest as documented by volume and reach (Oulheiser, 2018; Gillaspie, 2018). Fewer than 24-hours after Milano's tweet, Facebook reported more than 12 million interactions related to #MeToo by 4.7 million users around the world (Gillaspie, 2018). Google searches for sexual harassment and/or assault increased by 86% in the period between October 15, 2017 and June 15, 2018, as compared to search volumes between January 1, 2010 and October 15, 2017 (Caputi, Nobles, & Ayers, 2018). Searches related to reporting and preventive training against sexual harassment and/or assault increased by 30% (Caputi, Nobles, & Ayers, 2018). These numbers signify a widespread interest in the issue of sexual assault, harassment, and violence. #MeToo permitted conversation and challenged the oppression of silence.

I participated in #MeToo. I felt empowered. No longer invisible, I was part of a collective. It was a feminist movement unlike any I had seen in my lifetime. It opened my eyes to the reach of sexual abuse and violence. It returned me to the vulnerability and nuance of trauma.

#MeToo brought me back to my first experience with sexual trauma. I was eleven years old. In school. Fellow classmates would corner me in public spaces within the

school. On the way home from school. For over three years. These classmates (all young boys) were larger than me; physically stronger; intimidating. They violated me. It was shameful. They inflicted a hurt that will endure. I was not told “*don’t tell.*” And I *did not tell.* Instead, I carried guilt. I developed self-loathing. I returned to the cycle of abuse with a stoic face. I remember hoping that a teacher would notice or that my parents would *just know* that something was wrong. But magic didn’t happen: no one witnessed the offences. No one could read my silent body. There was no voice to the pain.

#MeToo has helped me to make sense of my own struggle with trauma. After my first experiences with sexual assault, there were more. At the time, there was no language to say “me too.” I was not aware of any cultural conversations about sexual assault. In my world, there was no dialogue around personal power or systemic cycles of abuse. Instead, I was alone. I felt scared to speak. I was afraid of stigma. I didn’t know that others went through the same experiences as me. There was no way to talk. There were no conversations happening: at home, at school, or between friends. I wasn’t aware that being in a female body made me vulnerable. I thought this was unique to me.

“Me too” is not a novel concept in the conversation against sexual abuse and violence. “Me too” originated with black civil rights activist Tyrana Burke. She coined the now famous term in 2006, ten years following a conversation she had had with a teen girl who suffered sexual abuse (Garcia, 2017; “me too,” n.d.). Notably, my first experience with sexual assault was in 1994. Ten years prior to Burke’s me too; more than twenty years prior to today’s iteration. Burke’s “me too” was not like today’s media-blown discussion represented by white, wealthy women. Under Burke, “me too” acknowledged and represented women of colour who had disclosed personal experiences

of sexual abuse and harassment (Pellegrini, 2018). Her “me too” was rooted within community, on the street, with individuals. Burke’s “me too” vision was ‘to address both the dearth in resources for survivors of sexual violence and to build a community of advocates, driven by survivors, who will be at the forefront of creating solutions to interrupt sexual violence in their communities’ (“me too,” n.d.). Burke worked to disrupt the patriarchal and colonial systems that have plagued racialized women and have perpetuated injustices (Pellegrini, 2018). Her grassroots “me too” efforts incited conversation, reduced the stigma associated with sexual abuse, and targeted solutions to tackle the incidence and impact of sexual violence (“me too,” n.d.).

The 2017 reinterpretation of #MeToo made public an “awakening” of a long-standing issue. Since 2017, Burke’s “me too” work has expanded to reach “a global community of survivors from all walks of life” (“me too,” n.d.). The “me too” movement, guided by Burke, has expanded via a global conversation and wider spectrum of survivors that includes “young people, queer, trans, and disabled folks, Black women and girls, and all communities of color” (“me too,” n.d.).

### **Yoga in the Era of #MeToo**

Yoga has not been isolated from these “me too” conversations. I listened to popular yoga podcasts and read articles from yoga magazines and blogs on the topic. Yoga teachers and industry leaders participated in discussions that explored stories of abuse and sexual misconduct in the community. These discussions challenged the popular Western belief that yoga is inherently *good*. The discussions highlighted the vulnerability that comes with a practice that has been imaged as *pure, transformative, and healing*.

Teachers in the community began to publicly call for a review of ethical practices. Sarah Herrington, in an op-ed piece for the *New York Times* titled “Yoga Teachers Need a Code of Ethics,” called for the protection of yoga students. She acknowledged the vulnerability of students in the yoga space. She further recognized that

teachers, like therapists or educators in other fields, have an inherent power, which can be used to either heal or exploit. But because it is also easy to conflate the goodness of yoga with the teachers themselves, instructors can benefit from an aura of ethical conduct, or even holiness – what some call a spiritual blanket that protects those who abuse their power. (Herrington, 2017)

In my teaching career, I have been aware of “scandals” in the yoga community. In fact, several yoga lineages have been tainted by scandals involving prominent teachers.

K. Patthabi Jois (1915-2009), Amrit Desai, Bikram Choudhury, and John Friend are only a few of the well-known modern postural yoga (MPY) teachers who have faced sexual abuse and harassment allegations (Moss, 2013; Remski, 2018; Yoga Journal Staff, 2018). The allegations against these men, as well as others known in the yoga community, are serious and damaging. It is widely accepted that almost all modern yoga lineages have had experiences with sexual abuse and harassment (Yoga Journal Staff, 2018).

None of these men I just mentioned have faced jail time for their offences. Bikram has been the defendant in six sexual harassment lawsuits; a warrant for his arrest was issued in 2017 (Samuelson, 2017). Desai and Friend resigned from their positions. Jois passed away before survivors announced decades of abuse. These occurrences suggest that while yoga can be a safe, spiritual, and enlightening practice, it can also, like other aspects of life be one that requires caution, and that leads to fear, harm, uncertainty, and mistrust (Farhi, 2006; Keyes, 2016; Macdonald, 2012; Wiggins, 2017).

I had accepted these scandals as outliers in the yoga community. I did not reflect on their history or their impact. I accepted that “*some people do bad things.*” I believed – as framed by Herrington above - that most yoga teachers are *good people*. How could they not be? *Yoga is good*. And so, I moved on. I did not allow the scandals to impact my yoga practice.

But #MeToo brought my attention to the similarities amongst the alleged offenders. All were men with power and privilege. All of them offered the promise of transformation through a physical and mindful practice. All of them were leaders of influential yoga practices. All of them attracted many followers who would pay a high price to practice in their presence. Women were the primary victims. The alleged offenders were protected by their status and influence as teachers of virtuous traditions. Often, their alleged offences were said to have happened *in the yoga class*.

The above similarities were alarming. They mirrored the entertainment industry’s #MeToo stories. They aligned with other stories of abuse that had headlined newspaper articles throughout my teen and adult years. The alleged offences did not occur once, but often multiple times over years (if not decades) (Rain, 2018; Yoga Journal Staff, 2018). My complacency of years past could no longer hold. I was deeply disturbed, especially because the stories aligned with my own. My early traumas occurred in *public spaces*. In a location that I was supposed to *trust*. I knew that the acts committed against me were wrong, but I did not have a position to speak from. I did not have the language to say *no*. Or the institutional or cultural support to be *protected*. I was *one* against *many* who were seemingly okay; they were enjoying their experience, participating in learning, being

students, and having fun. I started to wonder: *could the yoga class be a place that harbours mistrust, that triggers a negative response for some students?*

In response to the #MeToo movement, popular social-media yoga teacher Rachel Brathen elicited #MeToo stories from members of the yoga community. She gathered more than 300 stories of women who had been exposed to sexual abuse and harassment at the hands of their yoga teachers (Brathen, 2018). The outcry that followed these stories exposed the deep and misogynous culture present in yoga's modern history (Remski, 2018). Brathen prompted a reckoning around sexual assault and the "toxic power dynamics" (Remski, 2018) present in the yoga community. According to Matthew Remski, the yoga community is confronting important questions in the aftermath of Brathen's project:

"is the yoga studio consistently the healing space it is advertised to be? Or has it engendered a culture in which spiritual surrender can be conflated with physical submission?" (Remski, 2018).

It was the #MeToo movement that brought me to question my personal teaching methods, including the use of touch. I felt shame about the misuse of power that existed within a community that had fostered my own healing. I worried that my personal approach to teaching was placing undue risk on my students. As a survivor of trauma, I knew that someone in a position of vulnerability might find it difficult to speak out against an unwanted action (if not impossible). I wondered: was I endorsing a culture of disempowerment? Was I perpetuating types of power and privilege that could harm my students? More specifically, I considered: *do I have the right to touch a student's body in the yoga class?*

The conversations in the yoga community regarding teacher conduct point to the need to revisit integrity in teaching (Brown, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d; Rain, 2018; Remski, 2018). The conversations acknowledge that misogyny and abuse of power are systemic issues (Brown, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d; Carlson, 2017; Rain, 2018). Downplaying the authority and power of the yoga teacher is difficult. As with people who have high status in other social contexts, the yoga teacher must be acknowledged as holding power. During the yoga class, a teacher is responsible for guiding āsana and students' thinking.

### **The Research Project**

Questioning my own power and privilege as a yoga teacher inspired me to conduct the present research study. Given my personal uncertainties, I wanted to understand how others in the teaching community were approaching the issue of touch in their classes. I wanted to talk to other teachers about their approach to consent in the MPY class. I wanted to know if and how others in the community were responding to the conversations around #MeToo. I wanted to know: *are others questioning touch in the way that I am?* I wanted to explore the balance between safeguarding students and honouring touch as a teaching method. I felt that these conversations would help me (and maybe others) to evaluate my own practices around touch in the yoga class.

In honesty, this project has also been a healing journey. I am a survivor. And I know that I am not alone. This work is important for me and for others. It is dedicated to those who are hurting and do not yet have the voice to speak. It is necessary. To teach many people is to also teach each person individually. I cannot predict how my teaching

methods will impact each of my students. But if I do not critically review my practice, I am not honouring the yoga tradition. I am not valuing *ahimsa* (non-harming). I am not honouring those who need the yoga class, as I did, to be a space of reprieve.

As a yoga teacher, I cannot practice under yoga's reputation as inherently *good*. Yoga at its heart is a practice of coming together: a practice of unity. Literally - the sanskrit meaning of yoga is *to yoke*. This meaning brings forth a connection to community and the process of unifying the physical body with the mental and spiritual. Yoga is not about *me* the teacher. It is about sharing and transforming *together*. And so, it is my responsibility as a teacher to understand the needs of my community. To do so, I need to understand the socio-cultural influences that impact these needs.

I started this project with an immersion in popular media publications on the topic of consent, touch, #MeToo, and the yoga community. I became engrossed with current thoughts, trends, and debates on the issue. In my literature review I explored touch as a teaching method not only in yoga, but also in other movement disciplines. I looked at the use of 'no-touch' policies in the context of vulnerable populations. Finally, I explored the topic of consent, of what influences its *meaning* and *understanding*.

The empirical work for the project involved focus groups and individual interviews with yoga teachers. I invited participation from new and experienced teachers, as well as yoga studio owners. I hoped that a range of experiences would offer a variety of perspectives. Initially, my intention was to engage teachers through focus groups only. This changed through the duration of the project given teachers' availability and scheduling conflicts. Regardless, it was important for me to have conversations with my teaching peers (some of whom I met for the first time). I wanted teachers to explore



difficult issues in a thoughtful and safe way. I also wanted teachers to hear others' perspectives.

I also documented my own reflections (to the interviews and to my own experiences as a teacher) throughout the duration of the project. Journal entries became a way for me to process my personal reactions to the data. They became a way for me to critically appraise my teaching practice and they became a way for me to reckon with touch. Just as in my personal meditation practice, the journal entries allowed me to *slow down*. To *observe* more thoughtfully. And to *respond* to what I was learning with empathy, compassion, and impartiality.

### **Research Questions**

The main research question guiding the study has been: *in the context of #MeToo, what are the views of yoga teachers on touch in the yoga class?* Further questions ask: is informed explicit consent necessary before a teacher may adjust a student's *asana*? If so, how does a yoga teacher acquire consent to touch during a class? Going back one step further, why do yoga teachers touch? Is touch a way for teachers to assume authority in the yoga studio? Or, do teachers approach touch in a deeper, more energetic way? How is a student protected as they are being touched by a teacher? And, how do students receive touch? Is touch necessary for a students' practice?

Given my own experience receiving and offering touch in yoga classes, the study also explores how the yoga teacher approaches their relationships with students. What kind of relationship can be fostered through one class or one session? Must this

relationship develop over time in order for a student to accept touch? What impact does this relationship have on the consent process?

Overall, my intention through this project has been to critically reflect on the practice of touch in the MPY class in relation to the current socio-cultural climate. I am hopeful that a thoughtful exploration of the questions above will help me contribute to the yoga community's discussions regarding consent and professional responsibility. Currently, there are no shared standards or regulations regarding these issues. I am hopeful that this project can be shared with yoga leaders, teacher trainers, and registering bodies. And, I am hopeful that my contributions will support processes, practices, and standards that mitigate future cycles of abuse in the community that I call home.

### **The Topic of Consent in Yoga**

In today's MPY class, it is largely expected that touch will be part of the practice. The use of touch by teachers is based on implied consent. That is, teachers *assume* that students are aware that touch (as in hands-on assists) is offered during the yoga class. There are no guidelines or standards that teachers must follow to offer hands-on assists during a practice. There are no requirements for yoga teachers to obtain verbal or written consent from students prior to or during a yoga session.

The issue of consent in yoga has been challenged over the past decade. In a 2007 article for *Yoga Journal*, Michael Cohen says that the "ethics of touch" is more complex in yoga teaching than in other, licensed professions. He calls upon yoga teachers to question the legal and ethical concerns around touch:

The causes of inappropriate touch in yoga, as in other healthcare professions, can include the provider's inexperience, unmet emotional and sexual needs,

and psychological transference ... because yoga teaching bridges mind and body, physical contact can neither be totally avoided, nor completely embraced. This presents an interesting paradox: how can we find that place of balance where contact is appropriate and neither inadequate nor violative? (Cohen, 2007)

Yoga is a place where some people come when they are experiencing difficult emotions or mental health conditions. Yoga can be a form of therapy for depression, anxiety, and stress. Although teaching methods and philosophies differ, yoga teachers often use specific language to try to help students access their innermost feelings and thoughts. I have often encouraged students to *set aside your physical expectations and listen to the emotion of the stretch*. With these words I am asking students to *feel* a posture using attention to somatic sensation. I am asking them to move beyond the kinesthetic facts of a shape; I am inviting a deeper inquiry.

What Cohen's statement points to is the vulnerability of the yoga student's experience. The student is invited into an intimate exchange with a teacher. The yoga teacher often uses words, phrases, and directions that *make students feel good*. In my yoga training, I was encouraged to offer each class as a unique experience to each student. That is, to use language, sequences, and teaching methods that not only guide the physical practice, but also deeply influence the student beyond the yoga mat. To make the student feel *special*. To provide moments of *connection*. To permit *vulnerability*.

The risk of touch during a yoga class cannot be ignored. The receiver of touch may be negatively affected depending on their emotional state, religious or cultural beliefs, and personal history. Touch can become "healing or violating, welcomed or repugnant, constructive or demoralizing" (Krucoff, 2007). In a state of sensitivity, the touch received through a yoga class may surprise a student in a welcomed or unwelcomed fashion.

There are questions regarding the practice of touch in an otherwise unregulated profession (“Yoga Alliance Statement on Sexual Misconduct in Our Community,” 2017; YJ Editors, 2017; Rain, 2018; Remski, 2018). Hands-on adjustments have been identified by some leaders in the yoga community as a source of fear for both yoga teachers and students as the #MeToo movement has brought heightened awareness to power dynamics (Murphy, 2018). Other movement-based mind-body practices, such as dance, are also re-evaluating touch as a teaching method where “touch can be misinterpreted [...] even where it is an accepted part of learning” (Marshall, 2009, p. 82).

On the issue of consent, Yoga Alliance<sup>1</sup>, the largest worldwide registering body for yoga teachers, acknowledges that physical adjustments “have been a customary part of yoga practice for nearly a hundred years” (“Yoga Alliance Statement on Sexual Misconduct in Our Community,” 2017). But just because physical adjustments have been part of MPY for nearly a century does not mean that current practices are appropriate, safe, or necessary. On the ethics of touch, there is a community-wide acknowledgement that there is “a societal need for yoga teachers to understand and put into practice methods for how to serve, or not to serve, students with touch” (“Yoga Alliance Statement on Sexual Misconduct in Our Community,” 2017). Yoga Alliance encourages principles such as acting with conscientious conduct, acknowledging skills and limitations, and adhering to “traditional yoga principles” such as the *yamas* and *niyamas*<sup>2</sup> (Yoga Journal Editors, 2017).

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<sup>1</sup> Yoga Alliance is a not-for-profit “membership and trade association” (“Our Mission,” 2018) that operates without government oversight and legislative power. Its membership includes over 90,400 Registered Yoga Teachers (RYT®) and over 6,200 Registered Yoga Schools (RYS®) (“Our Mission,” 2018).

<sup>2</sup> The Yamas and Niyamas are considered to be “yogic precepts for ethical living” (Farhi, 2006). These precepts were first observed in the pre-modern yoga text *Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras*. The *Yamas* represent

While ethical teachings are *encouraged*, they are not well-established. My initial teacher training offered less than one hour (out of a total of two-hundred hours) on the ethics of touch. I recall the conversation being brief and without depth. We discussed areas of the body *not* to touch (particularly the sexualized areas on the human body). We also discussed the nuance of the student-teacher relationship. We explored the ethics of romantic relationships with students. We acknowledged the allure of the yoga teacher, that is, of someone who can be attractive (by popular culture standards), linguistically adept, emotionally charming, and spiritually savvy. We were encouraged to set clear boundaries between *teaching* roles and *friendship* roles.

My initial teacher training offered close to one-hundred hours on hands-on assists. Over a twenty-six-day period we practiced hands-on touch daily. As a teacher-student I became accustomed to using touch as an integral part of my teaching practice. Beyond my previous experiences in *receiving* touch as a student, this daily teacher's practice became programmed. I left the training with an expectation that I would use touch consistently and frequently.

Aside from offering guidelines for teacher training and acting as a teacher's registry, Yoga Alliance has not been equipped to safeguard the public through monitoring teacher conduct. But, in response to the pressures from #MeToo and community-wide scandals, they are taking action. As recently as December 2017, the organization partnered with

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"outer observances" or how a yoga practitioner interacts with the greater world (Farhi, 2006). The *yamas* include *ahimsa* (compassion for living things), *satya* (commitment to truth), *asteya* (the practice of non-stealing), *brahmacharya* (sexual propriety), and *aparigraha* (non-coveting). The *Niyamas* represent "inner observances" or how the practitioner fosters care for the self (Farhi, 2006). *Niyamas* include *saucha* (practicing purity and cleanliness), *santosa* (contentment), *tapas* (disciplined use of energy), *svadhyaya* (self-study), and *ishvarapranidhana* (the surrender to the higher self).

RAINN (Rape Abuse Incest National Network) to help “shed light on the issue of sexual misconduct” and provide resources for yoga students and teachers who have been victimized (“Yoga Alliance Statement on Sexual Misconduct in Our Community,” 2017). They also offer a grievance policy to report the misconduct of registered yoga teachers (RYT®s). While these services are not widely advertised, they are a start. Their existence demonstrates a need. But these services do not address *how* ethics are discussed with or practiced by teachers. They do not *guarantee* safety in the yoga class. They simply serve some victims *after* a harmful event.

While I would consider my teacher training and experience as a yoga teacher to be life-changing, I don’t believe that my community is doing enough to safeguard students. Egregious acts have been committed by yoga teachers, enough so to warrant a grievance process and partnership with RAINN. It is our responsibility to stop abuse before it happens. It is our responsibility to ensure that all students, including those who have experienced trauma, feel safe under our guidance. Doing so protects the yoga tradition, and demonstrates our commitment as professionals.

### **Personal Experiences: Touch in Yoga**

In my own teaching practice, I have always felt confidence in my method of touch. In my teacher trainings, touch has been presented as an accepted part of effective education. As mentioned previously, few of my trainings have specifically addressed the issue of consent. There have been clear discussions and instructions to avoid touching certain areas of the human body; however, there are few discussions about the grey area of the teacher-student relationship. There is an assumption that because yoga is a

discipline that honours *ahimsa* (non-harming), that all students will accept the inevitability of touch.

I have not been accustomed to informing students at the start of a class that hands-on assists may be offered. Nor do I ask for consent to touch during class. When I use touch, I position myself near a student and offer verbal cues which align with the hands-on assist. I speak to the entire class, while one student receives two methods of communication (verbal and kinesthetic). I often use statements like “*imagine that my hand is pressing against the back of your heart ...*” to engage all students in embodied awareness. I do not want to single a student out. Instead, I want students to explore their bodies. It is my practice to try to be “invisible” during a class, that is, to guide students without invading their experience. If a student seems to recoil at the feel of my touch, I will exit the intended assist and continue to instruct the whole class with verbal cues.

My teaching methods have been influenced by my personal experiences as a student. As a survivor, I do not like to be *told* what to do. I do not like to be *corrected*. I am willing to be *guided*. I am willing to accept *suggestions* which might deepen sensation (be it physical or mental). When I receive touch, my breathing - along with verbal guidance - allows my āsana (posture) to change. When I feel a teacher’s hand on my body, I breathe into their hand. This permits my teacher to place pressure on my body and guide my shape. I have great trust in this process. It has become part of my yoga practice. Although another person is assisting me in the shape, I retain authority. As a student, I memorize the way my teachers’ words, hands, and sequences feel in my body. I take time after practice to intuit the effect: how I feel emotionally and how I move physically.

