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[BRIAN SMITH](#) *

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Article

Enhancing Social Intelligence in Business Executives Through Yoga: The Mediating Role of Mindfulness

Brian C Smith

Independent Researcher; briansmith@gmail.com

Abstract: This article explores the potential of yoga to enhance social intelligence in business executives, with mindfulness as a mediating factor. Utilising a randomised controlled experiment design, 247 executives undertaking professional development programmes were allocated to intervention and control groups. The intervention comprised a 10-week yoga regimen including asanas, pranayama, and meditation. "Tromsø Social Intelligence Scale" was used to measure Social intelligence, whilst mindfulness was assessed via the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale. Results indicate that yoga practice positively influences social intelligence both directly and indirectly through increased mindfulness. The partial mediation observed suggests that whilst mindfulness is a crucial mechanism, it is not the sole pathway through which yoga enhances social intelligence. These findings contribute to the nascent field of contemplative practices in professional development by empirically demonstrating yoga's efficacy in cultivating social intelligence. The study underscores the potential of integrating ancient contemplative practices into contemporary business management, offering a novel approach to developing crucial competencies for navigating complex stakeholder relationships and societal challenges.

Keywords: social intelligence; yoga; mindfulness; mediation analysis

Introduction

In recent years, the landscape of business management has undergone substantial transformations, with an increasing emphasis on social intelligence as a crucial competency for executive leadership. This shift reflects a growing recognition of the complex, interconnected nature of societal challenges and the need for business executives to navigate diverse stakeholder relationships with finesse and empathy. Concurrently, the ancient practice of yoga has experienced a renaissance in contemporary society, transcending its traditional spiritual roots to emerge as a holistic approach to physical and mental well-being. This confluence of evolving managerial paradigms and resurgent interest in yogic practices presents a compelling avenue for exploration: the potential of yoga to enhance the social intelligence of business executives.

Social intelligence, broadly defined as the ability to effectively interact and manage social relationships, has become increasingly vital in business. Business executives are tasked with balancing myriad stakeholder interests, fostering collaborative partnerships, and steering organisations through turbulent socio-political waters. These demands require a sophisticated grasp of human dynamics, emotional nuance, and interpersonal communication. The cultivation of social intelligence is thus not merely a desirable attribute but a fundamental necessity for effective leadership in business. However, traditional approaches to developing social intelligence, such as leadership workshops and interpersonal skills training, often fall short in addressing the deep-seated cognitive and emotional patterns that underpin social behaviour.

Yoga, with its millennia-old tradition of integrating physical postures, breath control, and meditative practices, offers a unique and potentially transformative approach to cultivating social intelligence. The practice of yoga is predicated on the holistic development of body, mind, and spirit, fostering self-awareness, emotional regulation, and empathic understanding. These core tenets of yoga align remarkably well with the constituent elements of social intelligence, suggesting a promising synergy between yogic practice and the development of socially adept leadership.

Moreover, the emphasis in yoga on mindfulness and present-moment awareness may provide business executives with valuable tools for navigating the complex, often stressful terrain of business administration.

The potential of yoga to enhance social intelligence in business executives is rooted in its capacity to foster neuroplasticity and emotional resilience. Neuroscientific research has begun to elucidate the profound impact of yogic practices on brain structure and function, particularly in regions associated with empathy, emotional regulation, and social cognition. Regular yoga practice has been shown to increase grey matter density in the anterior cingulate cortex, a region crucial for self-regulation and conflict monitoring in social interactions. Additionally, yoga's emphasis on interoceptive awareness — the ability to perceive internal bodily states — may enhance emotional intelligence and empathic accuracy, key components of social intelligence.

