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A quest for relaxation? A figurational analysis of the transformation of yoga into a global leisure time phenomenon

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ABSTRACT

Eric Dunning and Norbert Elias began developing their concept ‘quest for excitement’ in the 1960s. In this paper we consider the concept in the context of their work on the civilizing process and leisure in the spare-time spectrum, applying it to an analysis of the global diffusion and transformation of yoga. In so doing, we develop a preliminary theoretical account of its global popularity as a leisure-time movement form. We specifically consider the extent to which yoga’s transformation from the late 19th century onwards can be understood as a socially generated psychological quest for excitement rather than as a need for relaxation. We take a long-term developmental perspective, focusing on processes of globalization to explain the transformation of yoga into an increasing variety of forms. We argue that its global popularity is linked to its transformation into a diversity of styles, which provide flexible, individualized, non-competitive and health-oriented leisure opportunities that have become attractive to an increasing number of people. We conclude that the contouring of yoga in this way reflects the socially generated leisure time needs of people in complex societies. Our preliminary theoretical account, informed by the work of Dunning and colleagues, illuminates how yoga, as a polymorphous social practice, provides leisure enclaves which can lead to an upsurge of satisfying emotions and hence can be psychologically restorative.

KEYWORDS

Civilizing process; globalization; leisure; quest for excitement; yoga

Introduction

Eric Dunning and Norbert Elias began developing their concept ‘quest for excitement’ in the 1960s. This was the beginning of a long-term collaboration that continued until just before Elias’s death in 1990. It was Dunning, however, who was the main proponent in applying Elias’s work, including the quest for excitement, to sport and leisure (Waddington and Malcolm 2006). This process culminated in their influential text, *Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process*, published by Blackwell in 1986 and subsequently revised and reprinted in 2008 (Elias and Dunning [1986] 2008). In this paper we draw on and apply aspects of this work to the transformation of yoga from a solitary, religious

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pastime of men into a widely shared leisure-time movement activity. Although yoga has attracted interest from the popular press in recent years, its global expansion and transformation has received scant academic attention beyond the fields of anthropology, history, and religious studies. These fields have predominantly been concerned with the expansion of yoga as a religious and spiritual phenomenon, with debates often centring on the authenticity of modern forms. After tracing the very early development of yoga as a basis for subsequent analysis, the paper then considers the extent to which its more recent transformation (that is to say, the development of what is referred to as ‘modern postural yoga’ from the late 19th century onwards) can be understood in terms of a socially generated psychological need for excitement, as Elias and Dunning (2008) contend in relation to sport and leisure transformation, rather than a quest for relaxation as often presented in popular media (Crisp 1970; Sivananda Yoga Centre and Devananda 2000) and as argued by some academic scholars (see, for example, De Michelis 2004; Singleton 2005, 2010; Strauss 2005). In other words, can the quest for excitement provide a more adequate explanation for how yoga has become absorbed and assimilated into the very many different social contexts across the world?

In our use of the term ‘yoga’, we are not suggesting that there is any ‘essential’ or ‘authentic’ form. Rather, we use the term to denote an eastern movement form (Brown and Leledaki 2010) characterized by an increasingly diverse set of practices. To analyze the changing cultural significance of these practices, the paper is divided into three interrelated parts. First, we outline the conceptual-theoretical framework in terms of the civilizing of the emotions and the globalized development of leisure in complex societies. Second, we discuss the development, transformation, and globalization of yoga in more concrete empirical terms. Third, we explore more specifically the extent to which yoga functions as an enclave for emotional arousal and pleasurable tension, drawing on Elias and Dunning’s prior analysis of the quest for excitement in leisure activities and across the spare-time spectrum. We conclude with a discussion of Dunning’s contribution to the theory of the expansion of leisure pastimes.

The civilizing of the emotions

Common among the accounts of yoga’s popularity is the notion that it fulfils a socially generated need for relaxation, or conscious rest from the stresses and strains of emotionally draining modern lifestyles (Singleton 2010). Strauss (2005, 143), for example, argues that yoga brings a “measure of calm to our harried lives”. Similarly, De Michelis (2004) argues that modern postural yoga offers participants much needed spaces for psychological and spiritual comfort outside religious orthodoxy, generating relaxing experiences that are akin to healing. In reviewing this and other recent work on yoga, Chapple (2008, 76) summarizes the global popularity of yoga thus: “Yoga provides a way for the modern person, unwilling to commit to a fixed ideology, yet in need of solace and meaning in a turbulent world, to engage mind and body in a practice that brings relief from the onslaught of everyday busyness and stress”. According to these views, yoga provides enclaves for the management of socially generated nervous exhaustion, offering some respite from the modern world. This, as Elias and Dunning (2008) note, is the commonly held view of the function of leisure more generally, that is to say, there is a widely held perception that the purpose is to relax tension – often the tension generated in the work sphere – rather than create it. Explanations

regarding both relaxation and excitement pivot on the emotional dimensions of leisure, and it is to this we now turn via an examination of the civilizing process.