I cannot recall ever being asked by a teacher for consent to be touched. Mostly, I have received touch well. As noted previously, I have benefited greatly from hands-on assists. However, I have had a few “cringeworthy” experiences receiving touch in a yoga class. By “cringeworthy,” I mean that I felt *corrected*; I felt *wrong*; I felt *bothered*. I did not feel that the teacher was adequately delivering the assist. I did not feel that the teacher adequately assessed my body. These teachers were not familiar to me. Likewise, my body and my practice were not familiar to these teachers. While I did not leave the practice with injury, I felt highly dissatisfied. Instead of feeling emotionally and physically enhanced, I left agitated.

Clearly, I have an affinity for touch; but I can also recognize the potential risks associated with its use. Teaching yoga is part of my identity. But I can recognize the value in growth as a person and a professional. I can recognize that what is comforting to me may not serve others. And I recognize that I need to re-evaluate my approach and application of touch.

### **Connections: Yoga and Academia**

Early on in the research process, an article by Jennifer Musial (2011) offered me guidance on thinking about the intersection between academia and yoga teaching. Musial explores bell hooks’ “engaged pedagogy” as a way to negotiate teaching relationships in both the university setting and the yoga class. She discusses *critical thinking* as a method to cultivate skill and develop self-inquiry. She goes beyond traditional learning principles and methods. She explores learning with respect to emotional, spiritual, physical, and intellectual growth. She emphasizes that “engaged pedagogy is an affective and energetic



practice” requiring a “mind-body-spirit” connection (Musial, 2011, p.214). Further, she emphasizes the active engagement required for teachers to become self-aware. This awareness moves teachers from authoritarian figures toward compassionate guides. Musial’s approach mirrors feminist methodologies, wherein reflection is useful to challenge power and privilege. What I appreciated most about Musial’s article is the invitation to bring compassion to both teaching and academia. She encourages teachers to nurture the self as much as they nurture students (albeit academic or yoga). She permits vulnerability. And she normalizes the messiness in relationships.

Musial’s article encouraged a critical appraisal of my own teaching practice and my role as a researcher. It offered me a connection between academia and modern postural yoga and helped me see their parallels: inquiry, introspection, and contemplation. Academia invites questioning and interpreting. Likewise, yoga practice requires exploring and evolving in physical, emotional, and spiritual ways. Both involve vulnerability and uncertainty. As Musial states: the practitioner (student) can “critically evaluate distress, worry, anger, or frustration in the hopes of finding transformation” (2011, p. 217).

Musial’s article further reminded me that I can only “do so much” as a teacher or academic; that the method of my approach and the *intention* of my approach leads to learning, growth, and transformation. She reminded me that “growth is not always easy or enjoyable” (Musial, 2011, p. 222). But remaining “committed to the process of being changed” (Musial, 2011, p. 222) serves in both yoga and academia. Through this work, I have become comfortable with being *uncomfortable*. And this kind of vulnerability has

made me a more curious researcher, a more compassionate yoga teacher, and a stronger survivor.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

#### Introduction

The literature that I review here serves to situate the issue of touch in the Modern Postural Yoga (MPY) class in the era of #MeToo. To my knowledge, there are currently no published academic studies that have explored this specific issue. Thus, I explore literature that addresses: touch as a communicative tool; the use of touch in other movement disciplines (e.g. dance); the meaning of consent; and, the rise of no-touch policies in movement practices (namely school-based physical education). I feel that this literature is relevant to critically appraising the use of touch in MPY. First, I offer some historical context regarding touch in the MPY practice.

#### The Origin of Touch in Modern Postural Yoga

A pivotal publication in my understanding of MPY was Mark Singleton's "*Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice*." Singleton's work, published in 2010, challenged the popular conception that yoga was born of ancient ascetic practices. In my own teacher training, less than one year following *Yoga Body's* publication, yoga was introduced as reminiscent of a thousand-year-old practice. My training was rich in the philosophical teachings from the *Yoga Sutras* (the *Sutras* are a formative Indian text describing the psycho-spiritual practice of yoga; they outline the meditative, behavioural, and spiritual practices of life). While Singleton's book does not dismiss the relevance of the *Sutras*, he does frame MPY as unique to present-day socio-cultural and political

influence. Relevant to my study, *Yoga Body* described to me a practice and tradition that is not monolithic. Instead, Singleton frames yoga as a practice that changes and evolves.

*Yoga Body* invites yoga teachers and practitioners alike to acknowledge yoga's malleability across decades. Through a historical analysis, Singleton details the shift from a spiritually motivated practice to one of physical appeal and emotional steadfastness. Matthew Remski describes *Yoga Body* as telling the story of yoga like "the story of the self: developing endlessly along variant trajectories" (n.d.). Regardless of how we have come to the yoga of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is necessary for us to accept adaptation. Our lives are simply *different* in the 2000s than they were in the 1800s or even the early 1900s.

In *Yoga Body*, Singleton asks practitioners to view yoga "not as an artifact, but an organism" (Remski, n.d.). This speaks to the need to nurture the practice and to accept its inevitable change. Reading *Yoga Body*, it is clear that yoga's current iteration has been highly influenced by the way that values change over time and in different contexts. For example, as money, independence, and physical fitness became primary motivations to achieve a successful life, the yoga practice *changed* to appeal to more people. The practice became more āsana based; the feature of the practice became physical movement. Yoga began to promise a *fit body*, a *highly revered body*, and a *balanced body* (Singleton, 2010).

Today, yoga is a business and a commodity. That yoga is found in fitness centres and gyms, and taught in elementary schools demonstrates the reach that yoga has into mainstream culture. I have bought into this commodity myself by purchasing yoga-specific clothing. I've consumed yoga classes marketed toward "detoxing" my body

(through “sweating” and engaging in specific posture-based sequences). I’ve associated yoga with emotional healing, physical fitness, and spiritual development.

Not all aspects of *Yoga Body* have been accepted by yoga and religious studies scholars. While Jim Mallinson would agree that yoga in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been more inclined toward physical movement, he argues that pre-modern texts were more relevant to yoga’s modern iteration than Singleton suggests. He cites canonical works of the Śrīvaiṣṇavism and Haṭhapradīpikā as inclusive of physically demanding practices. Mallinson suggests that Singleton’s timeline for a more physically-based yoga practice incorrectly makes assumptions about pre-modern yoga. Mallinson argues that early canonical texts included physical postures and that Singleton cannot fully claim the development of physical postures through the past century (2011).

Singleton describes the shared ideals of perfection and performance as aligning with societal demands for a “perfect body” (Singleton, 2010). Yoga practice in the early 1900s equated āsana (posture) to the ideals of “bodily strength and spiritual merit” (Singleton, 2010, p. 101). Singleton distinguishes today’s MPY not as esoteric or confined to those with spiritual desires (2010). Instead, he suggests that yoga has been reinterpreted as a system of practices that offer physical and mental health benefits. Singleton argues that the West has accepted this physical practice eagerly. In this context, physical ability equates with physical strength and an ability to contribute to society in a positive way (Godrej, 2017; Singleton, 2010).

Other scholars have agreed that popular “posture-based” yoga advanced through the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with the aim to control body physique (Godrej, 2017). Godrej goes further in the discussion around India’s 20<sup>th</sup> century physical culture movement. She

points to the movement's correlation with Indian nationalist aims to uphold a "strong, disciplined population" able to combat British colonialism (Godrej, 2017, p. 775). She suggests that motivations to practice yoga were influenced by socio-political factors. Others have linked the physical culture movement with discipline and the quest for achievement (Byrne, 2014; Singleton, 2010). Godrej further emphasizes that physical movement practices were motivated by the values of strength, endurance, and self-optimization.

Godrej's and Singleton's views have been shared elsewhere. Patricia Vertinsky (2014) describes the early 20<sup>th</sup> century yoga movement in the context of physical culture movements in India and the United States. She also describes the draw of yoga as a transnational physical culture movement not only as related to physical and spiritual excellence, but also to nationalist pride. Vertinsky argues that the ambition of Americans had a big influence on the transformation of yoga towards a more therapeutic practice in the late 1960s onward. That is, as Americans dealt with the physical and emotional effects of industrialization and "consumer capitalism," the relaxation benefits of yoga became essential in order for people to "restore the productive labor and efficiency" of their work lives (Vertinsky, 2014, p. 288). Put simply, yoga became a way for people to "recharge" their bodies (physically, emotionally, and spiritually) to be able to handle a demanding workload.

Godrej also argues that MPY serves as a form of self-governance and biopolitical power (2017). She connects the rise of yoga's physical practice with neoliberalism in the later twentieth century. The discipline of the modern yoga practice, Godrej suggests, is one influenced by social pressures to self-regulate and to self-actualize. That is,

neoliberalism encourages people to take responsibility to optimize their potential in order to contribute to society. Godrej invokes Foucault in her analysis of today's yoga, especially his ideas around self-discipline. Although yoga is presented as spiritually, emotionally, and physically unique, Godrej argues that yoga nevertheless encourages conformity to our society's value on physical strength and achievement. Yoga is part of a broader cultural system that encourages people to *improve themselves* in order to "fit in" and "be our best." People *want* to demonstrate to themselves (and to others in their social sphere) that they are "good" and "healthy" people.

Godrej's interpretation that yoga is aligned with "better" people and healthier, more efficient societies is evident through empirical research that shows a definite betterment of the self when people follow a yoga practice. Khalsa, Hickey-Shultz, Cohen, Steiner, and Cope (2012) show that secondary school students demonstrated significant differences in mood, anger control, stress management, and fatigue after just an 11-week yoga program. Puymbroeck, Burk, Shinew, Cronan, Kuhlenschmidt, and Schmid write about the healing benefits that yoga offers for physical, mental, and social health for women living with breast cancer (2013). From a survey of over 4000 individuals who practiced yoga, Ross, Friedmann, Bevans, and Thomas (2014) found that participants felt that yoga improved energy, happiness, social relationships, sleep, and weight management. Harkness, Delfabbro, and Cohen-Woods (2016) show that stress levels in women decrease with as little as two hours of yoga per week. Regardless of the *source* of the motivation, yoga is clearly a practice with potential to positively impact both individuals and society.

What Singleton, Godrej, and Byrne point to is the strong influence of external factors on the *evolution* of MPY. That is, the political, structural, and cultural forces that guide the motivation to practice and what the practice looks like. They outline the messy confluence of forces on a practice that has the potential to influence an individual in spiritual, cultural, physical, and psycho-social ways. I think what is key about their analyses is that yoga is not practiced for *one reason*. Rather, it is practiced for *many reasons*. And that the reason to practice *changes* with time, with situation, and with both individual and collective experiences and with the changing requirements of the structures that shape it.

What Singleton and Mallinson, and other scholars, have not yet explored is the changing role and practice of the yoga teacher from pre-modern to modern times. Related to this, the literature does not speak to the relationship between student and teacher in any yoga practice. More specifically, the literature does not speak to the way yoga teachers have used touch (as hands-on assists) in the MPY or pre-MPY practice.

Remski argues that there has been minimal evidence of teachers physically adjusting students prior to the 1930s (2017). Scholars tend to agree that pre-modern yoga teaching used oral methods to instruct and guide students (Byrne, 2014; Remski, 2018; Singleton, 2010). Interestingly, the introduction of touch seems to have coincided with the advent of a more physically-based yoga practice.

Several scholars elude to the “expertise” that the teacher has assumed over the students’ body (Byrne, 2014; Remski, 2018). These scholars agree that yoga teachers develop their teaching skills through careful observation of their students’ practice and subsequent physical or touch-based guidance. Although oral approaches continue as an



important teaching method, Byrne suggests that a physical relationship between student and teacher developed as the physical āsana practice came to be favoured (Byrne, 2014).

It makes sense to me that hands-on assists have coincided with a more physical, āsana-based practice. As I will review later, touch can play a role in guiding awareness to the body. Touch is used in many physical disciplines, including dance and sports training. In pre-modern yoga, āsanās were positioned close to the ground and held for longer periods of time (for example “sukhasana” or “padmasana” – both seated postures, primarily used in meditation practices). In such cases there would have been less requirement for a teacher to intervene to encourage alignment and safety.

As I reviewed important research on yoga, including Singleton’s *Yoga Body*, Singleton and Ellen Goldberg’s collection of essays *Gurus of Modern Yoga*, and James Mallinson’s *Roots of Yoga*, the influence and status of the male body in yoga was very evident. This literature suggests that the majority – if not all – of yoga’s lineages (as established in pre-modern times) have been led by men.

Singleton shows that MPY is largely rooted in the male body, in terms of the “performer” and the guru (2010). Several of the popular modern yoga lineages, including those started by Jois (Ashtanga Yoga), Friend (Anusara), and Choudhury (Bikram), have been led by charismatic men (Remski, 2018). Their original teaching pathways were shaped by male cultures (Singleton, 2010). The allegations of abuse and misconduct in yoga have coincided with the shift toward a predominantly female-dominated practice, particularly in the West. Confronting the power and misconduct of the male yoga teacher has been key in changing the landscape of the MPY practice.

Ashtanga is one well-known yoga practice that involves a strong teacher-student relationship and hands-on assists. Many herald Ashtanga as a physical and disciplined practice (Byrne, 2014; Remski, 2018). Byrne describes physical adjustments in Ashtanga yoga as “necessary” and “physically and mentally intense, bringing students to the threshold of pain or fear” (2014, p. 110). This seems contrary to the commonly described intentions of yoga, that is, to foster self-compassion and awareness (Bryant, 2009; Farhi, 2000).

In the studio where I teach, we have one Ashtanga teacher. This teacher has a mentor and teacher. In turn, the teacher in my studio acts as a mentor and teacher for students following the Ashtanga practice. I have observed that Ashtanga students are very dedicated to their practice; they are less likely to participate in other yoga styles. I wonder if part of this relates to the emphasis on the student-teacher relationship in the Ashtanga tradition. Many members of the larger yoga community have criticized the way that teachers continue to be revered, particularly in the Ashtanga lineage (Brown, 2018a, 2018c, 2018d). That is, how the practice is very much led and mentored by the teacher. Critics feel that by allowing yoga teachers to hold power and a certain prestige, cycles of abuse and misconduct are more likely to continue.

Ashtanga yoga, more than in other yoga lineages, situates the teacher as fore in a relationship that requires that students “have some level of faith in their teachers” (Byrne, 2014, p. 110). Scholars identify that ashtanga and some of the other MPY practices (including Anusara, Vinyasa, and Iyengar) have worked on the assumption that a student is best served by years of one-on-one instruction with an experienced yoga teacher for years as they develop physically and philosophically (Byrne, 2014; Singleton, 2010).

Byrne writes that the “guru” (teacher) holds a “spiritual currency” that students can strive to aspire to (2014, p. 112). The deep respect for the guru serves as a means to uphold the integrity and authenticity of the practice (Brown, 2018a; Byrne, 2014; Rain, 2018; Remski, 2018).

There is a gap in the literature with respect to the influence of patriarchal culture on MPY. While many popular media resources have explored the issues of guru culture and patriarchy in yoga (Brathen, 2018; Brown, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d; Remski, 2018), there are no published academic studies on the topic to my knowledge. It is not well-known how members of the yoga community, including teachers and students, understand their teaching lineages. I find this quite troubling. As male teachers have been accused of abuse, there is more to explore with respect to the problems with tradition and the issue of the guru-disciple model in a form of body practice that has transformed into not only a physical fitness discipline, but also into a kind of psycho-social therapy. I believe that research on guru culture would be pivotal to modernizing yoga teacher training programs. This research could prove useful to those wanting to challenge the notion that the guru or teacher is all-knowing. Perhaps a more rigorous critique of the yoga teacher’s value could help us identify the teaching roles and responsibilities that would help improve a student’s experience. By *understanding* the role that power plays in the student-teacher relationship and by reflecting on the potential misuse of power when *one* person is revered without safeguards, the yoga community can support safer spaces for yoga students and teachers alike.

## **Touch as a Communication Method**

While it has not been discussed much in yoga literatures, the benefit of touch for reasons of building relationship and feeling connected to others has been well-established in a range of other literatures. When bodies relate to each other through touch, there is an exchange of energy. Touching and being touched can connect us to others at a primordial level. In Western culture, touch is associated with intimacy, symbolism, sexuality, and compassion (Cohen & Wolkowitz, 2018). Touch is considered a means of shaping perception, relations, and responses (Steward & Lupfer, 1987). In any definition, touch is a method to share feedback (Gibbons, 2004) and bodily affect (Vasseleu, 2015).

The benefits of certain forms of touch in educational and mind-body settings are well-established (Anderson, Öhman, & Garrison, 2018; Billhult & Määttä, 2009; Gallace & Spence, 2010; Lindgren, Jacobsson, & Lāmās, 2014). In a study with massage therapy clients, touch was associated with relaxation and safety (Lindgren, Jacobsson, & Lāmās, 2014). In massage, touch was further associated with ‘sensual pleasure’ and a strengthened emotional awareness (Lindgren, Jacobsson, & Lāmās, 2014). In this study, fifteen participants were interviewed after receiving whole-body massage on two separate occasions. The participants were asked about their experience with massage, the expectations they had of their experience, and the influences on their massage experience. The participants described the response to the touch associated with massage as a desire or *longing*. The participants aligned with touch as a primordial need. Interestingly, the participants identified the massage therapist as influential on their touch massage experience. The participants noted the ability to perceive the current mood or state of the

therapist; they saw this mood or state as an influence on the pleasure they experienced during the massage (Lindgren, Jacobsson, & Lämås, 2014).

Billhult and Määttä (2009) gathered detailed descriptions of the massage experience from nine interviewees who suffered from generalized anxiety disorder. All patients experienced a deep relaxation and a sensation of “lightness” after their massages. Some patients discussed a state of relaxation in which they were able to better access past memories. The patients said the massage enhanced their sensory capabilities. The interviewees also mentioned the experience of receiving unconditional attention. The therapeutic relationship and constant touch were a form of compassionate communication.

Like these studies, touch in yoga is praised as a method to bring awareness to the body (Rueb, 2011), it is seen as an important part of connection (Wiggins, 2017) in MPY. Dependent upon social context, touch in yoga can become a means to establish shared communication and caring (Anderson, Öhman, & Garrison, 2018). But while the positive effects of touch are established as the norm in the context of therapeutic practices like massage or physiotherapy, literature about such alternative health practices has not yet addressed the potential for practitioners to engage in harmful behaviours.

Although touch in yoga is not well documented in the literature, I did explore its relevance in Dance Movement Therapy (DMT). Dance is inherently a physical, emotional, and somatic experience for practitioners and teachers alike; and, the dance community has begun to explore the relevance and ethics of touch.

There is a resounding accord in the dance community on the utility of touch. In a study with dance/movement therapists, Matherly (2014) reported on their motivations for

using touch. These included social, physiological, emotional, and instructional motivations. In this study, the dance/movement therapists described making decisions to touch based on moment-to-moment awareness. They described the beneficial use of touch in expressing affection and directing awareness and connection to the body. They described touch as supportive in nurturing breath and changes in posture. The therapists interviewed by Matherly described having a skillfulness not only in specific techniques involving touch, but also somatic senses and analytic skills that they had gained through continuing education (beyond the required minimum training for a DMT).

Popa and Best (2010) attest to the welcomed aspects of giving and receiving touch through dance/movement practices. Popa, herself a dance/movement trainee at the time of the publication, describes her personal experience with touch as one of kinesthetic pleasure and compassion. She further describes touch as inspiring discovery and active imagination. In this context, she says that touch invites a deeper awareness of feeling the body in space.

Popa and Best acknowledge the lack of guidelines around therapeutic use of touch in the context of DMT. Others have highlighted the risk culture around touch in movement modalities (Dymoke, 2014; Cristobal, 2018). Drawing upon personal experiences as a dancer, Dymoke points to the subjective nature of receiving and offering touch as one that requires a deep sense of trust and open, ongoing communication. Dymoke further acknowledges the evolution regarding the discussion of touch since the 1960s, namely the rise of the “no touch” culture, that is, avoiding physical contact with others. She acknowledges that when people from a “no touch” culture touch other people

that “boundary issues may arise” (2014, p. 211). This “risk culture” or “no touch” culture has filtered into school-based sports, as I explore later in this review.

Both Dymoke and Cristobal challenge the complete avoidance of touch between teachers and students despite the cultural pressures around no-touch practices and the concerns about touch involving trauma survivors and others who may experience suffering. Both Dymoke and Cristobal argue that touch is necessary for a dancer (or other movement practitioner) to explore the physical aspects of movement. Dymoke (2014) writes about her experiences as a dance and theatre teacher for disabled, blind, and deaf-blind adults. She says that the sense of touch for people who are deaf and blind is necessary for connecting them to the outside world. She explores her own observations about touch, namely how she has noticed the absence of touch in society. She also describes her experience in working with people who have experienced mental health problems, and how, through dance and receiving touch-based instruction, these people have experienced less depression (Dymoke, 2014). Dymoke says that because our society has a “non-touch value system,” people benefit from participating in activities that allow them to “move in physical contact in a way that connects them deeply to their inner being” (2014, p. 206). She argues that touch is a basic human need. Dymoke argues that offering touch through “art-sports” like dance is necessary to optimize our health and self-care because touch is not available in our “outer world” (by which she means through our day-to-day interactions, like work).

Cristobal (2018), in a review of the role of dance movement therapy (DMT) with survivors of sexual abuse argues for the utility of touch. She argues that touch is a way to “provide access to the mind” (Cristobal, 2018, p. 72). She suggests that using touch

within safe boundaries enables survivors to improve their own understanding in their bodies. She also argues that touch can help a survivor improve self-regulation and present-moment awareness. Whereas a survivor may tend to dissociate from their body and their sensations, touch invites a survivor to re-learn skills like emotional regulation and acceptance of their body. Cristobal writes that because DMTs are repetitious and playful, they help survivors feel comfortable in receiving touch.