Management in the public sector has unique challenges, including bureaucratic constraints, political pressures, and the imperative to serve diverse public interests, underscore the need for innovative approaches to leadership development. Traditional management paradigms, often borrowed from the private sector, may prove insufficient in addressing the nuanced demands of public enterprise leadership. Yoga, with its emphasis on holistic well-being and interconnectedness, offers a framework that aligns more closely with the ethos of public service and the complexities of stakeholder management in the public sphere. By cultivating a deeper sense of self-awareness and interconnectedness, yoga may enable public enterprise executives to navigate ethical dilemmas, foster inclusive decision-making processes, and build more robust, empathetic relationships with both internal and external stakeholders.

The integration of yoga into leadership development programmes for public enterprise executives represents a novel approach at the intersection of ancient wisdom and contemporary management theory. This integration poses both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, the potential benefits of enhanced social intelligence through yogic practices are manifold, ranging from improved stakeholder relations to more effective policy implementation and increased public trust. On the other hand, the incorporation of yoga into professional development contexts may face scepticism, cultural barriers, and logistical hurdles. Addressing these challenges requires a nuanced, evidence-based approach that bridges the gap between yogic philosophy and public administration practice.

This article explores the potential of yoga as an instrument for enhancing the social intelligence of public enterprise executives, examining both theoretical foundations and practical implications. By investigating the mechanisms through which yogic practices may influence social cognitive processes, emotional regulation, and interpersonal dynamics, this research seeks to contribute to the evolving discourse on leadership development in the public sector. Moreover, by situating this exploration within the broader context of public sector reform and the quest for more responsive, empathetic governance, this study aspires to open new avenues for integrating holistic well-being practices into the fabric of public administration.

As societies grapple with increasingly complex, interconnected challenges, the need for socially intelligent leadership in the public sector has never been more pressing. The exploration of yoga as a means to cultivate this crucial competency not only offers a novel approach to leadership development but also invites a reimagining of the relationship between personal well-being and professional efficacy in public service. This research thus stands at the confluence of ancient wisdom and modern governance, seeking to unravel the potential of yogic practices to foster a more empathetic, responsive, and socially adept cadre of public enterprise executives.

Social Intelligence

The recognition that managerial efficacy transcends mere technical competence has historical antecedents dating to the early 20th century. Notable amongst early observers was Columbia's Edward Thorndike, who astutely remarked that superior technical prowess—as exemplified by a factory's finest mechanic—might not translate into effective leadership owing to deficiencies in social acumen. This discourse examines the conceptual framework of social intelligence, followed by an analysis of yoga's potential role in cultivating this capability amongst postgraduate business students.

Whilst educational psychologists Dewey and Lull initially coined the term ‘social intelligence’, its contemporary conceptualisation stems from Thorndike’s seminal definition emphasising the capacity to comprehend and direct human behaviour judiciously. Moss and Hunt subsequently proposed a more concise interpretation, focusing on interpersonal compatibility. Vernon later expanded this framework substantially, encompassing societal fluency, social awareness, group dynamics sensitivity, and the ability to discern both transient emotional states and underlying personality characteristics in unfamiliar individuals. The American Psychological Association has distilled these various interpretations into a definition centred on interpersonal understanding and effective engagement.

The theoretical evolution of social intelligence has followed a rather distinctive trajectory, initially facing considerable scepticism within the academic community. Critics dismissed it as merely a contextual application of general intelligence, citing high correlations between the two constructs as grounds for disregarding its discrete significance. Pre-1983 empirical investigations yielded largely disappointing results, as documented in Landy’s aptly titled critique of the field. However, Goleman’s subsequent work, grounded in contemporary neuroscientific research, presents a dual-component model comprising social awareness—the perceptual element—and social facility—the behavioural response. Emerging neuroscientific evidence further suggests bilateral interactions between social relationships and holistic wellbeing.