As Waddington and Malcolm point out (2006), it was Dunning's idea to apply the theory of civilizing processes to sport in general and, initially at least, to football in particular. He argued that the civilizing process was a useful vehicle for illuminating the development and, latterly, global diffusion of football (Dunning 2010). Subsequently, Elias and Dunning's ideas have been extensively applied to the study of the emergence and development of a range of sports particularly what might be called 'male achievement sports' – and how many of those have globally diffused from England, northern Europe and, more recently, the USA, to a variety of locations (see, for example, Bloyce 2008; Bloyce and Murphy 2008; Dunning, Malcolm, and Waddington 2004; Maguire 2000; van Bottenburg 2001). While a number of eastern movement forms – such as specific martial arts – have been examined sociologically (van Bottenburg and Heilbron 2006; Sanchez Garcia and Malcolm 2010), the focus of this research has been on understanding specific aspects of diffusion, for example, sport spectatorship and trends in violence, largely in a competitive context. However, yoga is of particular interest because, at least in the early period of its diffusion, it went against the trend of most sporting flows, not only in terms of its axis of diffusion from India to the USA, England and northern Europe, but also as a non-competitive, non-violent, individually-oriented pastime, the practice of which, to a greater or lesser degree, appears to have been part of a broader spiritual endeavour. This is what makes it an especially interesting and worthwhile case study on which to apply Elias and Dunning's theory of leisure in the sparetime spectrum and the civilizing process.

While the civilizing process is Elias's ([1939] 2000) central theory, 'figuration' is a basic concept (Dunning and Hughes 2013). In taking a long-term perspective on the development of societies, Elias theorized that figurations of mutually oriented interdependent people are historically produced and reproduced, and hence transformative. For Elias and Dunning (2008), it is through the interweaving of these increasingly complex social processes that the development of sport and leisure must be understood. Blind social processes – that is to say, those that give rise to unplanned outcomes – emerge from figurations in flux because the complex and dynamic interweaving of increasingly large numbers of people spread over a widening geographic area become ever more interdependent, and thus inevitably give rise to transformations that no one person had chosen or intended. These globalization processes transcend nation states, are historically rooted (Maguire 2000), and relate to the increasing pace and scale of flows of people, goods, services, information, and so on. Thus, as Elias and Dunning (2008, 33) argue "Most varieties of sport have reached maturity in the course of an unplanned social development". This, we suggest, is equally true of the development of yoga.

The two central and interrelated dimensions of Elias's civilizing process are, first, the process of state formation in Western Europe and, second, the shifts in people's social habitus, or psychogenesis. Connecting the two dimensions is the notion of social norms, which "develop as part of the structure of society" (Elias and Dunning, 2008, 85). The rise of Western modern nation-states thus created not only the "preconditions for the sportization of pastimes" (Dunning 2010, 185) but also for the expansion of leisure activities more broadly. In particular – and notwithstanding the breadth, depth and complexity of this theory – the broad historical pattern of increasing social constraint on human behaviour, which became internalized through self-restraint, gave rise to a social habitus in which the

emotions were subject to increasing degrees of self-control. In this regard, emotions might still be felt (although the notion of habitus suggests that the embodied experience of emotion will change over time), but the norms of expectation mean that they could seldom be acted upon (Elias and Dunning, 2008). The theory thus enjoins social structures with the emotions, via social norms. The relative orderliness of modern societies is conveyed through the notion of routinization. In other words, as societies have become more highly differentiated and complex, social standards of emotional control have shifted in a direction of greater expected and required self-regulation.