I completely relate to touch as necessary to accept my body. I like the way that receiving touch from my yoga teachers makes me feel included and I value the guidance that my teachers offer through touch. But, as I've noted previously, this enjoyment of touch is *my* experience. And, as I've noted previously, I understand that others may not enjoy touch. Regardless, knowing that what I feel through touch is evident in the literature has, for me, validated the usefulness of touch and to inform how I approach and describe touch to my students. If I am able to communicate *why* a particular hands-on approach may be helpful to a student, they may be more receptive to receiving touch.

### **What is Consent?**

In the context of massage therapy and dance/movement therapy, touch is seen as central. The literature above points to the positive association that touch offers with respect to overall well-being. In my experience, touch has led to empowerment, self-acceptance, and emotional health. But regardless of the utility of touch, the larger issue relates to *consent* and the *meaning* of consent in any given context. *Do I want to be touched? Do I grant someone permission to touch me?*



Consent has traditionally been viewed from legal standpoints, and strict definitions have been discussed in relation to healthcare, research, and sexual relationships. In the allied health practice in which I work, consent is professionally mandated for each of my client interactions. Consent relates to a person's *uncoerced decision to participate* in an activity or conversation. More specifically, *informed consent* is considered to be ethically essential in respecting a person's right to decide whether they want to participate (Grady, Touloumi, Walker, Sharma, & Babiker, 2017). Seemingly, consent is simple: when a person is asked to respond to a request to engage in a certain activity or conversation, their consent affirms or denies their desire to participate.

Miller and Boulton (2007) caution against a universal notion of consent. They argue that consent is a socially constructed concept that is subject to "the forces of social change" (Miller & Boulton, 2007, p. 2199). Miller and Boulton respect the "dignity and worth" of all people. But they suggest that greater reflexivity is needed to make sense of consent in any context or situation. Miller and Boulton would argue that using one method of consent for all health professional-patient interactions does not fully guarantee consent. Similarly, they would argue that how health professionals received consent from patients in 1999 would be different in 2019 (and will be different in 2039). They suggest that we need to be aware of what the current social trends say about consent. In turn, we need to adapt *how* we approach consent depending on factors like time, location, and both parties involved in an interaction. It is not enough to accept "yes" or "no" responses to outdated consent approaches.

Miller and Boulton's perspective is upheld in today's social climate, including the climate created by #MeToo. What has been accepted as "normal behavior" in workplaces, social interactions, and other contexts is now called abuse, assault, sexual harassment, and misconduct. We have become a society that demands more respectful interactions and discussion about consent. My study is an effort to use Miller and Boulton's description of consent as something that requires careful consideration of the current socio-cultural climate. The challenge to re-considering consent practices lies in how to make consent understandable and appropriate for the situation.

Although Grady et al. (2017) acknowledge that consent is important for ethical and legal reasons, they critique the way that areas like healthcare and academic research complicate the approach to getting consent from people who access their services. They argue that consent has become more about protecting the rights of institutions (like hospitals and universities) than protecting people (patients, students) who access their services. In my own experience (I am an allied health professional in addition to my yoga teaching practice), I can attest that lengthy consent forms are often difficult for my patients to understand. At my workplace, we invite all of our patients to sign a lengthy consent form that asks them to participate in healthcare research. Many of our patients end up declining to participate because they feel intimidated by legal-looking documents. They default to saying 'no' because the actual process of consent seems time-consuming. They also associate the long document with more risk, even though (in my opinion) there is little risk connected with their participation.

Grady et al. (2017) inspire a nuanced discussion that is often absent from the issue of consent: "*who is consent for?*" In my example above, my healthcare institution (a

hospital) uses a long consent form to ensure that we won't be sued by one of our patients if we fail to protect their privacy. We outline every possible scenario where a patient could be hurt (physically or emotionally). But in an effort to protect our institution, we ignore the fact that many of our patients struggle with literacy. Our patients are also coming to us during a time where they feel physically and emotionally vulnerable. Is a rigid and structured (and lengthy) approach to consent necessary? Or, does a rigid and structured approach to consent alienate our patients? Grady et al. (2017) ask us to debate the issue and revisit how we approach consent given the social context and cultural influences in an electronically-connected and risk-sensitive society.

My own response to the question "*who is consent for?*" has changed by the moment. Looking back to times in my life where consent mattered, consent was for *my* protection. But if I consider my role as a yoga teacher, consent is not only important for my students, it is also important for *me* to ensure that I am approaching my students in an ethical and responsible way because I do not want to cause harm. I don't expect consent to be a *yes* or *no* issue when teaching yoga; there is nuance. But as a teacher, I need to ask more questions about how to approach consent within my yoga studio and with individual students. I need to find a way to approach consent that feels comfortable for me and that is not intimidating, awkward, or disrespectful for my students. And I not only need to reconcile "*who is consent for?*" but also "*is consent absolutely necessary in yoga?*"

I have gained some insight about the necessity of consent practices from reading discussions about consent in sexual relationships. Conroy, Krishnakumar, and Leone (2015) surveyed one-hundred-and-thirty-nine (139) female college students. Sixty four

percent (64%) of the interviewees admitted to having unwanted sexual activity. The students described passively agreeing to participate in sex acts even when they did not want to in order to please their partners, to avoid difficult situations, and to “gain experience.” This study depicts the problem with verbal consent, that is, that an absence of saying “no” does not mean “yes.” Conroy, Krishnakumar, and Leone’s study suggests that there is a flaw to relying only on verbal consent. They point to body language and facial expressions in addition to receiving verbal consent as important signs of consent.

The fact that more than two-thirds of the women in Conroy, Krishnakumar, and Leone’s (2015) study engaged in “willing unwanted” acts is alarming to me. Beyond exploring the benefits of touch and the promise of *informed consent* to safeguard negative outcomes, I wonder how we reconcile this consent to touch issue. Wells (2017) emphasizes that focusing on moral and legal permission alone is flawed. She writes about how women’s experiences of trauma are often ignored because moral and legal codes do not consider social context and desire in the discussion about consent (Wells, 2017, p. 251). In my own experience of trauma, I felt intimidation and fear and inadequacy. I had no desire to participate and I did not welcome the acts against me. While I cannot change the moral and legal practices in our current society, I can take my own experience into account when I approach touching other bodies. I can remember what it feels like to be a participant in an unwanted situation. And, I can take responsibility to protect my students.

### **Consent in Yoga**

A number of authors agree that consent in yoga is complex given the intimacy of the practice, the vulnerability of some students, and the casual environment that yoga studios

offer. The ethics of touch in yoga is described as being more complex than it is in licensed professions (e.g. massage therapy) (Cohen, 2007). The complexity of touch in yoga is situated in teachings that “often involve a highly fluid, individualized interaction that increases the ambiguity of physical interactions” (Cohen, 2007). Yoga is offered in many different settings: home studios, gyms, yoga studios, resorts, retreat centres, holistic healthcare centres, and more. Yoga teachers are as diverse as their settings: some teachers offer therapeutic one-to-one instruction for people suffering with specific health conditions, some teachers focus on meditation and breathing exercises, some teachers instruct using energetic teachings about chakras and meridians, some teachers teach a strict physical practice that would be similar to an aerobic or strength conditioning class, and some teachers offer a mixture of techniques and styles. There is not “one yoga” and the complexity and diversity of the yoga practice limits the feasibility of a universal standard.

To my knowledge, there are no studies that have specifically explored the issue of consent to touch in yoga. But several authors say that a yoga teacher cannot assume the right to touch people (Farhi, 2006; Lea, Philo, & Cadman, 2016; Rueb, 2011). Yoga is deeply personal for both the teacher and the student. In a practice that is marketed as a “balm” for physical, emotional, and spiritual health, authors acknowledge the potential for teachers and their students to develop physical and emotional connections (Blyth, 2018; Fahri, 2006). If touch is given without a thoughtful purpose by the teacher and received without welcome by the student, there is a risk of emotional and physical harm. If the reason for touch is not explained or clear to the student, there is no opportunity for consent. Lea, Philo, & Cadman (2016) suggest that a teacher must appreciate their power

in the yoga class in order to help a student to enact internal authority and experience physical, emotional, and spiritual gain (Lea, Philo, & Cadman, 2016).

I argue that consent cannot be standardized in the yoga community because, as mentioned previously, yoga is diverse in the type of practice, the location of practice, and the way that teachers guide a practice. But what could be helpful are knowledge standards about mental health and trauma as well as knowledge standards around the physiological and emotional response to touch. Knowledge in these areas may help yoga teachers to understand how their personal teaching approach may affect their students. In turn, yoga teachers may be able to develop personal consent practices that are unique to their own teaching style and setting. This knowledge may help yoga teachers better understand their own authority in a yoga class.

While there are no guidelines about consent to touch in the yoga community, the “ethics of touch” has been a topic of conversation. The “ethics of touch” in the yoga community is based on how a yoga teacher maintains integrity (“Yoga Alliance Code of Conduct”, 2016). A yoga teacher is responsible for understanding how to communicate appropriately with their students, including offering safe hands-on assists (“Yoga Alliance Code of Conduct”, 2016). The issue of consent between yoga teachers and their students relies on how yoga teachers *interpret* and *apply* ethical practices (Farhi, 2000; “Yoga Alliance Code of Conduct”, 2016).

### **“No-Touch” Trends in Coaching and Physical Education**

Literature trends reveal a shift toward “no touch” policies across physical learning disciplines (e.g. sports, physical education classes, art-based sports like dance) over the

past seven to ten years. “No touch” policies seek to limit the way that coaches/teachers interact with their athletes/students in a sport or physical activity setting. They situate both the coach/teacher and the athlete/student in the realm of risk aversion and surveillance. Policing touch is viewed by policy makers and the general public as necessary for “stopping the potential for bad things happening” (Piper, Garrett, & Taylor, 2013). The policies are built on our dominant culture’s perception that touch is associated with harm. And the policies are re-affirmed by extensive media reporting on worst-case scenarios like the case of Larry Nassar, a doctor convicted of abusing more than 150 members of the United States Women’s Gymnastics team (Cacciola & Mather, 2018). These types of stories result in all coaches/teachers becoming overly surveilled in their actions: how they express care for students, how they negotiate relationships, and how they approach physical touch (Fletcher, 2013; Garratt, Piper, & Taylor, 2013; Öhman, 2017; Piper, Garrett, & Taylor, 2013).

Piper, Garratt, and Taylor (2013) suggest that our present-day aversion to touch arose from the identification of child abuse as an international problem across settings like childcare, education, and organized religion in the 1960s. Over the late twentieth century, government organizations have developed guidelines and definitions about abuse and what is socially acceptable when it comes to interacting with children and youth. In the United Kingdom (UK), “no-touch” policies have been introduced as part of government initiatives dating to the early 2000s (Gleaves & Lang, 2017). There are examples beyond sports in the wider public realm, including in schools (Cohen & DeBenedet, 2012).

Interestingly, there is minimal research into the effect of no-touch policies or the level of support for them (Gleaves & Lang, 2017). Piper, Garratt, & Taylor (2013) discuss the incidence of child abuse in sports between 1995 and 2008 in the UK, when “no touch” policies were popularized, and suggest that there are problems with the way that abuse in sport has been conceptualized. They argue that “no touch” policies and risk-averse coaching/teaching practices have coincided with a culture of fear and “safeguarding” practices. Although “no touch” policies were initially introduced as a way to protect children and adolescents from physical misconduct at the hands of coaches and teachers, Garratt, Piper, & Taylor (2013) and others (Gleaves & Lang, 2017; Öhman, 2017; Varea, Gonzalez-Calvo, & Martinez-Alvarez, 2018) argue that safeguarding policies create more fear and anxiety in our culture and limit the way that coaches/teachers are able to enhance a student/athlete’s ability instead.

In their study involving 60 physical education teachers, Piper, Garrett, and Taylor (2013) found that physical education teachers were nervous about touching students. This was especially true of younger teachers, who were more likely to approach touch with caution and fear. Meanwhile, older and more experienced coaches were less likely to accept the guidelines and processes that had been put in place to safeguard students against inappropriate touch. These teachers regarded new policy guidelines as unrealistic and based on worst case thinking.

Similarly, a study involving 23 Swedish teachers found that teachers were anxious about touching students in class (Öhman, 2016). At the time, the teachers noted that pressure about teaching methods had increased substantially over the past several years. The teachers identified the down side of risk aversion. They described being more “on



guard” with their students instead of being in the moment and responding to challenges as they arose (Öhman, 2016). That a teacher is not able to be “in the moment” with their students seems unfair to both the teacher and the student. It seems that while protecting the students from perceived risk and harm, that “no touch” policies may compromise a teacher’s skillset and limit a student’s experience and potential growth.

“No touch” policies encourage teachers to negotiate risk before using a teaching method such as touch (Varea, González-Calvo, & Martínez-Alvarez, 2018). Part of negotiating risk involves the teacher developing a practice of *when to touch, how to touch, why to touch, and whom to touch* (Öhman, 2017; Piper, Garratt, & Taylor, 2013; Varea, González-Calvo, & Martínez-Alvarez, 2018). Teachers are supposed to take into consideration the way a student is dressed, and any prior relationship they have had with the student (e.g. is the student liked or disliked by the teacher) (Jones, Bailey, & Santos, 2013; Öhman, 2017). As part of a larger discourse, *what is okay* when it comes to teachers interacting with students is influenced by what institutions and sporting communities are saying about touch and other teaching techniques (Piper, Garratt, & Taylor, 2013; Varea, González-Calvo, & Martínez-Alvarez, 2018). Teachers must understand what is deemed “acceptable” in different situations (Piper, Garratt, & Taylor, 2013; Varea, González-Calvo, & Martínez-Alvarez, 2018).

The above discussion highlights the importance of *context* and *current* socio-cultural trends in the decision to use touch. To apply this concept to touch in the yoga class, I would assume that “*what matters*” in the decision to touch is the way that the students understand, receive, and respond to touch. My own personal beliefs and values are only part of the story that informs what would make touch appropriate or

inappropriate in my classes. The only way for me to apply touch then, is to communicate with my students and try to understand their personal beliefs and values around receiving touch.

### **Questions for Future Research**

The literature I have reviewed talks about touch in movement disciplines as a positive communication method between teachers/coaches/practitioners and students/athletes/clients. The approach to touch (e.g. asking for consent, implying consent, communicating during the touch experience) in the current literature is not completely outlined with great detail. Thus, it would be valuable to explore in more depth the approach that professionals and teachers take when their practices involve touching students.

I was unable to find relevant empirical studies regarding the intersection of yoga, touch, and ethical issues such as consent. Given the current socio-cultural climate, and the conversations that are underway in disciplines such as physical education, there is potential for my study to contribute to discussion in the yoga community. Earlier, I discussed in detail the community-wide conversations that are happening around consent to touch in the yoga community. Research that contributes to our understanding of this topic from the perspective of the teacher, the student, and the greater community would be helpful in directing standards and promoting a culture of safety.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methods**

#### **Research Design**

I designed this thesis project to explore the yoga teacher-student relationship in general, with a specific focus on the issue of touch as a teaching method in modern postural yoga (MPY) class. Given my intention to study the socio-cultural influences on different understandings of consent to touch in the MPY class, it was important that I talk with yoga teachers.

The study involved two semi-structured focus groups and four individual interviews. In total I spoke with eleven yoga teachers, eight women and three men. All of my data were collected and analyzed over a two-month period (March to April, 2019). One focus group included three experienced yoga teachers (teaching longer than three years) and one new yoga teacher (teaching less than one year). The other focus group included three new yoga teachers. Three yoga studio owners and one independent yoga teacher participated in individual interviews. In total, the eleven participants represented seven different yoga studios and teaching spaces in Kingston.

I recorded focus groups and interviews with the iPhone recording application. I facilitated focus groups at a local yoga studio in Kingston where I am a yoga teacher. All focus groups took place in a closed-door room outside of regular studio hours to protect privacy and confidentiality. Prior to recruiting my participants, I received permission from the owner of the yoga studio where I teach to host the focus groups. I brought along vegan snacks (fruit, nuts, and vegan protein balls) to each focus group as a courtesy. Each focus group lasted seventy-five minutes. I knew all but one member of the focus groups,

which allowed for ease in our conversations. I had previously participated in yoga classes led by two of the seven focus group participants. Although I knew most of the participants, our relationships had not extended beyond the yoga studio. Five of the focus group participants had been students in classes that I have taught.

I facilitated individual interviews at a location chosen by the participant. One individual interview took place via telephone at the request of the participant. I previously knew only one of the four interviewees. I was meeting three for the first time. The telephone interview was the shortest in duration, lasting less than 45 minutes. In contrast, the other individual interviews lasted 75 to 95 minutes. I felt limited during the phone interview when I could only communicate with my words. I had difficulty focusing. My own learning style is active in kinesthetic and visual means. In the other interviews, I could observe facial expressions and body language. I was able to judge the direction of the conversation and how my questions were being accepted by watching the interviewees. I believe that face-to-face interactions also helped the interviewees build trust in me. They could see my interest in their responses.

It was essential for me to approach data collection and analysis with openness and reflexivity, and with attention to the privilege and power that comes with the title of “researcher.” I was particularly attentive to my approach in talking to my yoga peers. During the focus groups and interviews, I was often nervous. I often asked myself: *how can I respect their voices while fulfilling my research intentions?* It was important to me that I create a space where open dialogue could occur. This was especially important during interactions with teachers who teach outside of my home studio. I needed to ensure that they were talking to me as a *researcher* and not as a competing studio teacher.

I also needed to foster a partnership, where my peers could express ideas and opinions that would be welcomed, where *my* reaction would not create a hesitation to respond. I accomplished this through explaining the project and my role as a researcher clearly at the start of each interview. I specifically noted that I was not representing a yoga studio or teaching affiliation. At times I would share my own experience to relate to the participants.

I used an interview guide to lead the conversation. The interview guide consisted of several key questions that helped me to explore the main research questions (See Appendix B). I designed questions in a way to allow participants (and me as the primary researcher) to shape the discussions. I designed questions to be open-ended, neutral, and understandable (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008). Such questions encourage a wide yield of information while staying connected to the aims and objectives of the research (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008). The interview guide was the same for both focus groups and the individual interviews.

I often veered from the interview guide in order to follow a participant's thoughts or viewpoints. As much as possible, I allowed my participants to steer the conversation. I wanted the participants to feel comfortable in expressing their ideas and opinions. I feel that this worked well. I was able to ask the questions as outlined in my interview guide. And, especially through the individual interviews, I was able to explore a range of issues beyond those covered by the interview guide. For example, during three of the four individual interviews, my participants explored with some depth trauma-informed yoga teachings and the issue of "power" in the yoga class. Although these were not direct questions from my guide, the topics arose through the context of the participant's views.

The individual interviews led to deeper discussions. This is typical of the individual interview as a research method (Lambert & Loiselle, 2007). Although each method carries a unique set of attributes, the focus group is often less able to offer as much depth as the individual interview. Rather, focus groups encourage *interaction data* (Lambert & Louiselle, 2007). Focus groups are able to generate discussions, agreements, and disagreements. They tend to generate fewer ideas (Morgan, 1996). Instead they encourage participants to formulate their personal responses through the act of listening to others in the group. During focus groups, I tried to allow each participant to respond to each question, whether it was from the guide or from follow-up questions. While this left the participants (and me) with less time to move beyond the questions that I was asking, it also offered me an opportunity to observe when the participants had similar ideas and where their viewpoints converged.

Morgan (1996) notes further weaknesses associated with the focus group method. In focus groups, we are asking people to share ideas that may or may not be accepted by others in the group. To disagree with ideas or contribute a new idea may feel scary or threatening. Polarizing ideas may prevent participants from speaking up (Morgan, 1996). While I tried my best to establish a safe space for sharing, some focus group members may have felt shy to move the conversation beyond the boundaries of my questions. In turn, this may have limited the depth of our discussions.

The research for this thesis also involved journaling. I made notes following each focus group and interview, as well as following the yoga classes that I taught through the duration of data collection and analysis. My notes allowed me to wrestle with the research questions and make sense of the interview data. I was also able to respond to the

way the research was influencing my teaching practice. I was able to respond to the participants: I explored where I agreed with the participants, and where I disagreed. This process allowed me to document my own reactions, ideas, and reflections. Working through my own critical reflections helped me situate the “expertise” about the subject matter in the hands of the participants. It also helped me acknowledge and affirm my own opinions and expertise. The journaling process unearthed a lot of lingering trauma from my own experiences with sexual assault. It helped me clarify more specifically the importance of my study to the profession of yoga teaching, that is, to acknowledge that yoga teachers have a unique influence over their students. Given this influence, who must acknowledge the long history of poorly handled scandals? Who must enhance the ethics of our teaching practice?

Many qualitative researchers favour a combination of research methods (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008). In the case of focus groups and individual interviews, both are said to offer a similar set of results (Guest, Narney, Taylor, Eley, & McKenna, 2017). Although interviews and focus groups are independent methods, their skillful combination can offer complementary and nuanced answers to research questions (Lambert & Louiselle, 2008). While interviews offer depth of discussion, focus groups allow for participant interaction. Lambert & Louiselle (2008) explore the benefits of combining these methods, some of which are pragmatic. For instance, in the context of this study, scheduling conflicts prevented yoga studio owners from attending a focus group interview. Thus, I offered individual interviews to these participants. Lambert & Louiselle (2008) identify the benefit of using mixed-methods to confirm data. They also report the benefit of mixed-methods to offer a more nuanced understanding of the study questions. Focus groups in

particular can also offer insight into question areas to focus on during individual interviews. A combination of focus groups and individual interviews allowed me to collect a broader range of data (Adami, 2005; Halcomb & Andrew, 2005; Lambert & Louiselle, 2008).