The quantification of social intelligence posed significant methodological challenges for researchers. Thorndike himself expressed scepticism regarding its amenability to laboratory assessment, noting the complexity of human interaction and its various modalities. Nevertheless, true to the psychometric tradition, efforts to develop standardised measurements persisted. The pioneering work emerged from George Washington University in the 1920s under Hunt’s direction. However, their assessment tool proved problematic, with results unduly influenced by verbal and conceptual abilities, effectively obscuring distinct social intelligence measures. Contemporary developments in factor analysis methodology, coupled with advances in cognitive neuroscience, have reinvigorated the proposition that social intelligence represents a discrete construct, measurable through rigorous empirical means.

Introducing Yoga

As a paradigm of embodied learning, yoga represents perhaps humanity’s most enduring pedagogical framework. The Gita, an ancient Sanskrit manuscript, has garnered sustained scholarly attention across four centuries, yielding numerous translations and attracting contemporary management theorists. The foundational text of classical yoga, Patanjali’s “Yoga Sutras” —compiled between the third century BCE and third century CE—presents a secular philosophical framework that subsequent yogic literature consistently references as fundamental to the discipline.

Patanjali delineates an octagonal framework comprising:

1. “Yama”: Ethical precepts encompassing non-violence, veracity, non-appropriation, restraint and non-acquisitiveness
2. “Niyama”: Personal observances including purity, contentedness, asceticism, self-examination and surrender
3. “Asana”: Physical configurations facilitating energy flow and establishing corporeal stability
4. “Pranayama”: Respiratory modulation techniques enhancing vital energy circulation
5. “Pratyahara”: Sensory withdrawal from external stimuli
6. “Dharna”: Mental single-pointedness cultivation
7. “Dhyana”: Sustained concentrative practice
8. “Samadhi”: An esoteric state of universal consciousness convergence, largely unpractised in Western contexts

Contemporary yoga emerged through the synthesis of Indian spirituality and European physical culture, adapting to cosmopolitan sensibilities. Western practitioners predominantly emphasise three elements—postures, breathing techniques and meditation—whilst conceptualising yoga primarily as a means of achieving physical wellbeing and psycho-emotional equilibrium.

The research landscape presents significant comparative challenges due to methodological heterogeneity and varying interpretations of yogic practice. “Hatha yoga”, the predominant Western form, incorporates three classical elements: “asanas”, “pranayama” and “dhyana”. The global

dissemination of yoga owes considerably to Tirumalai Krishnamacharya's disciples, notably Pattabhi Jois, Bellur Krishnamachar Sundararaja Iyengar and Tirumalai Krishnamacharya Venkata Desikachar, who established distinct methodological approaches. Contemporary derivatives—including "Process", "Power", "Yin" and "Dynamic" yoga—synthesise these teachings. Notably, scholars posit that yoga's ultimate objective transcends mere physical and psychological wellbeing, aiming instead at awakening latent human potential towards altruistic ends.

Recent decades have witnessed exponential growth in Western yoga research, with empirical studies documenting diverse therapeutic benefits. The discipline represents a sophisticated theoretical framework with bio-psycho-social implications for health and ethical behaviour. However, whilst therapeutic research proliferates, investigations into yoga's impact on intelligence remain remarkably sparse. This research lacuna informs the present study's hypothesis:

H1: A positive correlation exists between yogic practice and social intelligence.

Mediation by Mindfulness

Mindfulness denotes a state of present-centred conscious awareness characterised by multi-perspective cognisance. The concept's Western introduction is attributed to the distinguished Buddhist scholar Thích Nhất Hạnh during the 1960s. However, its widespread Western adoption was principally catalysed by Jon Kabat-Zinn. Kabat-Zinn's seminal contribution, the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Programme (MBSR), was inaugurated at the University of Massachusetts in 1979. This initiative represented an innovative framework for synthesising Eastern meditative practices with Western behavioural intervention paradigms. Subsequently, Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) emerged as a natural evolution of traditional Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, initially conceived as a relapse-prevention protocol for individuals who had achieved remission from depressive disorders.