Why is it, however, that in these kinds of societies more and more people use some of their leisure time to participate in various kinds of physical activities, including yoga? In theorizing leisure not in relation to 'work' but in relation to *all* other spheres of life – work, the domestic domain, relationships with friends and families, and so on – Elias and Dunning highlight a fundamental character of economically developed societies through the social norms of emotional restraint. Leisure, then, is an enclave within the 'spare-time spectrum' wherein people can choose "socially permitted self-centredness in a non-leisure world which demands and enforces the dominance of other-centred activities" (Elias and Dunning, 2008, 88). Much of modern life requires orderliness and routinization, which, if not relieved, can engender feelings of monotony and emotional staleness and create personal "stress-tensions" (Elias and Dunning, 2008, 24) resulting from conflicts associated with emotional self-restraint. Leisure thus offers a counter to this by creating pleasurable tensions that directly appeal to people's emotions. Forms of leisure have developed that provide enclaves in which emotions can flow more freely in socially acceptable ways, and in a way that leads to mental refreshment through an "enjoyable and controlled de-controlling of emotions" (Elias and Dunning, 2008, 27). Pleasurable excitement can be psychologically restorative – cathartic even – primarily because there is a relaxation of emotional restraint, which can have both exhilarating and purifying effects. Thus, forms of leisure have developed that can meet these socially generated psychological needs. Accordingly, the development of forms of leisure is closely bound up with the conditions of society in modern nation-states. This quest for excitement, they argued, applied to a wide range of leisure activities, such as mimetic activities – that is to say, activities that are not only imitative, but also generate complex emotional experiences – in which playful excitement can be experienced with an absence of real risk. They note that, "... through the institution of leisure, the blind social process of social development itself has unintentionally left scope for a moderate loosening of adult controls" (Elias and Dunning, 2008, 97). For the purposes of this paper, the question remains whether, in the course of its development as a global phenomenon, the *structure* of yoga offers the kinds of mimetic experiences likely to give rise to an upsurge of satisfying emotions. To explore this further, we turn to the long-term expansion and transformation of yoga.

India's first global brand? The transformation of yoga into a globally popular pastime

Although there are considerable controversies and uncertainties in the body of knowledge relating to the development of yoga, archaeological remains depicting people in poses similar to those of modern day yoga suggest that it was practised in the Indus Valley civilization (geographically located in the northwest of the Indian sub-continent) more than 4000 years ago (Lamb 2005). This early form of yoga has been described as a series of postures – āsanās –

linked together by a sequence of movements that were co-ordinated by a breathing technique – *prānāyāma*. There is some consensus among scholars that the purpose of co-ordinating the regulation of breathing with disciplined physical movements was to control consciousness in pursuit of purification and individual salvation through the achievement of a spiritually liberated state (Singleton 2005; Strauss 2005; Smith 2007). These metaphysical and transcendental dimensions to the solitary practice of yoga reflect the extent to which it was embedded in the Hindu system of religious thought predominant at that time in the Indus Valley (Jacobsen 2005). They also illustrate how, from the earliest of times, the structure of yoga – bodily movements and co-ordinated breathing linked to mental processes – produced tensions of a particular kind. In this regard, yoga as a spiritual activity might have fulfilled functions similar to those Elias and Dunning (2008) posited in relation to the expansion of leisure in more recent times.

The transformation of yoga from these earliest of times reflects the philosophical and metaphysical diversity of human figurations in the Indus valley and the multidirectional cultural interactions between people as interdependencies expanded. This ‘interdependent commingling’ across cultures (Maguire 2000, 362), characterized by a collective blend of intentional and unintentional features, gave rise to yoga being practised beyond Hinduism to include Buddhism and Jainism (Alter 2004). Variant forms developed as practitioners were receptive to numerous ideas and adapted belief systems and techniques in a variety of directions to suit a multiplicity of primarily spiritual and religious purposes. The development of Hatha yoga in the 10th century in India (Alter 2006) was differentiated by its development of the *āsanas* into full body postures rather than the seated meditative position used in *astāngayoga*. From this, more physically vigorous forms developed that could fulfil physical and kinaesthetic purposes that tended to emphasize the body more than the meditative and spiritual dimensions of other forms. The ever-larger networks of practitioners of emerging yoga forms and other physical activities such as Indian wrestling (from the 11th century) and *kalarippayattu* (from the 12th century) – a form of martial art – gave rise to multidirectional processes of commingling that accelerated the development of yoga in particular ways. The incorporation of western gymnastic practices into Hatha yoga during the time of colonial rule in India has also been noted (Alter 2006; Smith 2007). This was a period during which there was extensive spread of British sporting forms and influences (Mangan 1988; Murphy, Sheard, and Waddington 2000). Interdependencies within the nation state as well as at a global level gathered momentum during the 19th century and reflected not only the increasing cultural diversity of India at this time but also the intensification of its inter-connectedness with other countries.