### **Field Notes**

It is widely acknowledged that research is often connected to the personal experiences of the researcher (Berger, 2015; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). As an insider in the yoga community – as both a teacher and a student – it was essential for me to be aware of my own personal connection and my emotional response to the study’s content. I also came to the study with past trauma. It is no coincidence that the effect of this trauma was triggered throughout the study. I found the subject matter – touch, consent, #MeToo – quite consuming. At times, the participant responses were difficult for me to receive, particularly when participants suggested that there is nothing that teachers can do to prevent triggers in the yoga class or that yoga is about *creating a positive experience*, and therefore, difficult issues have no place in the yoga class.

Writing in qualitative research is used to challenge a researcher’s own assumptions, to understand positionings, and to understand how personal feelings and thoughts influence the research (Brookfield, 1995; Charmaz, 2017; Maharaj, 2016; Watt, 2007). Writing can serve as a way for the researcher to ask questions about personal beliefs and values, and to add depth to the process of “meaning making” (Berger, 2015; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Maharaj, 2016). Field notes are a means to explore questions around self-knowledge, emotions, reactions to the research process and data, and personal



biases or assumptions that have shaped the project (Berger, 2015; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Maharaj, 2016). Field notes are necessary for developing a “methodological self-consciousness” or “examining ourselves *in* the research process” (Charmaz, 2017, p. 36). As suggested by Berger (2015), it is necessary for the qualitative researcher to turn “the research lens back onto oneself to recognize and take responsibility for one’s own situatedness within the research” (p. 220).

As previously mentioned, I took notes following each focus group and interview, to reflect upon group dynamics, my own personal reactions to participant responses, and the issues that were emphasized or omitted from the discussion (and why). The field notes were written by me from my personal standpoint. No names or identifying factors of the study participants were included by me.

Because I continued to be actively engaged as a yoga teacher and yoga student through data collection and analysis, it was necessary for me to identify how my insider status was influencing the study. Thus, I also wrote field notes following my participation as a yoga teacher (about two to three times per week over a two-month period). These field notes included details about my feelings and thoughts related my yoga classes, the things that I emphasized or omitted from the class, my personal beliefs and values related to yoga teaching and participation, and thoughts on how my research was influencing my experience as a teacher of yoga. These subjective reflections served as a means for me to raise questions, and to clarify my opinions and beliefs about touch in the MPY class.

## The Participants

Eleven yoga teachers participated in my study. Table 1 outlines the characteristics of my participants, including gender, teaching experience, and styles of practice/teaching. Yogis 1, 2, 3, and 4 participated in my first focus group. Yogis 5, 6, and 7 participated in my second focus group. Yogis 8, 9, 10, and 11 participated in one-to-one interviews. I explore the focus groups and individual interviews in more detail later in this chapter.

**Table 1**  
Characteristics of the Study Participants

Yoga Teacher “Yogi”	Gender	Group/Interview	Role	Teaching Experience
1	Female	Focus Group 1	Yoga Teacher	>3 years
2	Female	Focus Group 1	Yoga Teacher	<1 year
3	Female	Focus Group 1	Yoga Teacher	>3 years
4	Female	Focus Group 1	Yoga Teacher	>3 years
5	Male	Focus Group 2	Yoga Teacher	< 1 year
6	Female	Focus Group 2	Yoga Teacher	< 1 year
7	Male	Focus Group 2	Yoga Teacher	< 1 year
8	Female	Individual Interview	Yoga Teacher/ Studio Owner	>3 years
9	Female	Individual Interview	Yoga Teacher/ Studio Owner	>3 years
10	Male	Individual Interview	Yoga Teacher	>3 years
11	Female	Individual Interview	Yoga Teacher/ Studio Owner	<b>&gt;3 years</b>

I used purposive sampling to ensure that participants in each focus group had “like” characteristics, which I hoped would encourage friendly and productive conversations. While I did plan to have one focus group with only experienced yoga teachers, this focus group ended up with one new teacher. The day prior to this focus

group, one experienced teacher cancelled. I filled the space with an available, newer yoga teacher. This newer teacher had been practicing as a student for several years prior to becoming a teacher. This teacher was known to the other members of the focus group.

Because I teach yoga at a local Kingston, Ontario yoga studio, I selected participants from seven studios across the city. Kingston is a small city with a population of approximately 123,000 people (City of Kingston, 2016). I have been teaching at my current studio location for more than eight years. I have greater understanding with respect to my current studio's culture. But I wanted to invite conversation from outside of my studio. I did not want to favour the teachers at my studio. Instead, I wanted the greater Kingston yoga community to participate.

I did not attend yoga classes taught by any of the study participants during the project. Because of my research privilege, I did not want to make participants nervous or uncomfortable by attending their classes. I did not want their interview data to be skewed by my personal reaction to their teaching style or methods. I also wanted to have a raw and vulnerable experience when attending a class. If I took a class with a study participant, I would likely not be as present. That is, I would be distracted by my performance in any given moment. I would be thinking about the focus group and interview data. Or, I would be worried that the teacher was ruminating on my presence. Instead, I wanted my experience as a student to be free from worry.

### **Semi-structured Focus Groups**

I chose to conduct focus groups as a way of collecting rich data from the group participants, who shared a common experience (teaching yoga). Focus groups are

particularly helpful in gaining insights related to group norms, meanings, and processes (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwich, 2008; Kitzinger, 1995). Kitzinger (1995) highlights the group process as one which helps participants to explore and to clarify views in a more accessible way than through a one-to-one interview. Through the focus group, participants not only answer suggested questions, but they have an opportunity to reflect upon and deepen each other's perspectives. Finch, Lewis, and Turley (2014) talk about the benefit of group participants hearing from others and having an opportunity to reflect on the conversation in order to "consider their own standpoint further" (p. 212). The collective discussion of the focus group enables participants to explore how social constructions influence the way issues are perceived, experienced, and understood (Finch, Lewis, & Turley, 2014).

The focus group method aligns with the consciousness-raising and empowerment emphasis of feminist methods (Montell, 1998). Discussions in the focus group are largely participant-driven, positioning the participants as "experts" on the topic of discussion. Participants are encouraged to explore issues of importance to them, in their own words. Participants are also able to generate their own questions and pursue the priorities of the group (Kitzinger, 1995). The group dynamic can help balance the privilege and power of the researcher, more so than a one-to-one interaction.

I found that the two focus groups were both well-balanced, between my speaking and the participants interacting. I had time to consider "follow-up questions" as the participants spoke to each other's points. I not only listened to each individual's response, but I also watched how others in the group responded. Overall, the focus group

participants were mostly in agreement with each other in terms of their opinions and viewpoints. There were no disagreements. There were no challenging debates.

There were times during the focus groups where I was unsure about ‘pushing’ issues forward. An example of this happened when several teachers in my first focus group noted that #MeToo discussions had no place in the yoga studio. This was especially surprising given that one of the participants primarily practiced Ashtanga yoga. As I have mentioned elsewhere in this thesis, the founder of this tradition has been highly criticized for touching students in a sexual manner in the yoga class. Many of the conversations happening in popular yoga channels (e.g. online content, magazines, and podcasts) have been tied to this tradition. I consciously chose not to press the participants about specific allegations of abuse. I did not feel that the focus group setting was a place for me to insert my opinion or coerce the group’s discussion. Instead, I tried to nurture a dialogue between participants. I tried to respect viewpoints without inserting a personal, accusatory tone.

In effort to learn about social-norms and attitudes, the collectively produced knowledge of the focus group was desirable in my study. While individual interviews may encourage a “rigid dichotomy between interviewer and subject” (Montell, 1998, p. 46), focus groups can produce collective accounts. There is potential for rich data in the focus group. As mentioned previously, there is opportunity to analyze what each participant reveals about themselves, how each participant engages with others, and how the group collectively negotiates agreements and disagreements (Montell, 1998).

A key aspect of generating focus group data is the ability of group members to form connections. Interaction is vital to the focus group’s success (Gill, Stewart,

Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008). At the start of each focus group, I took time to offer gratitude to the participants. I invited a few minutes of breathing deeply. This was important to me as a way to bring a part of *yoga* into the research process. In yoga, we often start our practice with silence, breathwork, and intention-making. This brief meditation helped the “forming” phase of the focus groups in developing a sense of ease (Finch, Lewis, & Turley, 2014). The meditation was also a way to settle my own nerves. Participants engaged in the process, but honestly, would have been quite ready to jump into conversation without it.

After the brief meditation, participants were invited to introduce themselves. Individual introductions allow each participant to speak and to listen, and to promote confidentiality (Finch, Lewis, & Turley, 2014). Because participants were mostly known to one another, this was a relatively smooth process. I observed that participants were comfortable and eager to share.

### **Semi-Structured Individual Interviews**

Individual interviews were conducted with three yoga studio owners in Kingston, and one private-practice yoga teacher in Kingston. Initially, I had planned to include only focus groups in the study. However, I was not successful in scheduling one time when all of the studio owners could attend. Given the responsibility that studio owners have not only as teachers, but as leaders in their studio communities, I decided to go ahead with individual interviews. I also included a private practice teacher to add more variety to the overall sample of my study. Individual interviews allowed me to collect detailed accounts of each participant’s thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs on the research questions (Lambert &

Loiselle, 2007). A semi-structured interview approach was used to allow for a more in-depth dialogue driven by the responses offered by the participants.

## **Recruitment**

As I mentioned previously, I used purposive sampling methods to select participants who would be most able to generate conversation with respect to the research questions. I approached studio owners and yoga teachers in Kingston who, I felt, would be able to contribute to the conversations. I selected new and experienced teachers based on my knowledge of their personalities and teaching approach. I was aware that these teachers usually spent time talking with students and other teachers before and after yoga classes. In my experience with these teachers, I have found them to be welcoming people. I had confidence that these teachers would be approachable and comfortable expressing their opinions in a group environment. I knew this would be important, especially for the focus groups, given that group dynamics and conversations are key elements in the generation of rich data (Ritchie et al., 2014).

Potential participants were recruited through face-to-face interaction (in person) and through e-mail (see Appendix A). As the PI, I shared a Letter of Information (LOI) and Consent Form (CF) (see Appendix C, LOI/CF for Focus Groups and Appendix D, LOI/CF for Individual Interviews) about the study and I answered any questions posed by the potential participants. All but one person responded to my request. One new yoga teacher cancelled on the day of the scheduled focus group. I was not able to accommodate two other new teachers due to scheduling conflicts. One of the experienced yoga teachers declined my request to participate due to competing demands and one

experienced teacher cancelled on the day of their scheduled focus group. I was not able to accommodate two experienced teachers due to scheduling conflicts. Of the studio owners, three declined to participate due to time constraints.

Given the subject matter of my thesis, I recruited three men for my study. The remaining eight participants were women. Two of the male teachers participated in the focus group with new yoga teachers. The third was unable to attend the focus group for experienced yoga teachers and so I decided to schedule this teacher for an individual interview. I felt that having more men involved in my study was important given the role that gender has played in the scandals affecting the yoga community. I felt that the male voice was important given the ratio of male to female practitioners in the yoga community. Yoga draws largely a female studentship. Over 70% of yoga practitioners identify as female (Ipsos Public Affairs, 2016). I wanted to understand how males in the community were approaching touch in a female-dominated area.

My participants ranged in age from 25 through 55. I invited teachers from a wide range of yoga teaching lineages (e.g. Iyengar, Vinyasa, Ashtanga) to allow for diversity in the philosophical and physical approach to touch and adjustments. All participants were white, which reflects the lack of ethnic diversity amongst Kingston yoga teachers.

The participants in each focus group knew each other. This relates to Kingston being a smaller community. As reviewed by Finch, Lewis, and Turley (2014), participants who have pre-existing relationships can be an advantage in qualitative research. In this context, pre-existing relationships can foster a feeling of safety and trigger memories of shared meanings and contexts (Finch, Lewis, & Turley, 2014).



## **Ethics**

My study was approved by the General Research Ethics Board (GREB) at Queen's University. A copy of my research ethics approval can be found in Appendix F.

Before the start of each focus group and individual interview, I read the participants a letter of information about the study and asked them to sign a consent form. The participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they would be able to withdraw from participation at any time during the interview and research process. Participants also reviewed and signed a confidentiality agreement. Participants of the focus groups were reminded to respect the confidentiality of other group members, and that anything stated within the group must not be repeated outside of the group.

A letter of information about the study was posted at the yoga studio where I teach and am a student (see Appendix E). This letter of information was made visible to other students and teachers at the studio to explain the study, including details about my field notes. No students or teachers approached me with any concerns about this. A few students and teachers did approach me with curiosity about the research topic, and with interest in how I was approaching my research. Several of my students said that they had noticed that I had been offering less touch in my classes over several months, and when they learned about my research topic, they could appreciate why I was not offering as many hands-on assists. All of the students who approached me expressed a hopefulness that I would start including touch in the yoga class again.

## Data Analysis

This study used a grounded theory approach to analyzing data and therefore, I analyzed my data as I was collecting it. Grounded theory is well-suited to studying social issues, as it allows researchers to focus on “what people do and the meanings they make of their actions” (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014, p. 154). Grounded theory has been used widely across the social sciences. It is based upon the premise that the data gathered by a researcher through fieldwork is key to identifying, developing, and integrating concepts and themes (Corbin, 2017). The researcher does not enter into research with a specific hypothesis or theoretical framework. Instead, the researcher develops an understanding of the research topic through collecting and analyzing data. The researcher analyzes *concepts* that emerge from the data, rather than *people or objects* (Corbin, 2017). The researcher constantly compares the data. Through this iterative process, the researcher identifies categories or *codes* that represent over-arching themes reflected within the data. In grounded theory, as categories are defined and re-defined, the researcher can move from detailed data points to more abstract and theoretical analyses (Charmaz, 2011). Not only does this approach structure the data, it also allows the researcher to ask questions about the data itself and the relationships that emerge from the data (Charmaz, 2011; Hesse-Biber, 2007).

During my own data collection, I transcribed each focus group and individual interview within three days of its completion. The entire interview and transcription process took about three weeks. After I completed the transcription, I printed out each focus group and interview. I read each transcript, making notes in the margins alongside the participants’ responses. A common practice in the grounded theory approach is to

identify words and phrases that summarize the data points (Burnard, Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008; Corbin, 2017). I also added my own questions about the data and noted key words about certain paragraphs, ideas, and participant responses. I also made notes about my own opinions about or responses to the research questions and my reaction to the participants' responses.

The reflexive practices of note-taking or “memo writing” are key processes in grounded theory approaches (Charmaz, 2017; Corbin, 2017; Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). Notes allow the researcher to question the collected data and how the data is being interpreted. I read and re-read each transcript about four or five times, and followed an iterative process to analysis. I was able to reference my field notes to explore how my approach to interview questions and how my reactions to the data were informing my interpretations. This process helped me to challenge my assumptions in relation to the data.

Each time I read a transcript, I also noted key terms on a separate paper. I did all of this through hand-written notes. I found it easier to lay out all of my papers on a table rather than switching between documents on my computer screen. Eventually, the key terms or “codes” were used to match similar ideas. This is a hallmark of grounded theory data analysis: the iterative process of reading and re-reading transcripts allows the researcher (in this case, me) to create codes that represent emerging themes (Burnard et al., 2008; Charmaz, 2011). Importantly, “codes *arise from* the researcher’s interaction with the data; they are not preconceived and *applied to* the data” (Charmaz, 2011, p. 165). This initial stage of coding (“open coding”) helped me to compare the “data with

data” (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014, p. 156). I was able to explore *what is in the data?* I was then able to move deeper into *how* I could communicate the *meaning* of the data.

I analyzed the focus group data and individual interview data together. I did make notes as to how the focus group participants responded to questions collectively. I also made notes about how the focus group participants differed in their responses. Generally, the focus group participants were cordial. As I’ve mentioned previously, there were no firm disagreements on the questions that I asked.

After gathering a list of key terms, I reviewed the similarities between these terms. I ended up with five themes. I listed each of these themes on a single document. Beneath the themes, I described what each represented. I collected quotes from each transcript that aligned with each theme. This was all compiled into one document as a way to summarize, synthesize and sort my data (Charmaz, 2011).

For me, organizing the key data into one six-page document helped me to synthesize the wealth of information within my transcripts. I started with over one-hundred and twenty pages of interview data. After my initial coding, I started to explore the most significant or common codes. This focused (or “selective”) coding helped me to categorize my initial codes and identify the relationships between my data. I was able to combine the codes that had similar meanings. As noted by Burnard et al. (2008) and Charmaz (2014), focused coding moves the data into a more conceptual framework and helps the researcher refine meaning.

## **Looking Back at Methodology**

My research experience was at times challenging, at times invigorating, and at other times completely frustrating. In my life I am very task oriented. When I have something to complete, I set my attention to it. I work hard at it. And I complete it. Once complete, I move on. I'm ready for my next adventure.

Research, I found, is not linear. It is not neat. It is messy. It requires wrestling: with process, with data, and with change. It requires flexibility and patience. It requires being okay with throwing out coveted ideas and discovering new ones.

When I started my project, I felt confident in my methodology. I chose focus groups as a way to include several voices, and to generate lively discussions about a topic that I have become impassioned about. I admit, I had moments of panic when I had difficulty scheduling a focus group with yoga studio owners. I had moments of panic when teachers already scheduled for focus groups cancelled hours before the session. It seems that I was experiencing the inevitable side of coordinating groups of busy people; it is simply a difficult task.

I was fortunate to have included an option for individual interviews in my ethics proposal. This allowed me the ability to modify my initial plan. I was able to substitute my planned focus group with yoga studio owners with one-on-one interviews. Looking back, I would have preferred to hold these interviews before the focus groups (I had held the focus group with experienced teachers first, the focus group with the newer teachers second, and the four individual interviews last). The individual interviews allowed for a unique level of depth. I was more able probe the interviewees on specific topics – all

arising from their personal responses. The individual interviews allowed me to dive deeper into the philosophy of their practice.

As a novice social-science researcher, I was able to observe and experience the differences between focus groups and interviews. I was able to experience first-hand the benefits and drawbacks to each method. For me, I really enjoyed the back-and-forth conversations in the focus groups. Particularly in the focus group involving new yoga teachers, I found the comradery and enthusiasm quite energizing. I felt less pressure in the focus groups to “perform” as a facilitator. While I still had to closely follow conversations, I had more time between participant responses to think more about of probing questions and ways to direct the conversations. In contrast, I was often nervous when facilitating individual interviews. In part, I was intimidated by the position of the individual interviewees as entrepreneurs and respected leaders in Kingston’s yoga community. I also had to play a more dynamic role in maintaining the energy of the discussion. I had to ensure that I was listening to the participants’ responses while simultaneously interpreting their responses and deciding how to guide the conversation.

Despite my experience with the individual interviews being a more vigorous challenge, I feel that the depth of discussion that I had with the interviewees was worthwhile. I left these interviews feeling excited about yoga. I left with great admiration for the interviewees’ thoughtfulness. This was especially true through the face-to-face interviews. In the future, I would strive to ensure that all contact with interviewees take place in person. I would not offer the option of a telephone interview. I feel that face-to-face interviews, when an option, are important to establish relationship and dialogue.

The one thing that has been surprising – and empowering – through my research experience has been finding my own voice. I have been invited to have a response; to express my emotions; to share my vulnerabilities. Coming from a natural science background (my first degree was in nutrition and dietetics), I have been accustomed to putting my own thoughts and opinions aside to favour evidence and facts. Natural science has rarely asked me: *what do you think about this? how does your understanding of the world help you interpret this?* Instead, natural science *tells* me how to interpret an issue or problem. It gives me clear directions in problem solving and making conclusions. It doesn't require me to challenge how I've thought about things.

Throughout the research process, my supervisor would often offer encouragement to insert “me” into my writing, my thinking, and my analysis. She encouraged me to *own* my research. As I wrote my thesis, I began to reflect on the passivity of my voice. Not only through the first drafts of my research project, but through the various events and experiences in my life. I learned this passivity from my early traumas. Instead of using my voice to speak out against abuse, I became isolated. My experiences taught me to be cautious and quiet.

My own transformation through this project has been as important as the research itself. I have allowed myself to include my story. And I have allowed myself to use that story to contribute to the yoga community. I have allowed myself to feel completely unsure. And then I have worked to rebuild my confidence. I have allowed myself to question my abilities. And then I have refocused. I have set deadlines. And I have allowed learning to be messy. I don't proclaim to be an expert. But I do intend to bring a deeper sense of inquiry to any further adventures that I pursue.

For a seed to achieve its greatest expression, it must come completely undone. The shell cracks, its insides come out and everything changes. To someone who doesn't understand growth, it would look like complete destruction. (Cynthia Ocelli)



## Chapter 4

### Results and Analysis Part 1: How We Touch

#### Introduction

My results yielded five themes, which I explore over the next two chapters. The themes that emerged are *intention, trust, observation, power, and scope of practice*. I have divided my results and analysis into two parts: *How we Touch* and *Authority and Touch*. In this first part of the results and analysis, I also summarize the use of touch and the consent practices of all of the teachers in my study.

My results suggest that yoga teachers do not follow a consistent approach to receive a student's consent when offering hands-on assists. Most teachers approached consent through implied means; few adopted informed consent processes. Those who asked for explicit consent from students say they see an inherent risk when bodies connect through touch. For those teachers who used touch during a yoga class, the decision to touch was informed by their relationship with students, the careful observation of a student's āsana, and the intention of the yoga class. In general, the teachers view touch as a means to connect, to share energy, and to constructively assist a student in a yoga posture. Largely absent from the results was any discussion of the influence of anti-violence socio-cultural movements on the yoga teaching profession. However, teachers did acknowledge an inherent power dynamic between the yoga teacher and student, which is a lesson that comes out of feminism.

I explore my questions *what are teacher's views on touch, why do yoga teachers touch, and how do yoga teachers approach touch* in this first of two results and analysis chapters. I use the themes *intention, trust, and observation* to answer these questions. In

Chapter 5, I explore my questions regarding *how is a student protected during a yoga class* and *does the role of the teacher matter when it comes to consent*. I use the themes *power* and *scope of practice* to discuss these questions.