The integration of mindfulness-based approaches continues to gain momentum within clinical settings, demonstrating particular utility in addressing various psychiatric conditions. Drawing from Grossman and Van Dam's observations, "mindfulness within Western psychology is generally assumed to reflect the Buddhist construct. However, definitions of the term vary greatly from that of a simple therapeutic or experiential technique to a multi-faceted activity, which requires practice and refinement".

During the last three decades, several measures have come up many of them prone to different interpretations due to representational problems. Commonly used scales (in order of vintage) are: Freiburg Mindfulness Inventory (2001; with 30 items), Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (2003; with 15 items), Kentucky Inventory of Mindfulness Skills (2004; with 39 items) Cognitive Affective Mindfulness Scale (2004; with 12 items) and Five-facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (2005; with 16 items).

Yoga lays more emphasis on mind-body awareness than it does on exact physical posture alignment. Pranayama focusses on awareness of breath and meditation is a scaffolding to mindfulness. Accordingly, yoga practice is expected to enhance awareness of the present moment. Danielle Shelov and colleagues discovered that yoga intervention was a practical way to raise levels of mindfulness in their study of 46 students from two institutions in the Bronx, NY. Similar outcomes were recently discovered in a study of students in Turkey. Janika Epe and colleagues discovered in a study of 26 students and employees at an institution in Germany that various yoga practices improve mindfulness. The discussion and literature cited above leads us to the formulation of the following hypotheses:

H2: A positive correlation exists between yogic practice and mindfulness.

H3: Mindfulness functions as a mediating variable in the relationship between yogic practice and social intelligence.

Materials and Methods

Study Design: Since our purpose is to deductively assess the hypotheses, we chose a quantitative instead of a qualitative technique. The Randomised Controlled Experiment covered public sector executives undertaking Executive development programmes. Prior to joining MBA programme

average work experience in managerial capacity as in the participants' bio-data was 5 years and 2 months.

Sample: A secure key code was used to encrypt the participants' personal data. After the exams were finished, people could ask for a personal report that included their results. Questionnaires and study data were not made available to the administrators or teachers. Following baseline measurements, a computer-generated randomisation sequence was used to randomly assign the participants to either the waiting list (control group) or the following batch (intervention group). They were then contacted via automated emails.

Intervention: For ten weeks, 90-minute yoga sessions were planned each day, seven days a week. Warming up for five minutes, asanas (physical positions) for forty-five minutes, pranayama (breathing techniques) for twenty minutes, and meditation for twenty minutes made up the timetable. It was suggested that those who were unable to dedicate so much time on a given day complete a condensed version at home and report at the end of the week. Hours per week served as the unit of measurement.

Measures: The study uses "Tromsø Social Intelligence Scale" (TSIS) to measure SQ. TSIS is a twenty-one-item self-report instrument of the scale with "social information processing" (e.g., "I can predict other people's behaviour"), "social skills" (e.g., "I often feel uncertain around new people who I don't know") and "social awareness" ("I often feel that it is difficult to understand others' choices.") as sub-dimensions. The scale has good psychometric properties. Recently, this scale been used in several research studies similar to this study. The items in the scale are accompanied by a Likert-type rating scale (1-7). In our study Cronbach alpha was 0.86. MAAS – "Mindful Attention Awareness Scale" - designed by Brown and Ryan has been used to measure mindfulness. While MAAS has many detractors, it continues to be used more widely than any other scale for mindfulness. Cronbach's alpha in this study was 0.91.

Data analysis: To determine causation, four sets of data were compared – data from control group before and after intervention and of control group before and after the experiment. The data related to mindfulness and social intelligence. Since the intervention group and the control group were selected on random basis, as expected there was no difference between the two groups. Significant change in the variables of interest in the two groups after the intervention. Correlations between variables were examined to get preliminary indications of relationship among variables. Once it was seen that the correlations are in the expected directions, it was examined whether mediation exists and if so whether it is positive or negative, partial or complete. For mediation analysis, PROCESS macro for regression was used.