What emerged from India was an increasing variety of yoga forms as well as diminishing contrasts between ‘classical’ form(s) and newer variants, which were embedded within a diverse number of religious and spiritual figurations, as well as secular social norms, reflecting the expanding globalized figuration of which they were a part. Yoga was becoming a more pluralistic phenomenon as a consequence of very long-term interdependency processes, the increasingly complexity and dynamism of human networks, and the commingling that was a feature of them. In explaining the expansion of yoga, there has been a tendency to give primacy to processes of secularization and/or ‘easternization’ of western cultural contexts (see, for example, Dawson 2006; De Michelis 2004, 2007; Strauss, 2005). However, as Dunning (2010) argued, the ever-increasing quantitative and qualitative dimensions of human interdependency ties reflected the interweaving of very many processes, of which,

we would add, secularization and easternization were a part. With regard to the transformation and diffusion of yoga, social processes of cultural diffusion related to broader global flows of people and their leisure styles, a key aspect of which was the response of local people to 'alien' cultures (Maguire 1994, 2000, 2011). These processes are central to explaining the assimilation of yoga in particular places during specific times. Diminishing contrasts and increasing varieties explain yoga's expansion and transformation, characterized by continuity alongside change and involving intentional and unintentional actions (Elias 2000; Maguire 2000). As Dunning (2010) also argues, shifting social norms within these transformative processes were a central characteristic of assimilation.

The diffusion of yoga to America through the work of Vivekananda in 1893 and his visit to the World Parliament of Religions alongside the subsequent publication of his *Raja Yoga* text in 1896 has been well-documented (De Michelis 2004; Strauss 2005). This process illustrates the purposive actions of elite migrants in the process of cultural commingling, whereby practices not indigenous to these countries began to permeate western culture (Guttman 1994; Maguire 1994). It was given momentum through intentional actions, such as establishing formal schools of yoga in a number of American cities (Dazey 2005), the development of yoga courses and the publication of books about yoga. It also seems that individuals were intentionally sent out by spiritual organizations in India (such as *The Divine Life Society* in Rishikesh) to establish centres in other countries and teach yoga as part of their 'missionary' activities (Altglas 2007; Strauss 2002). These actions, incrementally, left an expanding figuration within and beyond the host country through processes of institutionalization, in a similar way to that described by Dunning (2000) in relation to football and other sports (Dunning and Sheard 2005). A further consequence of the increasing inter-connectedness between America and India was that ideas and practices moved in both directions, influencing the development of yoga both 'at home' and 'abroad'. Broader social and political processes relating to the control of immigration into America provide an illustrative example of processes of cultural diffusion of significance for the further expansion and transformation of yoga. Before 1882, there were few restrictions on those who wanted to settle and immigration was relatively high (Daniels 2004; Duleep and Dowhan 2008). However, in 1921 and 1924 two Acts were passed introducing quota systems that favoured those from western European countries whilst restricting entry to those from Asia, South and Eastern Europe. This situation prevailed until the 1965 *Immigration and Nationality Act*, which lifted a number of these restrictions and shifted the profile of immigrants, with declining proportions from Europe and Canada and increasing proportions from Asia and Latin America (Duleep and Dowhan 2008). A consequence of this legislation was that during the 20th century America developed into an increasingly multicultural nation, which was likely to have been particularly receptive to new cultural practices, such as yoga. Under these conditions, commingling would have intensified with both established groups and newcomers shaping the development of yoga. The rise of leisure – as time distinct from all other obligations – throughout the whole of the 20th century was an enduring aspect of the receptivity of various cultural contexts to yoga during this period.