### **Touch in the Yoga Class**

I have summarized the use of touch and consent to touch for my participants in Table 2. Most of the teachers in my study use touch at least occasionally. One participant (Yogi 7) said they rarely touch students. While Yogis 1, 2, 3, 8 and 11 all used touch on occasion, they all said that they only approach students whom they know well and who they feel confident will receive touch well. Of the teachers who used touch frequently, Yogis 4, 9, and 10 report that they touch for specific reasons such as enhancing a posture or preventing a student’s injury. Yogis 5 and 6 reported using touch more frequently in restorative yoga postures.

**Table 2**

Summary of touch practices for study participants

<b>Yogi</b>	<b>Uses touch Frequently</b>	<b>Uses touch Occasionally</b>	<b>Uses touch Rarely</b>	<b>Asks for Explicit Consent to Touch</b>	<b>Uses Indirect Consent to Touch</b>
1	No	Yes	N/A	No	No
2	No	Yes	N/A	No	No
3	No	Yes	N/A	No	No
4	Yes	N/A	N/A	No	No
5	Yes	N/A	N/A	No	Yes
6	Yes	N/A	N/A	No	Yes
7	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
8	N/A	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A
9	Yes	N/A	N/A	Yes	N/A
10	Yes	N/A	N/A	No	Yes
11	N/A	Yes	N/A	No	Yes

Of the teachers who consistently use touch as a teaching tool, one (Yogi 9) described a practice of asking for consent with each student encounter. Yogi 8 described a similar practice; while she did not offer touch frequently, she asked for consent to touch with all encounters.

Three teachers (Yogis 5, 6, and 7) used informal consent at the start of each yoga class. These teachers describe a practice of leading their students into a discrete posture such as child's pose (where the student is kneeling on their shins, forehead touching the ground) at the start of the yoga class. Then, these teachers tell their students that a hands-on assist may be offered during the practice. The teachers then said something like "*if you do not want a hands-on assist, please place a hand to your head and I will know not to offer you a hands-on assist.*" In this way, students were able to decline the option of receiving touch.

Given that hands-on assists have become popularized only in the past century (Remski, 2017), some teachers in my study acknowledge that they have started to question both its utility and necessity. Five experienced teachers reported that they use touch less now than they once did.

When I started, my training was so big on assists. It was the biggest part of it when I look back on it. Like, a huge part of it. So, I remember when I first started teaching, I would be touching everyone once or twice, like an assist. As the years go on, I haven't had any bad experiences [...] but I definitely hardly assist anymore. (Yogi 1)

There was definitely a culture of like showing hands on love, which doesn't ... I'm just not somebody who was always feeling the love personally [...] And so, feeling like I needed to touch people, it felt hard. And also, energetically draining. Like, I feel like I already give so much in yoga classes. To then have to touch people ... I was very affected by that. (Yogi 8)

I used to touch a lot more in the first five years of my teaching and in the last two years I've toned it down a huge amount. (Yogi 11)

I also use fewer hands-on assists than I did at the start of my teaching career. For me, touch has been a programmed part of my teaching practice since 2011. After 500-hours of teacher training, hundreds of readings, several workshops, countless hours of teaching, and now the words of my teaching peers, I am questioning: *am I competent to offer hands-on assists? Are hands-on assists necessary?* I am touching less because of #MeToo. I am also touching less because of my own survivor story. The #MeToo movement was both alarming and empowering to me. I became passionate about the movement as one of transformation. As a yoga teacher, I feel competent to guide students through postures, breathwork, and meditation. I have several methods of teaching. Through this study, I recognize that I must better acknowledge my personal authority, more clearly communicate the intention of my service, and commit to cultivating a safer practice space for my students.

All of the teachers in my study reported some frequency of discussions about hands-on assists within their own yoga studios and on social media forums. None mentioned the specific #MeToo stories that I have become somewhat obsessed with over the past year (Brathen, 2018; Brown, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d; Rain, 2018; Remski, 2018). One teacher described conversations happening about “inappropriate assists” appearing on their social media feeds. In the wake of criticisms around Patthabi Jois, particularly in the months following #MeToo, photos began to circulate showing other Ashtanga yoga teachers (including one in Canada) performing intimate-looking and intense hands-on assists. Yogi 11 reported that the photos inspired conversations in her yoga studio about touching such as “why are we touching? do we need to?” I resonate with Yogi 11’s response. Her question opens an inquiry into how current events can shift

our teaching practice. In my opinion, staying connected to current events, and evolving my teaching practice in accordance with these events is paramount to delivering effective and appropriate yoga classes.

### **How We Touch: Intention**

All of the teachers felt that, regardless of approach, teachers who use touch do so with positive intentions. Teachers agreed that, in their experience, they had not experienced malicious intentions from other teachers while in a group or private yoga class setting. Teachers also report that they were confident in their own intentions about touch in a yoga class.

As a teacher, I know that my intention is very good. So, I'm not very worried that someone is thinking something when I'm teaching, because I know my intention is good. (Yogi 1)

You're always touching with a purpose. You're never just lightly touching. (Yogi 2)

You have to have a reason to assist and it has to be clear. (Yogi 4)

I do use hands-on very intentionally and very seldom and very light. Really, my whole intention of teaching is to get people to feel more calm and more at peace in their body and their lives. (Yogi 11)

These statements reflect the subjectivity of intent. Here, teachers assume that because they understand their personal intention to be "good," that such an intention will be desired and well-received by students. I have held these beliefs as well. I feel that I touch with the most positive and kind intentions. I touch with the purpose to guide my students and to make them feel safe. But does *my* intention matter if a student does not want to be touched through a hands-on assist? I would now argue no. As yoga teachers, I

believe that we need to respect that our “good intentions” may not be welcomed by all students. We also need to respect that some students will not benefit from touch. Some students *do not want to be touched*. If our ultimate intention is to extend compassion toward our students, I feel that we need to involve them in making decisions around accepting or declining touch during a yoga class.

*Intention* has been challenging for me to reflect on. Before this study, I had not considered how my students were receiving my intention as I’ve offered touch in the yoga class. But as a survivor of sexual trauma, I have reflected on how I am often triggered by stories in the media in which the *intention* behind some terrible behavior is debated. I often hear the *victim* being criticized for not being more forceful about saying “no.” I often hear alleged perpetrators defended because *their* intention did not carry malice.

It has been difficult for me to consider that my own good intentions needed to be thoughtfully assessed. I started to wonder: does *intent* matter if something I do as yoga teacher is interpreted by a student as harmful? Touch feels different to everyone, no matter the intention. Intention is uniquely personal, that is, only what I know as a teacher. As a teacher, I cannot expect that my students understand my intent when offering a hands-on assist. Just as in any other interaction, I feel it is my responsibility to clearly communicate the purpose and benefit of touching to a student.

This project has challenged my own justifications for how I am approaching touch in my classes. Several teachers in this study echoed my prior rationalizations: *asking in the moment removes the student from their practice, my students know me and trust me, my intention is pure*. But, as the teachers in this study also acknowledge, there is no real

way of knowing how an instruction, a sequence, or a teaching method will affect a student.

All teachers eluded to the fact that students come to yoga for various reasons. That is, students may come to class with their own intentions. A study by Park, Riley, Bedesin, and Stewart (2014) identified differences between students and teachers related to the reason for continuing a yoga practice. For students, fitness, flexibility, and stress management were correlated with a sustained yoga practice, while spirituality was the main correlate for teachers (Park, Riley, Bedesin, & Stewart, 2014). Knowing the motivations of both student and teacher may be useful for designing and instructing a well-received class. While the teachers in my study recognize that there is no way to specifically meet all students' needs, they did not specify if and how their own intentions (or instructions) change according to their students.

Overall, the teachers in my study believed that yoga teachers approach touch with *good intentions*. This is a belief that I share. But I wonder if we are disregarding the way that students are *receiving* intent. I believe that it may be worthwhile for me and other yoga teachers to consider intent in context of how a yoga student will *interpret* this intent. And interpretation is highly influenced by personal experiences, internal awareness, proprioceptive skills, and psycho-social factors (Stephens, 2014). By heralding *intent* as protective in terms of malicious behaviours, we may be ignoring the larger socio-cultural discussion about touch and consent: that intent does not matter if harm is perceived by the student.

## How We Touch: Trust

Teachers identify trust as the foundation of interactions between yoga teachers and students in a class setting. Of the teachers who use touch as a teaching tool in the modern postural yoga (MPY) class, a prior and ongoing relationship with students is named as a necessary component in the decision to use touch. The importance of the relationship between a teacher and a student has been recognized elsewhere (Byrne, 2014; Farhi, 2006). Hands-on assists are only offered to known or familiar students. Teachers rarely, if ever, use hands-on assists with students who are new to yoga or unfamiliar to the teacher.

I'm more along the line of: if I know a person and they've been coming to my class for a really long time, then I'll enhance their pose. ... I think it's all about communication. But if you haven't had the conversation, and it's a brand-new person, I would never touch them. Period. (Yogi 3)

... it is more implied. They see it in the room to begin with. At the beginning I don't assist them much. They come several times. Then when they have the flow, I will assist them. It's more organic. (Yogi 4)

I offer touch. But there are a couple of parameters I put around it. The first is: *if I don't know you, I'm not touching you*. If we don't have a relationship, then I don't feel like it's appropriate for me to put my hands on you. Because, why would you trust me. (Yogi 9)

I know my students pretty well because we build relationship with them at the front desk and before and after class. (Yogi 11)

The above statements interpret longevity as a means to build relationship. Most teachers likened *knowing* a student to the frequency of attendance. Only one teacher/studio owner describes a studio schedule wherein classes are offered in eight-week sessions. This is a deliberate strategy that enables students and teachers to work



together for a specific length of time, and for a specific type of yoga practice. This type of structure is used to foster trust in the student-teacher relationship.

All of the teachers describe having a consistent student base within their respective studios or teaching locations. Five teachers report class size as a limiting factor for hands-on methods. But these same teachers did not feel that class sizes influence their ability to form relationships with students.

As with the issue of interpreting intention, I wonder: *how do teachers know what the student's understanding of trust is as it relates to the yoga teacher?* To assist in this line of questioning, teachers say that trust in the yoga setting is earned. Teachers build trust with students through interactions before, during, and following class.

I've even talked to people after class and said *you know, what I offered you today, did that go okay? Do you want to try that again sometime?* Just going over after class and ask *did it go okay? Did it make things ... did you enjoy it?* Just asking the question. (Yogi 3)

Trust is earned. And so, I think it's through years of conversation and years of showing up. Years of maintaining integrity. Years of maintaining practice. (Yogi 9)

These statements highlight the role of communication in building and sustaining trust. But consistent communication is often interrupted *during* a yoga class, which some teachers referred to as a *silent space*. Here, relationships are based on the teacher *observing* and *directing*, while the student *listens* to and *follows* instructions. I can confirm that in the classes that I lead, the students are very quiet. I believe this comes from my teaching style and the general culture of yoga studios. Most studios have a "silent space" policy where classes take place. As I've explored earlier, my teaching style is to *guide* students and be almost *invisible* to their experience. Rarely do my students

speak during the class, unless I am close by and specifically helping them with a posture. My students freely approach me after class to offer me feedback or to ask more specifically about an experience that they've had during the class. Such an "experience" can relate to how a particular posture *felt*, how they could further *modify (or progress)* an āsana, or how they experienced the class in an *emotional or psycho-somatic* way. During the yoga class, I am conscious of offering *options* for each specific āsana or other yoga practice (such as breathing exercises or mantras). That is, although I am *directing* the class, I am also *inviting* the student to select the āsana and experience that is best for them in the moment.

One teacher describes constantly conversing with students through the class. This teacher also follows a practice of gaining consent for each hands-on interaction that she has with a student. This teacher has created an environment where students are asking questions during the class. This teacher talks directly to students during the yoga class, regardless of the number of students present. Three other teachers say that when they assist students, they invite the student to ask questions while they verbally detail *what* the assist entails and *how* the assist may be helpful. Two teachers describe the rationale for constant communication as *empowering* the student to participate in making decisions. Detailed discussions about the *rationale* for verbal cues and hands-on assists (if used) allow the student to decide if a teacher's suggestion would be helpful or not, depending on the student's immediate context.

Creating an atmosphere of choice is another thing that I think about a lot in teaching. And so that can mean offering options in poses, letting people know that they can take rests or sit things out, [...], just using language that indirectly creates an atmosphere of choice. (Yogi 8)

When I teach there is ongoing conversation happening in class while I'm teaching the class. So that people know what we're doing, why we're doing it. If I offer assistance, they know what I'm offering and why I'm offering it. But they always get to choose if they want to take me up on that or not. (Yogi 9)

While the above statements highlight the importance of creating an environment where students and teachers can talk to one another *during* a yoga class, no teachers commented on a student's *actual* explicit understanding of the teacher-student relationship. As with intent, I wonder if a teacher's perspective really matters when it comes to a student's experience. I may feel that a student trusts me, but I cannot be for certain (if I do not specifically ask). As I've detailed previously, I have not been accustomed to asking for consent to touch my students. I've assumed that my students trust me because they have not told me otherwise. I've assumed that my students enjoy being touched because they have not told me otherwise. But I wonder if I am really honouring my students' experiences. I wonder if *not touching* would change their experience.

Throughout my thesis work, I have been inspired by an article written by Jennifer Musial. In *Engaged Pedagogy in the Feminist Classroom and Yoga Studio*, Musial encourages us to think about the teaching role as one of mentorship (2011). That is, "assisting growth rather than imparting knowledge" (Musial, 2011, p. 215). Musial approaches teaching with observation. From here, she encourages uneasiness and a feeling of vulnerability. She heralds mindfulness and sensitivity to the student's experience. And, she emphasizes the teacher's role in acknowledging power. This acknowledgement becomes essential to serving the student (Musial, 2011).

I will explore the concept of power with more detail in the following chapter. But for now, I want to simply acknowledge that I have power as a yoga teacher. I have *authority* over my students. I make decisions during a yoga class. If I make decisions for a student without a student's involvement, I am enacting *authority*. Not consciously or with malicious intent, systemically. I am defaulting to the pre-modern yoga practice where the student submits to the teacher's demand (Godrej, 2017). Even with loving-intention (*metta*), I could be putting the student's liberty and safety at risk.

I agree that modern yoga teachers touch students to facilitate growth in practice, to offer loving kindness, to exchange energy, and to promote safety. But as a teacher, I need to engage in a practice of constant reflection and refinement of my skills. This practice includes the skillful observation of a student's experience, and the ability to adapt to individual and group needs.

One area of yoga that has strived to shift the power from teacher to student is trauma-informed yoga (TIY). In TIY, the teacher adapts to the unique needs of the individual, fostering a *safer* environment wherein students are invited to *respond* through the practice instead of *react* (Justice, Brems, & Ehlers, 2018). TIY highlights the complexity of personal experience. It offers insight into understanding the vulnerability of personhood. It challenges conventional methods of practice. TIY does not equate to *no touch*. Rather, it facilitates the process of critical reflection on the part of the teacher and the student.

Two teachers in my study have completed TIY training. They described the role of TIY in cultivating *safer* studio spaces that *empower* students to make personal choices about the yoga practice.

Part of creating safer spaces and I love just the term, the subtle nuance of the term safer versus safe, because we can never really know what's gonna make someone feel safe. And so, when you just kind of change your language around it and use the term safer it acknowledges that we can do certain things to be aware and try to make people feel safe. (Yogi 8)

For whatever reason, I have a lot of folks who have trauma in my classes. I have a lot of folks who are diagnosed with PTSD. I have a lot of folks - and I'm just going to call it, I kind of believe the whole entire world is traumatized. I mean if we were to dig deep enough into everyone's history there would be some trauma everywhere whether it's childhood trauma, they were bullied ... I don't know one woman who hasn't been sexually assaulted in my age group [...]. So really, you live life and you get kind of traumatized. And so, where it has evolved is, I don't want to decide for people ... I really want to empower them to own their practice. (Yogi 9)

TIY “presents opportunities for participants to be in charge of themselves based on a felt sense of their own body” (Trauma Center Trauma Sensitive Yoga, n.d.). The trauma sensitive yoga practice emphasizes “experiencing the present moment, making choices, taking effective action, and creating rhythms” (Clark et al., 2014, p. 153). During a yoga class, a TIY teacher guides a student through a yoga sequence with attention to using words, shapes, and cues that acknowledge potentially triggering situations for the student. TIY is based on the fact that trauma victims often don’t feel safe in their bodies because of physical or sexual assaults (Jones, 2015). TIY teachers learn to understand that asking a student to bring attention to a vulnerable part of the body (e.g. the pelvis) or a vulnerable position may be associated with trauma (West, 2011). Teachers learn to use inviting language (e.g. *when you are ready ... or, if you'd like ...*) to encourage their students to choose what kind of movements are best for them.

The TIY practice intends to help students tolerate stress and practice techniques which help them safely move beyond an immediate stress (in this case, a yoga āsana).

The approach is clinically beneficial in relieving the symptoms of PTSD and other mental

health issues (Clark et al., 2014; van der Kolk et al., 2014). TIY is a specialized practice, with specific intention and clinical indications. It is worthwhile to explore this area of teaching in order to contextualize the use of touch, and to question if touch is necessary to enhance a student's experience of growth and self-care.

The teachers in my study did not feel that hands-on approaches are always an appropriate offering. Verbal cues are lauded by all teachers as a skillful way to guide students and to invite students to make decisions about their bodies.

Teachers always have the best of intention, but you have to refrain yourself for going to assist somebody just because the way they do something just hurts your eyes. It is not about looking pretty. You have to look beyond that before you make a b-line to assist somebody. (Yogi 4)

Verbal cues are good. Because you walk around and you get into the class. (Yogi 6)

In a class that I am teaching, I'm not super handsy during poses and stuff. If I notice that someone is not doing something correctly, I try to use my words more and try not to single out that person, particularly by putting my hands on them, or even speaking directly to them. I try to make it more broad. (Yogi 7)

If I am using even like direct verbal adjustments where I'm like focusing on one person, and centering them out in a way, I'm really sensitive to that too and I kind of have a rule I like I won't approach a person more than twice in a class. (Yogi 8)

In my experience, I use touch as one of several teaching methods. I use touch to accent my verbal cues in a way, similar to that suggested by the interviewees. I use touch to show my students that I am watching them, that I am completely immersed in the moment-to-moment journey of a class.

I touch my students as a way to invite awareness of specific parts of their bodies or of the function of an āsana. In downward dog (where the student is making an inverted V-shape with their hands and feet on the ground, and their hips in the air), I may place

my right shoulder between my student's shoulder blades. With my feet staggered (one between the student's hands and one to the side of their hands), I will then use my hands to firmly guide the student's hips away from their hands. In this assist, I want the student feel how *pressing into the ground allows the spine to elongate*. I perform the assist, verbalizing what I am doing and cuing with attention to the breath. *Inhale: feel your palms root into the ground as your hips elongate away from your hands. Exhale: maintain your shape as your heart extends to the back of the room.*

Teachers said that they did not use hands-on adjustments to correct āsanas. Instead, the most common reasons to use touch were to invoke a *feel-good* sensation, to biomechanically enhance a posture, to address a student's safety, or to deepen a student's practice.

When the teacher comes to assist you to meet the condition of the posture it can be weird on you because you've never done that posture. And that is why you need the help – to meet the condition of the posture, so your body can remember after what it was about. (Yogi 4)

Students who are in a position that is perhaps unsafe immediately, acutely unsafe, that's obviously priority number one. And then, students who are in positions that are unsafe or potentially damaging in a long-term sense. I'd say that's the next priority. And then, after that, you have students wanting to deepen their practice, ... or students who I know or they seem like physical touch with another human will be very well received. (Yogi 10)

It is an element to bring more ease or more comfort and sometimes more depth, if it is judged as appropriate. But, never corrective. (Yogi 11)

Although the teachers did not associate *addressing a safety issue* with being *corrective*, I would consider *corrective assists* to be an important part of a yoga teacher's skill. I often have new students in my classes. If I see one of these students straining to "achieve" a posture, I will use hands-on assists to help them make modifications (or at

the very least resume steady, measured breathing). I look for physical cues like muscle “shaking,” gasping for breath, and facial “scrunching” to let me know if a student may be in a place of discomfort. For these students, a simple hand on the back of their heart along with a cue to *breathe in deeply* can be enough to help them relax and find the expression of the shape that is accessible and safe for their body. I am not telling the student that their shape is *wrong*; rather, I am inviting them to step back and re-evaluate how they are approaching the posture.

Seven teachers had used (or use) *feel good* or *energetic* forms of touch. Two of these teachers cautioned against using this form of touch with fingertips only (all teachers identified the need to be firm when providing touch – using the whole palm and hand so as to avoid misinterpreting touch as *caressing*).

There was minimal discussion about the more *energetic* forms of touch as “risky.” But it has been documented elsewhere that - even if well-intentioned - this form of instruction can come across as threatening (Justice, Brems, & Ehlers, 2018). Others have acknowledged the intimacy associated with “feeling good” in a yoga class and have advocated for the understanding of power and boundaries in a yoga class (Leo, Philo, & Cadman, 2016; Remski, 2018). The majority of teachers in my study did not see *feel good* or *energetic* touch as problematic. Instead, the majority of teachers interpreted this type of touch as purposeful and well-received, particularly in slower moving practices like yin yoga and restorative yoga.

The interpretation of *good* or *positively received* intention is associated with a teacher’s personal experience in receiving touch as a student. Several yoga teachers said



they enjoy touch in their personal yoga practice. They acknowledge that hands-on approaches have been a part of their own development.