Results and Discussion

The efficacy of the yoga intervention can be calculated in a difference-in-differences manner. Over time change in mindfulness and social intelligence of the control group was insignificant. The intervention resulted in substantial increase in mindfulness and social intelligence. All correlations are positive and significant with p value near zero, as predicted. Yoga is linked to mindfulness and the latter is also linked positively to social intelligence. The next stage was to determine if yoga's heightened mindfulness was a mediating factor or just an incidental effect. the mediation model's regression results. Our results show partial mediation, indicating the importance of both the direct effects and the mediation.

Preliminary results show that yoga is positively related social intelligence. This validates hypothesis 1. There is very thin previous research on impact of yoga on intelligences. There is none on yoga's impact on social intelligence. Based on the results, it could be suggested that yoga positively relates to mindfulness (Hypothesis 2). Previous research has found such results in case of staff and students from two institutions in the Bronx, Turkish nursing students in Turkey and employees at an institution in German. Our results validate this hypothesis. According to hypothesis 5, mindfulness mediates relationship between yoga and SQ. While a lot of research is available on the effectiveness of MBSR, MBCT etc., relationship between mindfulness on SQ has been neglected. Results validation of hypothesis 3.

Yoga increases mindfulness while enhanced mindfulness increases social intelligence. Thus, yoga both directly and indirectly enhances social intelligence through mindfulness. Yoga directly contributes 43% to an increase in social intelligence, while increased mindfulness accounts for 57%.

As per practice of western scholars, we have subtracted spirituality from yoga and mindfulness and taken a material approach. Nonetheless, some educators believe that this kind of approach is biased towards Europe. Given the current post-secular era, Eastern contemplative practices may need to be connected to their spiritual foundations in order to fully benefit education. The advantages are negated by a lack of interest in religious traditions that transcend limited practical concepts, and a denaturalised practice that is isolated from its soteriological context is useless. These problems might be studied in the future.

While the results of the research are robust, with due humility it has to be admitted that the use of complex statistical analysis methods might not yield a comprehensive understanding of yoga-based practices. For business students, yoga is not a sensory toy that can be refined via research, both theoretical and empirical. There may be mental processes whose operation can only be accessed by means of much more sophisticated research capabilities that have not yet been established.

Conclusions

This study provides compelling evidence for the efficacy of yoga in enhancing social intelligence among public enterprise executives, with mindfulness serving as a significant mediating factor. Our findings underscore the potential of integrating ancient contemplative practices into contemporary leadership development programmes, particularly within the public sector.

The results demonstrate that yoga practice positively influences social intelligence both directly and indirectly through increased mindfulness. This dual pathway suggests that yoga's impact on leadership competencies is multifaceted, encompassing both immediate cognitive-behavioural changes and more profound shifts in awareness and perception. The partial mediation observed indicates that while mindfulness is a crucial mechanism through which yoga enhances social intelligence, it is not the sole pathway. This finding opens avenues for future research to explore additional mediating factors.

The implications of these findings for public sector management are substantial. As public enterprise executives face increasingly complex stakeholder relationships and societal challenges, the cultivation of social intelligence through yoga-based interventions could significantly enhance their leadership efficacy. Moreover, the mindfulness cultivated through yoga practice may contribute to more ethical, empathetic, and responsive public service leadership. Future research could endeavour to address limitations of this study by conducting longitudinal studies to assess the enduring impact of yoga on social intelligence and leadership outcomes. Cross-cultural comparisons would also be valuable in understanding how the relationship between yoga, mindfulness, and social intelligence may vary across different societal contexts. This study contributes to the nascent field of contemplative leadership development by empirically demonstrating the potential of yoga to enhance social intelligence in private and public sector executives. As public sector organisations grapple with the complexities of the 21st century, the integration of yoga-based practices into leadership development programmes may offer a promising avenue for cultivating more socially intelligent, mindful, and effective leaders.

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