Alter (2006, 761) argues that "the tremendous impact Vivekananda had at Chicago is not so much because what he said was radically new and different, but exactly the opposite: what he did was to clearly articulate, and dramatically embody, somewhat dislocated recursive ideas that had been in wide circulation for many years." This somewhat monocausal view is akin to the Webb-Ellis creation myth that Dunning (and Sheard) (2005) exposed,

and tends to obscure the interdependent character of social relations in contemporary societies. However, it does point to the significance of social norms and the receptivity of the local context in relation to diffusion (Bloyce and Murphy 2008; Maguire 1994, 2000). Not only did the local people respond to the ideas that Vivekananda brought, they also reinterpreted them and, in so doing, produced something distinctive from that which had gone before. At that time there were numerous middle-class men and women with interests in transcendentalism and the occult, as well as those who had a desire to improve public health. This aspect of the local context meant that members of these groups were not only likely to be receptive to the ideas espoused by Vivekananda but also had relative degrees of power to influence developments. Such processes of indigenization (Maguire 2011) reflect the multidirectional and dynamic interweaving of global and local cultural contexts, and are useful in explaining the transformation of yoga in America during this period. As Dunning (2010, 183–184) argues “the varying balances of centrifugal and centripetal pressures to which interdependency chains of differing lengths and degrees of intensity are conducive ... also have to be central foci”. Expanding figurations and lengthening chains of interdependency conceptually explain how the global and local become connected. Local cultural wares, such as yoga, were becoming more global in scope, while at the same time being adapted to ‘local’ conditions.

De Michelis (2004) uses the term ‘modern yoga’ to refer to the forms of yoga that tended to emphasize āsanās and which developed from this period onwards. Alongside the emphasis on physical postures was an emerging emphasis on relaxation. Singleton (2005) argues that some practitioners incorporated – intentionally and unintentionally – ideas into the practice of yoga from humanistic psychology, psychotherapy and western esotericism, which were prevalent among some groups in America during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. To this we might add the persistence of religiosity in America during this period (Mennell 2007) and receptivity to spiritual practices. This further illustrates the ways in which local actors gave new interpretations to the practice of yoga that reflected the influence of the wider networks of which they were a part. It is also worth noting that the linking of mind and body – a central aspect of the long-term development of yoga through āsanās and prānāyāma – converged with the emerging Victorian notion of a healthy mind in a healthy body (*mens sana i corpore sano*) in these developments (Gibson and Malcolm 2020).

The expansion of yoga in recent times

Taking a long-term perspective illustrates how the local expansion of yoga unfolds within the processes of development of modern nation-states alongside their increasing interconnectivity at varying points in their development. The global diffusion and transformation of yoga gained further momentum during the second half of the 20th century and was part of wider commingling processes that were contoured by two broad developments in particular: migration, and the movement of people more broadly, and the shifting position of women in society. As we have discussed above in relation to America, trans-migration accelerated and intensified cultural commingling. The institutionalization of yoga through schools and centres of teaching and instruction that had developed in America in the late 19th century extended to Europe, with the first yoga school in Germany appearing in the 1940s (Strauss, 2002) and in Australia in 1950 (Penman et al. 2012). In the 1960s, yoga diffused to France (Altglas 2007) and England (Hasselle-Newcombe 2007). As in America,

immigration following the Second World War significantly contributed to cultural diversity in these countries. Between 1948 and 1962 large numbers of Indians and Pakistanis entered Britain, paralleling a similar development in America several decades earlier. Similarly, when the White Australia policy¹ was finally abolished in 1972 there was a large influx of Asians into Australia (Hugo and Harris 2011). These global flows of migrants, particularly from the Indian sub-continent, contributed to the global expansion of yoga through intentional and unintentional actions; immigrants took with them their cultural wares (yoga), alongside their conscious efforts to spread yoga globally. This meant that nation states were permeable to a variety of cultural influences through the ebb and flow of migration that lengthened the interdependencies between people throughout the world (Maguire 1994). These processes are analogous to those Dunning (2010, 184) refers to in discussing football: “Asianization ... Japanization and Sinecization”.

In the 21st century, movement of people through tourism, especially health and wellness tourism, has expanded in a multitude of directions. Yoga studios and spiritual retreat centres have proliferated across all continents and regions of the world (Halsall, Werthner, and Forneris 2016; Lewis 2013), widening the possibilities for people to experience yoga, from the mildly interested to the committed practitioner. The Ministry of Tourism in India intentionally facilitated this form of global tourism by marketing and promoting Rishikesh (and other places) as an ‘ideal’ spiritual location (Hoyez 2007; Strauss 2002). In the 21st century, developments in digital technology have also been significant in augmenting the expansion of yoga by enlarging and accelerating the global flow of people, their ideas and practices (Dunning 2010). In the last decade or so, internet-based yoga resources have increased greatly, including classes delivered by webcam and video streaming, yoga instruction via MP3s, mobile phone apps, home-study courses and meditation downloads (see for example www.yoga-centres-directory.net). Processes relating to the commodification of health and wellbeing in modern societies have further contributed to the transformation of yoga (Bowers and Cheer 2017). The elaboration of leisure lifestyles implies that choices can be made in relation to how time and money are spent (Porter 1999).