The people that I work with and that teach me, know my body and I trust them to ... if they were to deepen my body into a pose, I'm going to just soften. (Yogi 2)

I do really like getting adjustments myself sometimes. Just that nice little reminder of like '*oh yeah, my legs should be a little bit more straight right now and engaged*' ... just a light, suggestive touch, I find is so important and such a good tool. (Yogi 5)

I like hands-on adjustment. I like receiving it. Because sometimes I feel like, '*oh, the teacher is paying attention to me.*' (Yogi 7)

I've absolutely appreciated a teacher coming and offering me adjustments, letting me know that maybe I was off because I'm inside myself and I can't see it. (Yogi 9)

For these teachers, receiving touch is a welcomed part of being a student. It is well acknowledged that "yogis," like everyone, have preferential learning modalities and processes (Strean, 2017). The above quotes from the teachers in my study reflect a kinesthetic preference for learning (Stephens, 2014) and an acceptance of their own teachers as "experts" on a student's body (Byrne, 2014; Remski, 2018). They reflect the positive impact of touch. They also reflect on the influence of *having been touched on offering touch*.

In my case, my personal use of touch has been highly influenced by *receiving* touch as a yoga student. As I've previously noted, touch was a part of my *personal* healing practice. I can't say for certain that touch is equally as healing for others. *On what authority do I have to offer a teaching method based on my personal experience?* My answer is: *none*. I may be capable of offering hands-on assists; I may see the benefit

of an assist for a particular student; I may intuit the way an assist feels in the body. But another's body is not my own.

Teachers say that they receive more positive feedback than negative feedback from students during and following a class, and even more so when they use touch during the yoga class.

We get such a frame of positive reinforcement and not any – very rarely, do we get negative feedback from a student, right? So, when someone has a bad experience, they're probably going to be like, get up and go. Like, when are they actually going to have that channel to give you that feedback? (Yogi 5)

This teacher highlights the challenge in creating a space where students feel comfortable to offer constructive or negative feedback. But teachers did not seem to associate this gap with the potential for student harm. That is, the teachers did not elaborate on the value of receiving constructive or negative feedback in supporting safer practice spaces.

At the end of all of my classes, I invite students to approach me with questions or suggestions that they have before they leave the studio. But I do not specifically invite constructive feedback regarding hands-on assists. I wonder if more students would approach me if I did. I wonder if a student who had a negative experience would feel comfortable in approaching me.

Five teachers identified having felt vulnerable as a student in a yoga class. Even as teachers themselves, they said they could struggle in saying 'no' to unwelcomed hands-on assists. If teachers carry such anxiety, I wonder how many more students are carrying the same? That almost half of the teachers (and myself) in this study have received an unwanted assist makes me think that it is likely that our students may also have experienced a trauma or other negative experience in class *and not voiced their*

*concerns*. If we, as teachers, find it difficult to address negative practice experiences, how can we create a space where our students are more able to address similar experiences?

It makes you feel inadequate because everybody seems to really enjoys it [being touched by the teacher]. (Yogi 4)

Something that comes up for me sometimes when I'm practicing – particularly outside of my studios, where a lot of studios do hands-on stuff – is even if I see the teacher adjusting the person next to me, that sometimes gets me riled up because I'm like *they're going to come and touch me next, and what if I don't want this? Or, are they going to ask? If I say no, are people going to hear me say no? [...]* I'm not comfortable saying no. It's like embarrassing and everyone's going to hear [...]. It makes me feel vulnerable. (Yogi 8)

Teachers use their own negative experiences to inform their approach to using (or not using) touch when guiding a yoga class.

Sometimes I really like touch. But other times, I really don't. And I've been touched in ways that I didn't want to before. And so, I was just aware of that. I'm not a touchy-feely person. (Yogi 8)

I have had an experience of being, I'm going to go with *mildly traumatized*, in some yoga classes and then not wanting to create that experience for other people. And so, really thinking about it. (Yogi 9)

Two teachers, who disliked being touched by other teachers or who had negative experiences while being touched were more likely to refrain using hands-on assists in their own classes. When using touch, these teachers described a very deliberate approach. They verbally ask their students for consent and talk to the student about what they are doing throughout the duration of the hands-on assist. These two teachers had completed trauma-informed yoga teacher training, which had furthered their awareness of a student's vulnerability and the approach they could take to consent and touch.

These teachers, without directly acknowledging #MeToo, describe a teaching approach that acknowledges power. I admire their consciousness regarding trauma and risk. These teachers situate their practice outside of the conventional niceties of yoga. To me, this signifies a deep caring toward their students. That is, they share a willingness to confront discomfort in order to offer service. I came to ask how other yoga teachers might be encouraged to adopt a similar perspective. And I asked: *how am I evolving my teaching practices in the 2019 social climate? Regardless of my past teaching experiences, am I truly serving my students today?*

### **How We Touch: Observation**

Teachers told me that they use observation to assess a student's posture, somatic cues, and response to verbal cues. Observation was described by the teachers as a prerequisite to touch. Three teachers noted that a background in biomechanics, anatomy, and physiology of the body was essential for skillful observation and subsequent instruction. This was interesting to me, as some of my most meaningful yoga practices have been ones that have had no grounding in biomechanics, anatomy, or physiology. They *simply made me feel good*. Personally, I find that students don't always understand or respond to anatomical terms. And although I feel like I am competent in anatomy and physiology (in addition to yoga training, I completed courses in the subjects at a university level and work with these fields in an allied health profession), I do not use a lot of specific biomechanical or anatomical cuing as a teacher. I simply *watch students* to make decisions about how I will guide the people in the room.

When I'm teaching a class, like I'm just "scan-scan-scan-scan-scan..." (Yogi 1)

I offer mostly verbal cues, I will demo sometimes ... yeah, I'm typically like moving around the room or at the very least looking around the room and teaching to the people that are in front of me. (Yogi 8)

By observing their students, teachers are able to give verbal cues prior to offering any other type of enhancement, such as hands-on assists or visual demonstrations. After careful observation of the biomechanical efficiency and safety of the student's posture, the teacher determines if a hands-on assist would enhance the student's experience. The teacher can also observe if the student is receptive to receiving touch.

You don't always have to be pushing on people and forcing them into something like that. Sometimes they're not ready for it. So, it's getting familiar with bodies, and recognizing where some people can go. (Yogi 1)

One teacher acknowledges that touch can be risky and that careful observation was necessary to make decisions about touch. This teacher felt that if a teacher is not clear with the intent behind a hands-on assist or if a teacher touches a student in a way that could be perceived as sexual, the teacher could be crossing a boundary. The result could compromise a teacher's integrity and career and do serious harm to a student.

If I look at someone and I'm not quite sure, then I need to think more about what's happening before I approach that student and touch them. Because the casual touch is part of what's getting teachers into trouble. (Yogi 9)

In addition to observing their students, teachers also try to pay attention to physical clues that indicate how receptive students might be to being touched. Teachers were comfortable when observing a student's overall mood or body language. They felt confident about making a decision to approach students with touch. One teacher

described using somatic observation to exit a hands-on approach when they sensed a student's tension and discomfort.

Even if they don't shake their heads no, you want a sense of the unconscious communication they are giving off. So, if they are really, really tense, the second you put your hand on them there's a kind of tenseness that comes from surprise. And there's a kind of tenseness that comes from discomfort and fear. And if that's the case and I put my hand on them, even if they haven't shaken their head no, then I'll generally just sort of pull it off in a way wherein my hand doesn't make contact for more than two seconds. (Yogi 10)

Like intention, observation is a highly subjective mode of assessment. Even with a good understanding and observation of a student's anatomy and biomechanics it is difficult to fully understand a student's experience in a yoga āsana. Two teachers described *receiving adjustments* and *learning how adjustments* feel in the body as methods to gain skillfulness in observing and offering hands-on touch.

The way we learn to assist is by being assisted. Constantly, constantly, constantly. And I think that it is important to know what the assists feel like before we can give an assist to somebody. To know it from inside to begin with. (Yogi 4)  
I try to be mindful and have some form of dedicated practice with different elements of my teaching. So sometimes that's word choice, sometimes that's an enunciation. Hands-on is another part. So, I have followed up that education by scheduling private tutoring time. (Yogi 10)

Four teachers specifically noted how they use mentorship and continued learning as a way to develop their own skills in observing both the physical and non-physical aspects of a student's yoga practice. These teachers explored the ability to watch a student with empathy. They described going beyond their initial teacher training courses to develop a greater confidence in offering hands-on assists.

## **Final Thoughts on *How We Touch***

I think the questions and responses to *why are we touching* and *how are we touching* miss the point that *some students simply do not want to be touched*. Some students – myself included – desire and enjoy touch. Some enjoy more rigorous touch, while others want a *feel-good* effect. Other students *do not want touch*. A teacher’s inquiry into *why* and *how* we touch cannot change a student’s preference. Only the conversations we have with individual students can serve as a true marker for using touch.

Historically, my decision to touch has not been influenced very much by broader cultural discussions like those around #MeToo. I only talk about touch to students who initiate the discussion. Like many of the study participants, I have relied upon *knowing the student* and *having a reputation as a teacher who offers touch*. I have embraced both. My approach has not been incorrect; yoga teaching is not a regulated profession. There are no standards in approaching the issue of consent to touch. Nonetheless, I feel some shame in my complacency.

In this chapter I have come to question *why* and *how* yoga teachers touch. I have revealed the subjectivity of intention and observation, and the importance of communication between teachers and students in building a trusting relationship. I have also revealed the vulnerability that we might contribute to when we, as yoga teachers, assume that our teaching methods are applicable to all students. In the next chapter, I acknowledge the role that power plays in the yoga teacher-student relationship. I also explore scope of practice as a way for yoga teachers to prioritize protecting students from harm during a yoga class.

## Chapter 5

### Results and Analysis Part 2: Authority and Touch

#### Introduction: Results and Analysis

I explore the role that power and scope of practice play in this second part of my results and analysis. This chapter is important for understanding the influence that yoga teachers have over their students, due to the privilege and authority that yoga teachers hold. I discuss the importance of socio-cultural awareness for yoga teachers and argue that scope of practice is essential for creating safer and more welcoming yoga classes.

#### Authority and Touch: Power

When I think about *power*, I also think about *vulnerability*. When I turned to yoga after I experienced trauma, I was highly vulnerable. I was nervous to have a stranger guide my body, tell me how to breath, and manipulate my emotions and train of thought. I am not alone in turning to yoga after trauma. Six of the eleven teachers I spoke with say that they started yoga because of anxiety, stress, or other mental health conditions. All of the teachers acknowledge that there is a high incidence of trauma and mental illness amongst yoga students. The teachers in my study suspect that the yoga practice attracts people who suffer from mental health conditions because it is socially accepted as a healing practice.

I argue that many yoga students attend yoga classes with vulnerability. I was surprised that although some of the teachers in my study acknowledge that many yoga students live with mental health conditions, most of the teachers left the responsibility for dealing with these conditions to the student.



Anything could trigger any body. Happy baby ... you might have somebody who just had a miscarriage and you make them do happy baby. Or somebody just lost their puppy. There is always going to be something that is going to ... That's the thing, you are you, and there are maybe ten people in front of you, maybe thirty people in front of you. They are all going to have a different agenda, they all have a different expectation, you do your best. As long as you teach from here [gestures to heart]. (Yogi 4)

The quote above identifies the difficulty in meeting the needs of each student.

Yogi 4 offers compassion to the teacher and encourages teaching from an authentic and compassionate place. This has been something that I relate to as a teacher: if I teach from a place of empathy, I am hopeful that the practices that I offer will be safe for the majority of my students. I accept that I will not be able to reach all of my students in a profound or even satisfactory way. Some students may not resonate with my instruction, my voice, or my overall style of teaching. But even though I cannot specifically meet the needs of each of my students, I strive to be aware of how my vocal tone, word choices, and placement in the studio space will impact my students' experience. I believe that if I approach my class as a collection of individuals, that I can decrease the chance of triggering a student. Ultimately, I want to be attentive to each individual in my class and I strive to cultivate a positive experience for all of my students. I want to be aware that any potential to trigger a student in class takes power away from the student and further emphasizes me, the teacher, as in control.

It is my opinion that most yoga teachers (myself included) are teaching from a place of *how they have been taught*, instead of adapting our teaching methods to our students and to the current socio-cultural climate. In my opinion, this is a misuse of power; accepting the role of teaching must include an intention which emphasizes a student's safety and feeling of belonging.

Four teachers in my study state that a power differential exists between yoga teachers and students. These teachers expressed disappointment that conversations about power and privilege are largely absent in the yoga community. These teachers drew upon their own critical reflections related to yoga and teaching.

This conversation regarding privilege started because I was thinking about students in a class who might belong to certain minorities or groups that are less privileged in general and how that influences touch. And there's a broader conversation about privilege and just what it means to teach yoga as a whole. (Yogi 10)

I consider the statement above to be quite powerful and thought-provoking. Yogi 10 says that as yoga teachers, we need to consider our place of privilege and personally reflect on how our position has the ability to influence a student. Yogi 10 is making decisions to touch based on external factors – not only personal intention. Yogi 10 further identifies a history of working with sexual assault victims, and being immersed in readings about yoga's philosophy and history, including those of power and privilege. Yogi 10 describes a long and ongoing history of mentorship with teachers who have invited an inquiry into issues like consent and privilege. Yogi 10's interest and exposure to conversations and situations that have socio-cultural impact seem to constantly influence and transform his teaching practice.

The conversation about *power* and *privilege* with Yogi 10 took place near the end of our interview. I had asked if there was anything that was missed in the conversation and he replied:

...something needs to be said about how consent and touch and yoga culture, how that all ties into positions of privilege outside of yoga class. So, if you're a privileged because of your perceived race or your perceived gender or your perceived sexuality, things like that, it creates an inbuilt, societal, broad-speaking power differential. (Yogi 10)

During our conversation, Yogi 10 acknowledged his privilege as a white man of a younger age and able body. He accepts that with privilege comes power. He assumes a certain authority due to his privilege. But he says that knowing his abilities (e.g. being young, healthy, and strong) helps him to lead accessible yoga classes. Although his privilege does not stop him from touching students, he recognizes that he needs to work hard to create a safe space for his students. He describes making careful word choices and being thoughtful about his positioning around students as important in cultivating a non-threatening experience for students. As a teacher, he knows that he holds power over his students and that this power may negatively influence his students. This teacher strikes me as particularly attuned to serving his students. He demonstrates a high level of introspection. This guides his teaching methods. With reflection, he is able to adjust how he approaches his students as individuals and groups.

Yogi 10 also critiqued the guru-disciple model of pre-modern yoga. He explored how the modern yoga practice has retained some qualities of this model, wherein the “teacher” is recognized as someone who holds wisdom and experience. He highlighted the challenge that exists when confronting power and privilege in the yoga community:

I have a passion for thinking about the role that power and power roles and power dynamics play between yoga instructors and facilitators and yoga students. Because there are some elements that seem to be inherent to a lot of yoga communities that are very, very highly correlated with abuse in power. (Yogi 10)

When asked why the yoga community was not addressing historical (and current) abuses of power, Yogi 10 says that many in the community are not “as heavily invested and so they, quite frankly, often don’t see the value in engaging in these heavier, more in-depth conversations that might take away from their immediate enjoyment,” or are:

more deeply into the practice and by the time someone is deeply into the practice, getting them to acknowledge and confront the fact that what they're doing might have elements that are inherently harmful to vulnerable populations ... this population is invested in a way where it's going to be an attack on their identity. (Yogi 10)

These statements are directly applicable to the findings in my study. The majority of teachers in this study felt that their relationships with students, the consistency of their teaching methods, and their overall communication with students were reasonable. They did not see problems with how yoga teachers approach touch during a yoga class.

One of the questions guiding my study was whether #MeToo had played any role in a teacher's decision to touch students during a yoga class. Despite the media profile on the issue of consent to touch in the yoga community (Brathen, 2018; Brown, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d; Herrington, 2017; Remski, 2018), all of the teachers said that the #MeToo movement had not influenced their decisions around touching students. One teacher, who mostly refrained from touch, felt validated by the conversations arising from the #MeToo movement. These messages were already a part of the teacher's instructional framework. Three other teachers were cognizant about the #MeToo discussions in the yoga community, but they did not change how they touched because of #MeToo. Instead, the majority of teachers in this study feel that their relationships with students, the consistency of their teaching methods, and their overall communication with students are acceptable for minimizing risks associated with touch.

Four of the teachers directly acknowledged the role that #MeToo has played for those who have experienced trauma in relation to touch during a yoga class.

... I think there have been, definitely been, some abuse in the past and I think there have been some teachers who have been really you know, taking advantage of their positions of power. (Yogi 1)

Three of the teachers suggested that the discussions around #MeToo were not applicable to their roles as yoga teachers. Returning to their perspectives on *intention*, they said that #MeToo was not directly relevant to their teaching practice.

I don't think that the #MeToo movement really affects me and my class. I think that it created an awareness, and I think it gave people a voice to say no. And that's on them to tell me. It doesn't bother me. It doesn't affect me. We're all here together. And you know, I don't think about it when I'm going to adjust someone. (Yogi 2)

I try not to let stuff like that affect the yoga practice or the teaching. I just feel that there's so much fear in society already. We can't keep tip-toeing around on eggshells all the time. The #MeToo thing is great. Just like it says: "me too." You know you're not alone. But, in the yoga community, in class, we're trying to come together and not be alone. (Yogi 3).

#MeToo is never in my mind in the yoga class because I don't, honestly, if you're going to assist somebody and you're like, "*oh, #MeToo movement,*" what kind of assist were you going to do? (Yogi 4)

These teachers may have viewed the concepts and intention of #MeToo as very distinct and unique from the issues and conversations that are necessary in the yoga community. But I would like to start more conversations with my yoga teaching peers about challenging our practices' inherent "goodness." Having difficult discussions about power, privilege, and authority in the yoga class may invite more diverse populations to practice yoga (Freeman, Vladagina, Razmjou, & Brems, 2017). The teacher who acknowledges their position of power is more able to model healthy boundaries (Farhi, 2006; Macdonald, 2014; Lea, Philo, & Cadman, 2016; Keyes, 2016). The result may be a safer space for students to practice yoga.

The yoga class can be a place to form connection and be part of a community. Further, it has been well-established as a place to nurture mental and physical health (Ross, Friedmann, Bevan, & Thomas, 2013; Silveira & Smart, 2019). But previous

publications have noted the complexity of *power* as it relates to yoga teachers (Cohen, 2018; Godrej, 2017; Remski, 2018). In the statements above, the teachers are isolating the yoga class from society. And I can relate to the beauty in this; for me, attending a yoga class is a way to escape from the stress of my day. But I wonder how much greater we would be able to support a safe, nurturing, and progressive space for students to practice if we (teachers in the yoga community) were open to exploring socio-cultural issues that are happening in the world outside of the yoga studio.

I see a value in exploring the historical abuse of power in the yoga community (and the present-day conversations on the topic prompted by #MeToo). I think knowing about these issues makes me more reflexive about my practice and more empathetic toward my students. Exploring why and how abuse of power happens allows me to change my teaching practice to be more inclusive and sensitive to the deeper issues that my students may be dealing with “off of the mat.”

Perhaps yoga teachers interpret the #MeToo movement as sexualized and irrelevant rather than something that has professional value. As demonstrated with no touch policies in school coaching activities (Piper, Garratt, & Taylor, 2013; Varea, González-Calvo, & Martínez-Alvarez, 2018), perhaps yoga teachers fear over-surveillance and loss of teaching freedom in relation to critical reflection on the implications of #MeToo.

The issue of consent was viewed in a way similar to #MeToo; the teachers in my study generally did not use ongoing consent processes. Only three teachers advocated for direct consent practices when using hands-on assists, particularly as a response to the teacher’s privilege and power. These three teachers had either completed training in

trauma-informed yoga, described a student base with several people whom they knew were trauma-survivors, or had experience working in the area of sexual assault and violence. These teachers reflected upon the risky aspects of touch for some people, and the need to mitigate power. They talked about the meaning of “consent” and how consent can be interpreted very differently depending on the situation and environment.

I subscribe to the idea that consent is not the absence of a no; it’s a really enthusiastic *hell yes!* (Yogi 8)

A lot of the applications for the idea of consent as it applies to a more, like, sexual relationship, I think apply to the idea of consent in a yoga context. [...] It is better to err on the side of asking for consent rather than not asking for consent. (Yogi 8)

Someone explained it to me one time, like just using sex as an analogy. You know, if you think about it, just because someone said yes to it once doesn't mean they want it again, and you have free range to do it again. And just because you asked at the beginning of class doesn't, like a blanket ask, doesn't really have the same effect as in the moment. (Yogi 10)

These teachers acknowledge the nuanced meaning of consent. They are not assuming the right to touch a student, even if the student has already received touch well during a class (or a previous session). They are acknowledging that consent must be an ongoing process that can change with time and context. Thus, these teachers situate the yoga teacher as responsible for respecting a student’s autonomy to make a decision about receiving touch with each possible encounter.

All but one teacher in my study said that the student shares a role in the consent process. Many of the teachers feel that students also have a role in aligning their expectations and communicating their needs prior, during, and following a yoga class. Most of the teachers feel that students should tell a teacher about injuries or other concerns that could affect their yoga practice.

I feel that if there is going to be issues, then they should speak to maybe the teacher before class and say like “hey, just so you know” and I feel like this studio has a good clientele that seems to do that. (Yogi 8)

The student has to own a little bit of responsibility in this dance. And so, the students have to show up and practice. The students have to communicate their needs to the teacher. (Yogi 9)

One of the teachers disagreed with placing the responsibility on the student, stating “it’s the teacher’s responsibility, one hundred percent, to read the vibe, read the energy and say to them: *Do you want it? Do you want that?* Not the student’s job” (Yogi 11). This teacher is suggesting that the yoga teacher is completely accountable for observing, asking, and understanding what their students need.

I still wrestle with balancing *my responsibility* with the *student’s responsibility*. I cannot always “read” the energy of a group of people. I feel that I am an empathetic and intuitive person. But I will never know what a student is thinking or feeling unless *I ask* or *they tell*. So, I don’t believe that it is the *teacher only* or the *student only* who is responsible for communicating around consent.

The issue of consent is not binary. I still believe in touch during the yoga class. As demonstrated with “no touch” policies in sport coaching, policing the issue is not a definite solution. Others have explored the role of the teacher (or coach) to understand what is culturally *acceptable* when it comes to touching students for the purpose of learning (Piper, Garratt, & Taylor, 2013; Varea, González-Calvo, & Martínez-Alvarez, 2018). Honoring safer spaces for teachers and students involves negotiating risk and reflective practice (Öhman, 2017; Varea, González-Calvo, & Martínez-Alvarez, 2018).

The discussion above highlights the role of *communication* in confronting power. Students might misinterpret a teacher’s intentions if there is no conversation about *why* a



teacher is touching or instructing a student in a specific way. Likewise, a teacher may not be able to acknowledge their potential impact if a student does not offer constructive feedback or say “no” to unwanted touch.

One way that the teachers in my study mitigate risk is through consistent studio practices. One teacher/studio owner described a studio policy in which consent to touch is required of all teachers.

We’ve had this conversation with all of our staff. There’s definitely a culture of creating a safer space at our studios and being generally hands-off. It is an official policy to ask for consent in the moment. (Yogi 8)

This teacher says that the teachers at her studio were receptive and respectful of this policy. Teachers are encouraged to build verbal cuing and at times visual instruction. The teacher noted that new students often ask why hands-on assists are not offered. The teacher welcomes these questions as an opportunity to share the trauma-informed approach. Individual teachers in the studio are able to make personal decisions about using hands-on assists *if a student approaches with a request*. Overall, this approach to consent is well-received. Of course, students who have previously had hands-on assists request touch more often. But this teacher, who disliked being touched herself and had completed trauma-informed trainings, said that the absence of hands-on assists within the studio has been accepted by both the students and teachers.

Only one other teacher described using “consent in the moment” practices. This means that before the teacher offers a hands-on assist, she asks the student for permission to touch. One teacher critiqued this practice, stating that asking a student for consent would remove the student from the intended mindful state.

If somebody started to come behind me and started asking me questions, then I’m not in my practice anymore. (Yogi 4)

As suggested by legal expert Michael Cohen (2007), in the absence of clear standards regarding the consent to touch during a yoga class, it is difficult to establish a consent practice in yoga that is neither inadequate or violative. That said, I wonder if there is a way to approach consent to touch during a yoga class where all students feel respected, both those who want to be touched and those who do not. I feel that achieving this balance requires that teachers be more upfront with students about *how* and *why* they are touching (or not touching). Going one step further, achieving this balance will require that yoga teachers challenge what feels comfortable and familiar about their personal teaching methods. That is, finding a way to both communicate with consent in mind while keeping students grounded in the mindfulness of the yoga practice.

The majority of teachers in this study use implied consent practices. This is true even though the teachers acknowledge that students come to class with vulnerabilities and traumas. Teachers who had been teaching more than ten years reported very little or no discussion of consent during their yoga teacher training (YTT) programs. The new yoga teachers report that consent was discussed in their YTT program.

I was never told, we never did “*can I touch you.*” And I mean, it was fifteen years ago, it really was different. My teachers training was a bit more classical in that sense. (Yogi 1)

We learned to do the whole, when someone is in child’s pose at the very beginning, ‘*raise your hand if you’re not comfortable with being touched.*’ (Yogi 6)

Most of the teachers feel that their personal approaches to offering touch, as well as the studio culture where they teach, have been clearly defined for their students. They feel that the students who attend classes are not only aware of studio culture and practices, but are familiar with how individual teachers approach hands-on assists. The

teachers feel that students are able to establish relationships with teachers. The teachers observe that students are drawn to particular teaching styles. Students are likely to “follow” certain teachers. The teachers feel that students participate with a clear understanding of how a class will be taught, the types of postures that will be guided, and what they can expect during the class (e.g. hands-on assists).

I just feel like, the students are going to generally know if they’ve been to the class once or twice, or rumor has it that *she* not going to be a big touchy-feely girl, that they just ... don’t look for that. (Yogi 3)

I think working in a studio, with so many teachers, gives people the opportunity to figure out what they like. Because there’s going to be people who are more hands-on-y, there’s going to be people who like hands-on. There’s going to be people who aren’t into hands-on. And that’s the good thing about going to different classes and trying different people. (Yogi 7)

I think that this is a common thought that we, as yoga teachers, have about students: *the students know what they are getting into when they come to my class*. But do they? Does a new student really know what to expect when they arrive in a yoga class? I have had many students in my class who are not clear on what to expect when they arrive in class. Teaching styles and techniques vary and even experienced practitioners may be surprised at techniques and teaching methods when they attend a class with a teacher who is “new to them.” In the absence of any prior discussion, the student is being asked to first have an experience, and then make a decision about continuing a practice. This runs counter to the notion that consent is a two-way process.

Perceptions about gender or sex were a factor in the decision to touch for some of the teachers in my study. It was widely acknowledged that modern postural yoga in the West is marketed toward women. Two of the three men in my study say that they received specific feedback during their teacher training as related to hands-on assists.

As a male, and in a room full of women, it requires a bit more consideration. Even in my teacher training, I was singled out during teacher training. Not for anything that I did, it was more like “[you] and all the other males, make sure that you are present and aware with how you do your assist and your touches.” (Yogi 5)

All of the male teachers used some degree of hands-on approach when they were teaching yoga classes. As was the case with all of the teachers, their use of touch was influenced by their yoga teacher training program. Two of the male teachers were cautious in offering touch to both men and women during a yoga class. The other male teacher encouraged the purposeful use of touch to optimize a student’s experience. This teacher identified an element of equality of opportunity, whereby both males and females should be treated with equity.

It’s important, almost on a philosophical level, that you are treating people equally. That you are projecting your intent. If your intent is good, and is clean, then hopefully they can pick up on that. (Yogi 10)

Many of the female teachers reported some apprehension when they offered hands-on assists to the men in their yoga classes. They say that body proportions and general discomfort in touching “sweaty” male bodies contributed to their discomfort in touching the opposite gender. Despite some apprehension, the female teachers who used hands-on assists did offer touch to both the men and women who attended classes.

### **Authority and Touch: Scope of Practice**

Pre-modern yoga was historically known as a wisdom tradition (Byrne, 2018; Murphy, 2018). Five of the teachers reflected on this history; specifically, they focused on the relationship between teacher and student. Pre-modern lineages were grounded in the guru-disciple model. This relationship has been documented elsewhere (Remski,

2018; Singleton, 2010). The yoga teacher in pre-modern yoga traditions was considered to be a spiritual leader and healer. Today, yoga teachers are still central to the practice of yoga; the *teacher* remains the *expert* on a student's body (Byrne, 2014; Leo, Philo, & Cadman, 2016).

The teachers in this study refer to yoga teachers as guides or “holders of space.” They acknowledge that skill development and personal reflection is important when building relationships with students and when trying to grow as professionals. Three of the teachers use questions such as *what makes me a credible professional?* and *how does my teaching support my students?* to guide their teaching practice.

I like to consider ourselves as yoga teachers as kind of like *holders of space* for people to come in and have their own experience. It's not up to me to tell you necessarily what to do or what you're going to get from your class. I consider myself to be more of a guide. (Yogi 7)

Yoga teachers need to answer this to other yoga teachers, and the question is *what qualifies what you're doing, what makes this credible?* And it's a very broad question. And I think there's a lot of aspects of it; what makes what you're teaching physically credible? What makes this little thing that you've been doing for the past ten years, what makes that appropriate? (Yogi 10)

Most of the teachers describe their role as yoga teachers using objective measures. That is, they facilitate a student's experience by reflecting on the biomechanical and physical aspects of the yoga practice. Although student safety was mentioned as important, the teachers referred to safety in a physical sense (e.g. the immediate safety in a yoga āsana). None of the teachers explored their role in safeguarding their students' psychosocial or socio-cultural well-being.

The teachers acknowledge that the role of the modern yoga teacher is different than the “guru” of pre-modern forms. They emphasized this in relation to how yoga teachers offer spiritual and life guidance. All of the yoga teachers agreed that spiritual

and life guidance is not part of today's teaching qualifications. They acknowledge their own vulnerability when students expect spiritual guidance, particularly when students unrealistically view yoga teachers as spiritual or "enlightened" leaders.

As yoga teachers, we have to be really careful because some people really take what we say to a whole other level of heart, because we're the teacher and so it creates this shift in the dynamic of power. (Yogi 9)

...I'm not qualified to offer general life advice to other people. And, personally, I don't think many yoga instructors are qualified. A lot of yoga instructors feel like they are because historically, gurus had answers to everything. And that was their role in the community. But nowadays, I wonder what qualifies people to give that kind of advice. (Yogi 10)

In the above quotes, the teachers question how qualified yoga teachers are to offer "advice." This is a particularly important question given that students often place a lot of faith in their yoga teachers (Byrne, 2014). Given that modern postural yoga (MPY) has shifted from a spiritual practice to a physical and mental health practice, most of the teachers did feel that body-focused instruction is a reasonable scope of practice. This includes hands-on assists.

There's a difference between offering an adjustment to a posture – that is within the scope of practice for a teacher if they know how to do that. If they have that experience, if they have that knowledge of anatomy and physiology, if they have the knowledge of the pose – how it is meant to be practiced and what it does, then they can offer deeper refinement on the pose. (Yogi 9)

The key element regarding scope of practice in the example above is *knowledge*. Yogi 9 specifies that certain conditions must be met in order to offer hands-on adjustments. First, the teacher must have knowledge of anatomy and physiology. Second, the teacher must have knowledge of yoga āsanās, including the utility of the pose and the benefit (or risk) of enhancing the posture. Third, the teacher must have experience in offering adjustments.

Teachers say that they have observed other yoga teachers violating the scope of their practice. Most teachers feel that teachers violate scope of practice frequently and attribute the lack of regulations guiding yoga teachers as the main problem contributing to such violations. This was discussed more at length by individual interviewees and by more experienced yoga teachers.

I think also, yoga teachers, ... I feel like kind of underqualified. You know, and a lot of us have other trainings like kinesiology or massage therapy and stuff, but I think the scope of service when our staff are at our studio, regardless of whether they're an RMT [Registered Massage Therapist] during the day, they're a yoga teacher when they're here, and I feel like it's not part of their qualifications. (Yogi 8)

I think yoga teachers step outside scope of practice all the time. That's what I see. I do my best to invite conversation around that, because I think we need to do better. Especially when people expect us to be enlightened, the least we can do is consider our scope of practice ... I see other scope violations – touch is another one. Where people are outright giving people massages, but they're not RMTs. (Yogi 9)

Four of the experienced yoga teachers say that violating scope of practice is harmful and risky for both yoga teachers and students. These teachers suggest that the yoga community could consider regulatory standards to protect against violations. Although there are limitations to standardization, like losing creative freedom, the teachers did feel that the yoga community (at local and national levels) must address the vast range of yoga teaching qualifications.

If yoga accepted a regulatory body, teachers wouldn't like that because you lose a lot of freedom. Right now, it's the wild, wild West. You do whatever you want, and it's fine. (Yogi 10)

People have different ways of achieving consent. [...] and if you want to offer touch at your space, I think you should be allowed. I don't necessarily think that standardizing is the way to go. But, I think, the way that things are communicated to the public needs to be definitely more clear. (Yogi 8)

However, that loss on the part of the teachers might be a gain on the part of protection and safety and increased level of communication with students in the broader public. (Yogi 10)

People are doing all these different types of trainings. You know, we can't ... we can't all be doing the same thing. (Yogi 11)

Standardized practices have been criticized in other body-movement and sport domains. Piper, Garrett, and Taylor (2013) highlight and critique the no-touch policies happening in schools and sports. They argue that the overemphasis on safeguarding gets in the way of “actual sport” (Piper, Garrett, & Taylor, 2013, p. 589). They caution that any behavior or action can be interpreted as good or bad and that framing touch as negative can lead to false accusations and unnecessary fear. They go as far as to suggest that no-touch policies and “worst first thinking” falsely protects all involved: coaches, students, and others. They criticize no-touch policies as being *reactive* versus *responsive* to the current cultural conversations around risk.

Although the teachers in my study were not fully supportive of standardized approaches, they did explore other ways to encourage informed teaching practices. One of the teachers highlights the need for teachers to be cognizant of their personal limitations or inadequate skills. This teacher had feelings of uncertainty and inadequacy during their early teaching career. With time, experience, and personal reflection, this teacher pursued learning and training opportunities in order to improve their confidence and skills in the area of hands-on assists.

I did sixty hours of Thai yoga massage training. To be able to feel like when is it a stop, or when it is a go? And, when do they [the student] resist? When do they lean in? How does this work, where's the movement coming from? So, I dove into that ... plus, I needed more confidence, but I needed more understanding. I needed to understand a little bit more how things worked. (Yogi 9)



This type of reflection is common amongst regulated health professionals (Delaney & Watkin, 2009; Paterson & Chapman, 2013; Welp, Johnson, Nguyen, & Perry, 2018). As a health professional myself, I am mandated by my regulatory body to rate my competencies, identify my learning needs, and make plans to enhance my skills on an annual basis. I feel this helps me stay honest with my competencies and stay current with trends. My annual review also offers my patients a sense of confidence in my skills and competency.

I feel that if yoga teachers want to be recognized as independent and respected professionals, that they also need to engage in a similar way of reflecting on competencies and developing skills. Yoga teachers need to be willing to accept some loss of freedom with respect to how they teach as they start to evolve the profession and protect their yoga students from harm.

The discussion regarding scope of practice in my study went beyond the issues of qualifications and competence. One of the teachers highlighted the high expectations that students place upon yoga teachers.

The things people expect from me are hilarious. They expect me to be happy and blissful at all times, they expect me to be in contentment and constantly kind. And their definition of *kind* is *outwardly nice*, which isn't even necessarily the kind thing. (Yogi 9).

In the quote directly above, Yogi 9 acknowledges that yoga teachers are often seen by their students as *spiritual leaders*. She recognizes that the expectations that students place on the yoga teacher - confidante, friend, counsellor, fitness instructor, nutrition counsellor, and more – are unrealistic. She brings up the fact that as yoga teachers may be making assumptions about students, students also have expectations about yoga teachers.

Other teachers add to this discussion and explore the role of media and social media in advertising a false representation of yoga and yoga teachers.

We're bombarded by social media, and by expectations in our workplace and what have you. But it's great because people are exposed to it. But there's also this societal perception of yoga as more of this "*I've got my Starbucks and my, you know*" it goes along with that brand type of view. (Yogi 5)

I mean, how many times have you heard someone say "*oh I'm so not flexible, I can't.*" I mean, where is that that coming from? Because, any studio I've been to ... who is not putting that out there, right? I do think that comes from social media. And photos are pretty shapes, which is not the same thing as practicing yoga. I consider that to be more like "yoga-based art" than actually the practice. I think that thought definitely gets confused. (Yogi 8)

There was no consensus between the yoga teachers in my study about how to address the societal expectations that are placed on yoga teachers. Many of the teachers acknowledge that being clearer about types of yoga, what to expect during a yoga class, and how to choose a yoga class might help their students form a more realistic understanding about what a yoga teacher can offer and what a yoga teacher cannot. Several of the teachers also suggest that yoga studios need to display more accessible images on their websites and advertising and post more specific class descriptions (including if hands-on assists would be offered during classes). Some of the teachers also suggest that all studio staff members should be able to reasonably inform students about "what to expect" when attending a yoga class.

Having front-desker who knows what yoga is about, what the styles we teach are about, having the front-desker knowing how to tell people "*this is going to happen, you are going to be touched or you are not going to be touched,*" "*it is going to be more physical or it is going to be more relaxed*" or "*it is going to be more like this or like that*" should be mandatory in every studio. (Yogi 4)

I am aware that other studios tend to attract people that want touch, but I feel like not everyone is aware of that when they're going into a class. And so, I think, if that is going to be the case, put it in the description or just make it really clear. So

that as a student, I know that's what I am signing up for. And, not just have the experience and find out through the experience of being touched *that* is what's going to happen. (Yogi 8)

These suggestions once again place the responsibility of *interpreting* and *understanding* on a yoga student, relying on a yoga student to *read* class descriptions before they attend a yoga class. When it comes to the actual yoga class experience, I wonder what good *external* resources are. Does a class description really make my personal teaching style clear? Probably not. But what Yogi 8 eludes to in the statement above is the transparency of a yoga class: offering at least some sense of what to expect when attending. While class descriptions and media images cannot replace a conversation between a student and a teacher, they are a way to start the dialogue.

### **Final Thoughts on Authority and Touch: Cultivating Safer Spaces**

Ultimately, the yoga teachers in my study share a strong love toward the yoga practice as both students and teachers. While our conversations were largely rooted in personal experience and less in the broader socio-cultural context, they do represent a thoughtful exploration in the service that yoga teachers provide. I hope that these results can inform yoga teachers about the complexity of their role and the responsibility that they hold in cultivating safer practice spaces.

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion

Through this research, I became destabilized as a student of academia and a yoga teacher. By destabilized, I mean that at times I had feelings of insecurity and uncertainty. I was analyzing a foundational part of my physical, mental, and spiritual health and this was disruptive. Part of my identity as a yoga student and teacher was on pause during the process of inquiry. As a yoga student, I was constantly thinking about *how* I was being taught and *why* my teachers made certain decisions about instruction during classes. I found myself comparing and critiquing my own teachers, and this made it hard to simply enjoy my practice. As a yoga teacher, I was unsure about how to approach my usual way of instruction; I was constantly distracted by the literature that I was reading and the data that I was analyzing. During the research process, I had not yet reconciled how I was going to approach the issue of consent to touch and so I resorted to avoiding touch. Because I was touching less, I felt less connected to my students. But this was a necessary avoidance to allow me to reflect on *why* I touch and *how* touch benefits (or does not benefit) my students.

Aside from the disruption to my roles as a yoga student and teacher, I was nervous to assume responsibility for my peers' responses. I have a deep respect for the yoga teachers in Kingston. When I started to practice yoga, it was the teachers who inspired my practice and allowed me to transform my mental and physical health. While I was collecting data for my research, I often disagreed with the teachers' perspectives. And while I was analyzing the data and writing my final thesis, I felt some apprehension to insert my voice. At times I felt uncertain as to how I was representing myself: *am I an*

*academic? am I representing yoga teachers? am I representing a person who lives with trauma?* My field notes (journal) helped me to recognize that my first role was as an academic who was conducting research on a question of interest and that my second role was as a survivor who has the ability to represent other survivors and speak against assault and abuses, and potential harms.

In answer to my main research question, *in the context of #MeToo, what are the views of yoga teachers on touch in the yoga class*, I conclude that yoga teachers do not share a consistent viewpoint about touch in the yoga class. While some teachers embrace touch as valuable teaching tool, most teachers used touch sparingly and only with students whom they know well. My results suggest that yoga teachers are not changing their hands-on practices in light of the #MeToo discussions happening in the yoga community. The teachers in my study demonstrated very different approaches to offering hands-on assists. While teaching experience and gender did not have much impact on a teacher's decision to use touch in the yoga class, the teachers who have completed trauma-informed trainings and who have had experiences working with victims of trauma and assault report specific and consent-based approaches to offering touch.

The teachers in my study used touch for many reasons, including to invoke a *feel-good* sensation for students in a yoga āsana, to biomechanically enhance a student's posture, to prevent injury, and to deepen a student's practice. The rationale to use touch over other teaching methods, such as verbal cuing or visual demonstration, was highly subjective and non-specific. Teachers said that their personal experience of receiving touch during yoga classes contributed to their use of touch when teaching yoga. The teachers in my study did not describe their decision to touch as a way to assume authority

over their students. Rather, the teachers consistently described positive and well-meaning intentions to offer touch to their students.

Along with an intention to support their students, the teachers in my study also said that the decision to offer hands-on assists during a yoga class is informed by the trust that is built with their students and their own careful and skillful observation of a student's āsana. The teachers in my study feel that trust between students and teachers develops over multiple yoga classes and interactions. All of the teachers said that talking to students before and after yoga classes is part of the process of building a trusting relationship. The participants viewed touch as a means to connect, to share energy, and to constructively assist a student in a yoga posture. And, the participants said that touch is well-received by students, although they also acknowledge that students who do not want to be touched may not be sharing this preference with the teacher.

Largely absent from my results is acknowledgement of the influence of cultural issues in the yoga teaching profession. Although teachers acknowledge that an inherent power dynamic exists between the yoga teachers and students, few teachers are actively seeking ways to modify their teaching practices based on current social issues like #MeToo. The teachers in my study felt that students need to share responsibility when it comes to mitigating personal risk during the yoga class, whether that be informing teachers about injuries or preferences about hands-on assists. While I agree that students need to be active in making decisions about their bodies, I do worry that shifting responsibility to students to make those decisions clear absolves yoga teachers from their own responsibility to check in with students and communicate. If a teacher becomes

passive in conversations about issues like consent, abuse will continue to be present in the yoga community.

I feel that yoga teachers need to assume a more active role in *informing* students about risks that exist in a yoga class. For example, the potential risk of hands-on assists to trigger an emotional response or a physical injury. Likewise, I feel that yoga teachers need to actively inform students about the potential *benefits* of receiving touch, like connecting internally with breath and mindfulness and reducing the risk of injuries. Clearly and openly communicating both the risks and benefits of teaching methods, like touch, can empower students to be active in making decisions about touch, and can help teachers feel more confident in providing a safe and effective class.

Absent from this study is the voice of the *student*. In particular, the voice of the student in setting the parameters for when it is or is not appropriate to be touched. My study does not represent how yoga students view yoga teachers or how students actually feel about receiving touch during a yoga class. Regardless of how touch has evolved in various movement disciplines, the meaning of *consent* to be touched and the *utility* of touch cannot be completely understood without the voices of both teachers *and* yoga students. The discussion about touch warrants a more wide-ranging dialogue. Future studies exploring touch, whether in dance, physical education, or yoga, should involve the perspective of those *receiving* touch (e.g. the student, athlete, patient).