Interwoven with these broad social, economic, and political processes have been two longer-term processes that seem especially relevant to understanding the global transformation of yoga and its expansion as a leisure activity in the recent past. Discourses of the body, health, healing and the associated scientific evidence, have long been entwined with the development of yoga in India prior to and alongside its global diffusion (see for example, Alter 2003; Askegaard and Eckhardt 2012; Chakraborty 2007). Health and wellbeing are some of the most commonly cited reasons for starting and sustaining yoga practice (Vergeer et al. 2017; Lewis 2008). Healthization – the process by which health in its broadest sense has become increasingly prominent in the practice of many yoga styles – has continued to contour its transformation. To some extent, yoga has been promoted as something of a panacea for an increasingly diverse number of health issues, especially those relating to mental health (Halsall, Werthner, and Forneris 2016). In part, this reflects wider processes within research, policy, and practitioner figurations linking physical activity more generally, not only to physical health, but also mental health and wellbeing (Gibson and Malcolm 2020). In discussing the quest for excitement and the spare-time spectrum, Elias and Dunning (2008, 82) reflected on the limited attention given to what they called “higher-level health”, such as emotional refreshment and the restoration of mental tonus in the sport field. In much the same vein, Dunning (2010, 188) contended that sport – and by extension,

leisure – could “provide a central source of meaning and of feelings of continuity for people ... and offer experiences that are analogous to the excitement in primitive religions”. These, rather prescient reflections, offer some insight into how yoga might contribute towards mental refreshment. Also evident in the reflections of Elias and Dunning (2008) is their inclination towards the need for some form of interdisciplinary integration – across sociology, psychology and biology – if further light was to be shed on how leisure activities might give rise to an upsurge of emotional refreshment.

This is a theme taken up by Gibson and Malcolm (2020) in discussing physical activity and health promotion, in which they refer to the work of Elias (1987) on ‘the hinge’ – the juncture of social and biological processes on the body and the development of a social habitus, which Dunning developed further in relation to sport, leisure and the emotions. Although largely discussed in the context of social inequalities in health, Wilkinson and Pickett’s work (2019) converges with this and other similar interdisciplinary work focussed on trying to understand how society ‘gets under the skin’ (see for example, Sacker and Bartley 2016). With regard to yoga, recent empirical work indicates that specific poses (āsanas) can give rise to improved feelings of energy and self-esteem, which may well be linked to the activity of the vagus nerve and its role in emotional regulation (Golec de Zavala, Lantos, and Bowden 2017). The transformation of yoga into a plethora of styles, structured in ways that vary the power, agility and visualization elements of movements coupled with breathing, retains the mind-body link evident from the earliest of times. In other words, yoga continues to be structured in ways likely to give rise to the kinds of upsurge of emotions that Elias and Dunning (2008) outlined with regard to leisure in *Quest for Excitement*, which they theorized with reference to the biopsychosocial model of the whole person. Thus, yoga styles may well reflect “the interdependency of our social practices and physiological functions” (Gibson and Malcolm 2020, 79), via the emotions they generate. In this regard, the non-routinized, social, interpersonal and spontaneous aspects of embodied yoga practice – alluded to by Elias and Dunning (2008) and Dunning (2010) – retain, and perhaps even enhance, the capacity to stir the emotions. Yoga’s development as a movement form gives less emphasis to the instrumental and routinized aspects of many physical activities, such as spinning that – perhaps unintentionally – can marginalize opportunities for emotional refreshment (Hybholt and Friis Thing 2019). While this form of interdisciplinary perspective raises more questions than answers, it is evident that the work of Dunning, with Elias and others, provides a fairly distinctive platform for further theorization.

The second process we refer to is feminization; that is to say, yoga has, from the 1960s onwards, been contoured in ways that seem especially attractive to women. The growth in participation in America (Cramer et al. 2016), the UK (Cartwright et al. 2020), and Australia (Vergeer et al., 2017) has been driven by women in particular. While it is well-documented that figurational sociology has been, until relatively recently, ‘markedly masculinist’ (Hargreaves 1992, 161) – a point subsequently acknowledged by Dunning (1999) in his later work – the social transformation of yoga has inevitably had differential consequences for, and reflects differing needs among, diverse sections of the population, not only in relation to gender but also in relation to class. Coalter (1999) explains the feminization of health and fitness participation, including yoga, in terms of broad social and educational processes, proposing that women have increasingly continued and succeeded in education, delaying parenthood and restricting family size, expanding their figurations through these processes,

including into leisure. This is especially the case for middle-class women. Nonetheless, leisure in the spare-time spectrum provides a conceptual tool for understanding the ways in which women's obligations – especially in relation to the family and domestic sphere more broadly – can expand and squeeze out time for leisure. Elias and Dunning (2008, 98) described this in terms of the “inescapable commitment to family life”. Perhaps more importantly, however, are the highly routinized lives of many women, characterized by gendered social norms and close interdependency ties in most spheres of life, but especially the domestic sphere, that create the conflicts associated with self-restraint and, consequently, a personal need for socially approved forms of pleasurable excitement to refresh emotional staleness. Elias and Dunning's (2008) view that modern – and we would add, gendered – societies generate a need for the restoration of mental tonus and psychological refreshment through the controlled flow of emotions may be particularly pertinent here. The increasing varieties of yoga present flexible, individualized, non-competitive and health-oriented opportunities that not only appear attractive to many women but may also be more likely to meet a need for emotional re-balancing, or what is more commonly called ‘stress management’. Regular yoga practitioners (both men and women), for example, have been found to be interested in spiritual exploration (Cartwright et al. 2020) rather than physical fitness. In this regard, although Elias and Dunning did not open up their conceptual-theoretical analysis of leisure to include an especially well-developed gender dimension – reflecting not only the period during which they were writing but also their own degrees of involvement and detachment – leisure in the spare-time spectrum provides a particularly useful perspective for illuminating the gendered pattern of participation in yoga as part of its transformation from the earliest of times as a male preserve. More recent work, however, has applied their work to women's experiences of mixed martial arts (Mierzwinski, Velija, and Malcolm 2014).

In discussing the development of football, Dunning (2010) emphasized a plurality of increasingly interwoven processes reflecting the interdependencies of modern societies, as we have tried to do – albeit somewhat selectively – in tracing the long-term transformation of yoga. Central, however, to a figurational analysis is the concept of ‘sportization’ (Elias 1986) which accounts for the process by which folk pastimes become codified, standardized and increasingly regulated. This process was regarded as indicative of a ‘civilizing spurt’ associated as it was with shifts in the standards of self-control as societies became more highly differentiated and complex. Sportization has been used to explain the development of competitive and performance-oriented sport requiring relatively high levels of self-control and self-discipline (Dunning and Sheard 2005). Indeed, as Dunning, Malcolm, and Waddington (2004, 9) note, “Elias coined the term ‘sportization’ as a shorthand way of conveying the central meaning ... of the overall European civilizing process”. The quest for excitement emerged, in part, from the study of this process and the forms of sport it has given rise to, in that the structure of sport is perhaps most obviously seen as generating tensions that give rise to “pleasurable excitement ... allowing feelings to flow more freely” (Elias and Dunning, 2008, 31). To a very limited extent, sportization has become an aspect of yoga's transformation in the very recent past in that forms of yoga have developed that emphasize the physical and performative aspects of the āsanas, culminating in a specific form known as sport yoga. The process is perhaps most evident in the relatively rapid growth of yoga competitions (that extend to debating whether yoga should be included in the Olympics) and the first World Yoga Championship in 1989, established through the International Federation of Yoga Sports (www.worldyogachampionship.com). The

development of forms of rule-bound competitive sport yoga, which involve spectators alongside participants, is reflective of the types of mimetic leisure pastimes that Elias and Dunning (2008) use to illustrate their quest for excitement theory. Nonetheless, as we have argued above, rule-bound competitive forms of leisure activities (such as sport yoga) can become routinized and, in so doing, may diminish the extent to which they can function as an enclave for mental rebalancing. On the other hand, if the structure of sport yoga generates different kinds of tension, then this might change the character of mental rebalancing. Either way, the development of sport yoga illustrates how, at any particular point in time, yoga is in a 'structured flux' – changing, to greater or lesser degrees, more-or-less quickly over time. Some changes may be rapid and ephemeral, others slower but perhaps more lasting (Mennell 1992).