That the majority of teachers in my study have not changed their approach to touch during #MeToo leads me to question Modern Postural Yoga's (MPY) ability and willingness to adapt to the cultural forces that guide ethical practices in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the wake of discussions across the yoga community about the presence of abuse at the

hands of yoga teachers, I believe that my results reveal limitations related to teacher training programs and how yoga teachers are regulated in terms of scope of practice.

I feel that my role as a teacher is to be attuned to the important issues of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Socio-cultural literacy had not been a focus in my teaching practice before now. *Why?* I have worked as a regulated health professional (separate from my academic pursuits and my yoga teaching practice) for more than twelve years. It is part of my ethical competency in that profession to be versed in current issues. It is my professional responsibility to adapt my practice to social trends. Doing this enhances my personal integrity and I am better able to serve my patients, colleagues, and the healthcare system.

The distinction between my regulated health profession and my yoga teaching practice is legal and a matter of personal perception. My health profession has been *legislated* to adapt to socio-cultural influences; my yoga teaching practice has not. I perceive the relevance of socio-cultural issues in my health profession as necessary. My yoga practice, by contrast, has been isolated from my “real life.” While yoga offers me tools to cope with physical and mental ailments, it has also offered me permission to retreat from day-to-day hardships. That is, when I step into the yoga studio, I give myself permission to set aside the negative parts of my day, like what I have heard on the news or have experienced in a frustrating situation that I’ve dealt with at work. What I am ignoring as a yoga teacher is that my students are entrusting me with the challenges that they have experienced during their days. Teaching yoga is not about *me* feeling good. It is about cultivating a space where my students can nurture their own ability to do self-care. It is up to me when I teach a yoga class to be aware that my students may be entering the space with the same news stories and “bad days” that I am. If I have tried to



ignore this context myself, I can't help my students cope better with stress or help them progress in their breathing and āsana practice.

With respect to responsible and ethical teaching practices, my results indicate that regulative standards may be helpful in protecting a teacher's integrity and a student's safety, especially regarding yoga teaching qualifications and complex issues like consent. I agree that yoga's vast range of lineages and training programs make standardization difficult; there is no true consensus on *what yoga is* (Archer, 2003). The teachers in this study certainly uphold this statement. Viewpoints about *what yoga is* depend upon beliefs, values, and context (Archer, 2003). But standardized practices could safeguard both students and teachers. If the yoga community does not take steps to create more standardized guidelines around hands-on assists and the issue of consent, the community may eventually become vulnerable to government legislation (Archer, 2003).

Given the influence of media on the consumption of yoga and interpretation of yoga practices, it may also be worthwhile to confront yoga's media image. The media portrays yoga with some distortion. Images often portray yoga simply as "āsana" (Freeman, Vladagina, Razmjou, & Brems, 2017) and the people in these images are often young, fit, white, and thin. When I see the cover of magazines like *Yoga Journal*, even I think "*wow, I wish that my hips looked like that in triangle pose.*" The yoga consumers of the world and I are viewing these images as "correct" and something to strive for. But I wonder: does this representation of a "yoga body" prompt students to *assume* that hands-on assists are necessary in the yoga class? That is, when a student enters a yoga class, is there an understanding that a teacher's touch – even without informed consent – is acceptable because the teacher is assisting the student in *achieving* an āsana? I wonder

if students who don't want to be touched just go along with hands-on assists because "perfect" images of yoga postures might not otherwise be attainable.

My study data cannot be generalized given the relatively small and homogeneous sample. But the study raises important points about the issue of consent to touch in yoga classes and the factors that yoga teachers are currently considering as they make decisions about using or not using touch as a teaching method. The study identifies a gap in the way that yoga teachers are using social issues to advance teaching methods and enhance a student's overall experience. Moving forward, I offer the following recommendations for yoga teachers, teacher trainers, and yoga registering bodies in order to uphold integrity in the yoga teaching profession:

- *Inform yoga teachers (and trainees) about the history of abuse in the yoga community during teacher training programs and through continuing education credits, such as online learning programs.* Being open about this messy history is important for helping victims heal and for helping yoga teachers create safer practice spaces.
- *Include trauma-sensitive yoga training as a standard (and required) component of all yoga teacher training programs.* Teachers need to be aware of how teaching methods, vocal tone, body language, and placement around a student can impact a student's experience. If yoga teachers are better able to understand *how* trauma manifests, *how* trauma affects people, and *how* yoga teachers can foster safer and more inclusive practice spaces, then the yoga community can continue to grow and cultivate healing (for teachers and students).

- *Establish critical reflection and scope of practice reviews on an annual basis for yoga teachers, through a regulatory body such as Yoga Alliance.*  
Yoga teachers may be better able to respond to social issues that affect yoga students (and the yoga community) if they have a way to reflect on their personal skills. Critical reflections and scope of practice reviews can be a way for teachers to recognize limitations and create goals for enhancing their skills. If teachers are able to be honest about their own strengths and weaknesses, they can begin to engage in continuing education opportunities that promote skill development. As yoga teachers develop a more refined skillset (for example, in teaching methodology), their students will benefit from safe and effective practices, and the yoga community will uphold an image of professionalism.
- *Improve the way that touch is communicated to yoga students, through informed practices and media representation.* Yoga teachers need to talk to yoga students about *why* touch is offered and *how* touch can increase risks (e.g. to injury or an existing trauma) or enhance experiences (e.g. through improving body awareness or eliciting a positive emotion). While yoga teachers can improve communication about touch by directly talking to students, the broader yoga community (e.g. social media influencers and online magazines) can share information and images that include hands-on assists to “consumers.” As yoga students (and potential students) learn more about touch as a teaching method, they will be better

equipped to ask their teachers about touch and make decisions about consent that respect their personal needs.

In my yoga teaching practice, I have started to inform my students at the start of class that I may offer touch. While I am using touch less than I have in the past, I continue to offer hands-on assists to a handful of students (fewer than five or six in a twenty-person class). I have not consistently used the practice of asking for consent with each encounter, but I am considering this as I return to teaching without the tandem work of this study. I still hold an affinity for the way that touch connects me to my students and the way that touch can enhance some of my students' experiences (that is, for those who are accustomed to and whole-heartedly enjoy hands-on assists). But I want to be more cautious about *if* and *when* touch is really necessary; and, the only way to know if touch is appropriate is to *talk to my students*. That is, *ask* my students if touching is okay and *ask* my students how I can better serve them during class. I want to invite more dialogue about hands-on assists (and other teaching methods, like verbal cuing) before and after yoga classes. I want students to feel safe in approaching me with their concerns and with their constructive feedback. And I want *me* to feel respectful in the way that I honour each student's experience. While I cannot control regulatory standards, or the opinions and practices of my yoga teaching peers, I can remain grounded with a lifelong commitment to inquiry, introspection, and personal evolution.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Recruitment Email**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is [Investigator/Student Name]. I am a Master's student in the School of Kinesiology and Health Studies (SKHS) at Queen's University, working under the supervision of [Supervisor Name]. I have also been teaching as a yoga teacher in Kingston for the past eight years. I am contacting you to see if you would be willing to participate in a research study that I am doing as part of my degree.

The study is investigating the issue of consent with regard to teachers touching students in the yoga class.

Over the past several years, there have been allegations of inappropriate teaching practices within the yoga community, particularly around teachers touching students' bodies in the form of 'assists' or 'enhancements.' Given that yoga is not a regulated profession, and that the practice is sought for a variety of emotional health and physical health reasons, I am interested in understanding how the yoga teaching community is approaching the consent to touch, particularly in the era of #metoo. I want to know how studios, teachers, and teaching lineages are addressing the issue.

The research for this project will involve focus groups (group interviews) with yoga teachers from Kingston. Following the focus groups, some participants may be contacted to participate in a one-to-one interview with me in order to expand upon explore issues that were raised in the focus groups. The focus groups will take place in March 2019. One-to-one interviews would take place in April 2019.

If you would be interested in participating in this research project, or would like further information regarding the study, please contact me at by email at [Email Address] or by telephone at [Telephone Number].

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

[Investigator/Student Name]  
MA Student  
School of Kinesiology and Health Studies  
Queens University

## **Appendix B**

### **Interview Guide**

#### **Main Theme Questions:**

1. What is your view on using assists and enhancements in the yoga class?
2. How do you use touch in your yoga classes?
  - a. Probe: what affects your decision to use touch?
3. How do you approach the consent to touch students in your yoga class?
  - a. Probe: do you ask a student for verbal consent to touch them?
  - b. Probe: how does gender, age, participant experience (etc.) influence your decision to touch students?
4. Part 1: What is your understanding of #metoo?  
Part 2: How has your view on touching students in the yoga class changed in the context of #metoo?
  - a. Probe: how have you come to these views?
  - b. Probe: how does your yoga studio support you on the issues around consent?
5. How do you feel the yoga community can approach the issue of consent to touch in a broad context?
  - a. Probe: in relation to teacher training, regulation, informed consent, or implied consent?

#### **Additional Questions / Follow up Questions:**

1. How did your yoga teacher training program approach assists and enhancements?
  - a. Probe: How has your experience in touching bodies in the yoga class changed over the time that you have been teaching yoga?
2. How does the studio environment where you teach influence your view on using assists and enhancements? OR What is your studio's culture and practice on using touch in the yoga class?
3. In your view, how do students respond to being touched in the yoga class?
4. Is there anything else that you would like to add to the discussion?

## Appendix C

### Letter of Information (LOI) and Consent Form (CF) – Focus Groups

**Study Title:** Exploring the Consent to Touch in Modern Postural Yoga: Perspectives in the Era of #metoo

**Name of Student Researcher:** [Name], [Department], [University]

**Name of Supervisor:** [Name], [Department], [University]

My name is [Student Researcher Name], a Master's student in the [Department Name] at [University Name], working under the supervision of [Supervisor Name]. I am inviting yoga teachers to take part in a research study looking at the issue of consent with regard to touching students in the yoga class. Over the past several years, there have been allegations of inappropriate teaching practices within the yoga community. Given that yoga is not a regulated profession, and that the practice is sought for a variety of emotional and physical reasons, I am interested in understanding how the yoga teaching community is approaching the consent to touch, particularly in the era of #metoo. I want to know how studios, teachers, and teaching lineages are addressing the issues.

The research for this project will involve focus groups (group interviews) with yoga teachers from Kingston. These focus groups will take place in March 2019. There will be four to six participants in each focus group.

If you were to agree to take part, I would interview you as part of a focus group (a group interview) at a location (most likely a local yoga studio) and time agreed upon by all group members. The focus group would be audio-recorded and later transcribed by me. The focus group will last for approximately 45 to 75 minutes. Following the focus group, and depending on the material raised during that discussion, you could be asked to participate in an individual follow-up interview in order to provide clarification or to further explore further issues that came up in the focus group. This interview would be held at a location and time convenient to you. Even if you agree to participate in the focus group, you may decline to participate in a one-to-one interview.

This project may involve what research ethics specialists call “social risks.” Kingston has a small, and connected yoga community. You may already know some (if not all) of the participants in your focus group. To minimize social risks, we will review group guidelines prior to conducting the focus group.

You will be asked to:

- keep the content of our discussion, as well as the names of participants confidential,
- respectfully listen and converse with other members of the group, and
- refrain from making comments that you would not otherwise discuss publicly.

As reviewed above, you will be asked to keep the content of the discussion confidential. Respectful conversation will be moderated by me as the researcher to encourage a safe space for all ideas. Your personal information, including your name and your workplace, will not be mentioned in any publications or presentations that may result from this study.

This study may involve “psychological/emotional risks,” as sensitive content could emerge in our conversation. If at any time during the interview you are feeling uncomfortable, you can stop the conversation. You can refuse to answer any question. If you were to experience any signs of distress during our conversation, we would pause the interview. If this were to happen, you would be free to choose to discontinue your participation.

There are also no direct benefits to you as a participant, however, the study’s results could help inform how yoga instructors approach the issue of consent in their classes.

Your participation in this research project would be entirely voluntary. As previously mentioned, you could refuse to answer any questions that are asked of you and you would be free to withdraw from the project at any time. Were you to withdraw, I would destroy any data or other materials connected to you. To withdraw from the study, you would contact me at [Researcher Email Address] no later than May 15, 2019.

I will write about the results of this study in my Master’s thesis, in academic and yoga journals, and in conference presentations, or other talks for relevant audiences. I will include quotes from some of the focus groups or interviews when I present my findings. However, I will never include any real names with quotes, and I will do my best to make sure quotes do not include information through which participants could be identified.

All data related to this project will be kept securely in locked cabinets and on password protected devices, for at least five years after the study is completed. I will protect your confidentiality to the extent possible by replacing your name with a pseudonym and by not mentioning specific identifying information about you in any presentations or written materials that come out of the project. Only my supervisor and I will have access to the recordings and transcripts of interviews and focus groups.

There is no compensation to participate in this study.

Any questions about study participation may be directed to the research investigator [Researcher Name] or my supervisor [Supervisor Name and Email Address and Telephone Number].

If you have any ethics concerns please contact the General Research Ethics Board (GREB) at 1-844-535- 2988 (Toll free in North America) or chair.GREB@queensu.ca. *Call 1-613-533-2988 if outside North America. Please note that GREB communicates in English only.*

The [University] General Research Ethics Board (GREB) may access your data for quality assurance purposes.

This Letter of Information provides you with the details to help you make an informed choice. All your questions should be answered to your satisfaction before you decide whether or not to participate in this research study.

You have not waived any legal rights by consenting to participate in this study.

Keep one copy of the Letter of Information and Consent Form for your records and return one copy to me, [Student Researcher].

By signing below, you are verifying that you:

- have read this Letter of Information and that all of your questions have been answered to your satisfaction,
- understand your role of as a participant in this study,
- agree to be audio-recorded for this study,
- agree to respect the confidentiality of information shared in this focus group,
- understand the sources of contact for this study,
- understand that participation in this study is voluntary, and
- understand the confidentiality and privacy measures associated with this study.

Name of Participant (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Researcher (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix D**

### **Letter of Information (LOI) and Consent Form (CF) – Individual Interviews**

**Study Title:** Exploring the Consent to Touch in Modern Postural Yoga: Perspectives in the Era of #metoo

**Name of Student Researcher:** [Name], [Department], [University]

**Name of Supervisor:** [Name], [Department], [University]

My name is [Student Researcher], a Master's student in the [Department] at [University], working under the supervision of [Supervisor]. I am inviting yoga teachers to take part in a research study looking at the issue of consent with regard to touching students in the yoga class. Over the past several years, there have been allegations of inappropriate teaching practices within the yoga community, particularly around touching student bodies in the form of 'assists' or 'enhancements.' Given that yoga is not a regulated profession, and that the practice is sought for a variety of emotional and physical reasons, I am interested in understanding how the yoga teaching community is approaching the consent to touch, particularly in the era of #metoo. I want to know how studios, teachers, and teaching lineages are addressing the issues.

You have already participated in a focus group for this study. I am interested to explore further some of the ideas that arose during the focus group in a one-to-one interview. If you were to agree to take part, I would interview you at a location, likely a yoga studio, and time of your choosing. The interview would be audio-recorded and later transcribed by me. The interview will take approximately 45 to 60 minutes.

This study may involve "psychological/emotional risks" as sensitive content could emerge in our conversation. If at any time during the interview you are feeling uncomfortable, you can stop the conversation at any time. You can refuse to answer any question. If you were to experience any signs of distress during our conversation, we would pause the interview. If this were to happen, you would be free to choose to discontinue your participation.

There are also no direct benefits to you as a participant, however, the study's results could help inform how yoga instructors approach the issue of consent in their classes.

Your participation in this research project would be entirely voluntary. You could refuse to answer any questions that are asked of you and you would be free to withdraw from the project at any time. Were you to withdraw, I would destroy any data or other materials connected to you. To withdraw from the study, you would contact me at [Email Address] no later than May 15, 2019.

I will write about the results of this study in my Master's thesis, in academic and yoga journals, and in conference presentations, or other talks for relevant audiences. I will include quotes from some of the focus groups or interviews when I present my findings. However, I will never include any real names with quotes, and I will do my best to make sure quotes do not include information through which participants could be identified.

All data related to this project will be kept securely in locked cabinets and on password protected devices, for at least five years after the study is completed. I will protect your confidentiality to the extent possible by replacing your name with a pseudonym and by not mentioning specific identifying information about you in any presentations or written materials that come out of the project. Only my supervisor and I will have access to the recordings and transcripts of interviews and focus groups.

Any questions about study participation may be directed to the research investigator [Researcher Email Address] or my supervisor [Supervisor Name and Email Address and Telephone Number].

If you have any ethics concerns please contact the General Research Ethics Board (GREB) at 1-844-535- 2988 (Toll free in North America) or chair.GREB@queensu.ca. *Call 1-613-533-2988 if outside North America. Please note that GREB communicates in English only.*

The [University] General Research Ethics Board (GREB) may access your data for quality assurance purposes.

This Letter of Information provides you with the details to help you make an informed choice. All your questions should be answered to your satisfaction before you decide whether or not to participate in this research study.

Keep one copy of the Letter of Information and Consent Form for your records and return one copy to me, (research investigator).

You have not waived any legal rights by consenting to participate in this study.

By signing below, you are verifying that you:

- have read this Letter of Information and that all of your questions have been answered to your satisfaction,
- understand your role of as a participant in this study,
- agree to be audio-recorded for this study,
- understand the sources of contact for this study,
- understand that participation in this study is voluntary, and
- understand the confidentiality and privacy measures associated with this study,

Name of Participant (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Researcher (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix E

### Letter of Information (Yoga Studio)

My name is [Student Research]. I am conducting research for my Master's degree thesis, which I am doing under the supervision of [Supervisor], in the [Department] at [University]. I will be conducting a segment of my research in this yoga studio.

#### **What is the project about?**

The project explores how yoga teachers approach the issue of touch during yoga classes, especially given the rise of the #MeToo movement. The purpose of this project is to contribute to yoga community discussions about touch as a teaching method in yoga. The project is intended to contribute to the fostering of ethical and safe practice spaces.

#### **What does the research entail?**

For the main component of my research I will be conducting group interviews with yoga teachers in Kingston. As a yoga teacher myself I will also be documenting and reflecting on my own beliefs and values about touch. To do so, I will be taking notes after any class in which I participate as teacher or student. These notes will help me explore and keep track of my own experiences with touch. The notes will be part of the data for my study. While I am in the yoga studio, I will wear a name tag, and I would welcome any questions or concerns about the project that members may have.

#### **Confidentiality and your privacy**

The portion of the research that I will be conducting in the studio will not focus on individuals. I will not mention anyone by name in my notes and I will not include any details in my notes or in my thesis that would permit anyone to be identified. My notes will focus on my personal experiences, feelings, and beliefs about my yoga practice as a teacher and student. If you would prefer that I do not make notes about a class that you are participating in (where I have been a teacher or a student), let me know and I will not take notes on that day. Only myself and my supervisor will have access to the notes. I will keep the notes securely for at least five years per University Policy, after which the data will be destroyed.

**Questions?** Any questions about the research may be directed to [Student Researcher] at [Email Address] You may also contact the project supervisor, [Supervisor], at [Email Address] or [Telephone Number]. If you have any ethics concerns please contact the General Research Ethics Board (GREB) at 1-844-535- 2988 (Toll free in North America) or chair.GREB@queensu.ca. *Call 1-613-533-2988 if outside North America. Please note that GREB communicates in English only.*



# Appendix F

## Research Ethics Approval



March 13, 2019

Ms. Brendine Partyka  
Master's Student  
School of Kinesiology and Health Studies  
Queen's University  
KHS Building  
28 Division Street  
Kingston, ON, K7L 3N6

**GREB Ref #: GSKHS-311-19; TRAQ # 6026095**

**Title: "GSKHS-311-19 Exploring the Consent to Touch in the Modern Postural Yoga Class: Perspectives in the Era of #metoo"**

Dear Ms. Partyka:

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB), by means of a delegated board review, has cleared your proposal entitled "**GSKHS-311-19 Exploring the Consent to Touch in the Modern Postural Yoga Class: Perspectives in the Era of #metoo**" for ethical compliance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (TCPS 2 (2014)) and Queen's ethics policies. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (Article 6.14) and Standard Operating Procedures (405.001), your project has been cleared for one year. You are reminded of your obligation to submit an annual renewal form prior to the annual renewal due date (access this form at <http://www.queensu.ca/traq/signon.html>; click on "Events;" under "Create New Event" click on "General Research Ethics Board Annual Renewal/Closure Form for Cleared Studies"). Please note that when your research project is completed, you need to submit an Annual Renewal/Closure Form in Romeo/traq indicating that the project is 'completed' so that the file can be closed. This should be submitted at the time of completion; there is no need to wait until the annual renewal due date.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one-year period (access this form at <http://www.queensu.ca/traq/signon.html>; click on "Events;" under "Create New Event" click on "General Research Ethics Board Adverse Event Form"). An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that all adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example, you must report changes to the level of risk, applicant characteristics, and implementation of new procedures. To submit an amendment form, access the application by at <http://www.queensu.ca/traq/signon.html>; click on "Events;" under "Create New Event" click on "General Research Ethics Board Request for the Amendment of Approved Studies." Once submitted, these changes will automatically be sent to the Ethics Coordinator, Ms. Gail Irving, at University Research Services for further review and clearance by the GREB or Chair, GREB.

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Dean Tripp".

Dean Tripp, Ph.D.  
Chair  
General Research Ethics Board

c: Dr. Mary Louise Adams, Supervisor  
Dr. Elaine Power, Chair, Unit REB  
Ms. Josie Birchall, Dept. Admin.