Yoga as an enclave for emotional arousal and pleasurable tension

The body of theoretical work on which we have drawn in this paper has hitherto mostly been applied to the realm of sport, rather than leisure more broadly. Nonetheless, in studying the transformation of yoga into a popular, global leisure pastime we would conclude that, while there are differences in timescales and trajectories, similar long-term processes are at play. In this context, we specifically asked the question, to what extent can the quest for excitement provide an adequate explanation for how yoga has become absorbed and assimilated into the very many different social contexts across the world? In positioning the concept within the theoretical perspective of the civilizing process and leisure in the spare-time spectrum, we further conclude that quest for excitement provides a more adequate explanation for yoga's global popularity than has previously been proposed, one which in particular helps resolve the distinction between 'relaxation' and 'excitement' explanations. Drawing on the work of Dunning, at times collaborating with Elias, helps shed light on the transformation of yoga by theorizing leisure in relation to the conditions of everyday life in which there has been an increasing pressure and requirement for emotional restraint in domains beyond leisure. People's routinized and emotionally restrained lives thus need forms of leisure that provide emotional refreshment and mental rebalancing, not through the release of tension that has accumulated, but rather through the stirring of the emotions – the creation of pleasurable tension – provoked by the leisure event itself. Dunning (1999) noted that the breadth and diversity of leisure activities in modern times were likely to generate different levels and intensities of tension and in varying ways. In this regard, it is likely that yoga-specific processes (as with other forms of leisure activities) contribute to both the generation and release of tension. This is also likely to vary across yoga given the diversity of styles, which might also be significant in accounting for its popularity. For example, individually or collectively some or all of the following might be significant: the spiritual dimension and imagery of the setting, the structuring of breathing with poses and the physical contest with oneself this can create, the concentration required to focus on oneself and one's movements in a controlled decontrolling processual way, being in the company of others and participating in the social norms of the community, and so on. We can therefore theorize that the loosening of everyday emotional restraint through these kinds of processes can allow feelings to flow more freely, helping resolve emotional conflicts in a pleasurable, uplifting way. In so doing, they are likely to meet a socially conditioned psychological need for mental refreshment and restoration, which Dunning (2010) argued

was the foundation to mental health. In this way, relaxation of emotional constraint gives rise to a feeling of relaxation or respite brought about through the stimulation of emotions. This seems to provide a more adequate way of conceptualizing relaxation – not as ‘rest’ akin to sleep – but as a vibrant emotional state of arousal and refreshment.

Yoga, as a complex social practice, thus provides socially acceptable leisure spaces in which the relaxation of everyday restraint creates enjoyable tensions that can in turn be restorative and, at least a partial antidote to the emotional staleness of everyday life. In this regard, yoga may well function as a form of play. The particular emphasis Dunning, in collaboration with Elias, put on understanding leisure development as an aspect of the civilizing process has been our main theoretical point of departure in this paper, and, furthermore, one which adds explanatory power to understanding the expansion and popularity of yoga. The need for empirical studies that test out these theoretical ideas, however, is acknowledged.

Revisiting the writings of Dunning and his collaborative work with Elias and others while drafting this paper during the COVID-19 pandemic has further sensitized us to the significance of this body of work for understanding the human condition, specifically in terms of the civilizing of the emotions and the concept of quest for excitement. Throughout the period of ‘lockdown’, there have been significant restrictions placed on all aspects of social life, a consequence of which has been an increase in reporting of various mental health issues. Not only has the period highlighted the social dimensions of people’s lives – that is to say, that we are fundamentally social creatures in need of social stimulation through the company of others, a point that Dunning often expressed in different writings – but also the fact that spontaneous up-surfing of emotions are part of these interpersonal processes. The COVID-19 context has also provoked us to reflect on the ways in which physical recreation can help our newly routinized lives and give rise to feelings of creative tension and renewal. Leisure, it seems, is not trivial, but fulfils an important role in mental wellbeing especially during such times. The work of Dunning, together with Elias and other colleagues is, however, especially pertinent at this time given its emphasis on the function of leisure to meet the socially generated emotional needs of people in increasingly complex societies. It is, therefore, worth noting that *Quest for Excitement* was one of the first attempts to understand and theorize the significance of sport and leisure activities in contemporary societies and continues to provide a platform for future work in myriad directions.

Note

1. The White Australia policy refers to specific legislation enacted in 1901. Amongst other things, the aim of the policy was to maintain the ethnic and cultural homogeneity of the country in terms of the dominant white British.

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