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3 **Yoga in Penitentiary Settings: Transcendence,**
4 **Spirituality, and Self-Improvement**

5 **Mar Griera¹**

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8 **Abstract** Yoga, together with other so-called holistic spiritual practices such as
9 reiki or meditation, is one of the most popular spiritual disciplines in our contem-
10 porary society. The success of yoga crosses the boundaries between health, sport,
11 religion, and popular culture. However, from a sociological point of view, this is a
12 largely under-researched field. Aiming to fill this gap, this article analyzes the
13 impact, meaning, and implications of the practice of yoga by taking prisons as the
14 institutional context of the study. The growth of yoga in penitentiary settings is a
15 recent trend in many countries and raises new questions concerning its potential to
16 foster well-being and self-transformation. The research presented here applies
17 Schutz’s concepts of “finite province of meaning” and “stock of knowledge” to
18 understand yoga’s role in inmates’ lives. The main argument of the article is that
19 yoga is a body technique that affords inmates the possibility to enter into a ‘finite
20 province of meaning’ and transcend their everyday prison lives. However, the
21 impact of yoga upon inmates’ lives is not limited just to its physical effects as
22 learning yoga also involves the acquisition of a spiritual stock of knowledge made
23 up of Eastern philosophy, holistic concepts, and self-help therapeutic narratives.
24 Indeed, physical movements and spiritual accounts constitute one another in the
25 practice of yoga, thus opening up a pathway into a different reality; movement and
26 spiritual discourse inform one another—and it is precisely in this reflexivity that
27 “transcendent experiences” are created and yoga is made meaningful and important
28 in the improvement-setting of the prison. This article is based on ethnographic
29 fieldwork developed carried out in two different penitentiary institutions.

A1 The article is part of the special issue on Alfred Schutz and Religion.

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Introduction

Religious affiliations, practices, and beliefs have dramatically changed over recent decades in Europe. Historical churches have been displaced as principal providers of spiritual experiences of transcendence and, in Luckmann's terms, they "no longer represent the socially dominant form of religion" (1990: 135). In contemporary societies, new sources of the sacred are emerging and being disseminated through popular media and consumer culture. The religious expressions that are on the rise "lay great stress on the subjective experience of transcendence" (Knoblauch 2008: 148) and are often disconnected from many of the older institutional frameworks. In this context, the sensory and bodily dimensions of experiences of transcendence gain increasing relevance for individuals and become important loci of new spiritual forms and existential meaning-making processes.

Yoga, together with other so-called holistic spiritual practices such as reiki or meditation, is one of the most popular spiritual disciplines in our contemporary society. There is no clear estimate of the real magnitude of the so-called "yoga boom" but there are strong indicators of its increasing expansion worldwide (Singleton and Byrne 2008). Yoga has become one of the most legitimate practices of the holistic universe and it is considered to be at the forefront of the spread of alternative activities and therapies in Western societies (Fischer-White and Gill Taylor 2013). Currently the teaching of yoga is also increasingly being included in schools, hospitals, or prisons among other public institutions. The success of yoga crosses the boundaries between health, sport, religion, and popular culture and can not be explained without taking into account its multi-faceted nature. However, from a sociological point of view, this is a largely under-researched field and has not been the subject of the degree of discussion that its social relevance would demand (Smith 2007).

With a view to filling this gap, this article analyses the impact, meaning, and implications of the practice of yoga by taking prisons as the institutional context of the study. The growth of yoga in penitentiary settings is a recent trend in many countries (Rucker 2005; Rabi Blondel 2012; Bilderbeck et al. 2013) and raises new questions concerning the potential of yoga for fostering well-being and self-transformation. The study presented here applies Alfred Schutz's concepts of "finite province of meaning" and "stock of knowledge" for the understanding of the role of yoga in inmates' lives.

The article is based on ethnographic research developed in two penitentiary institutions. The focus on prisons is not an arbitrary decision. Prisons are privileged sites for observing and examining the reconfiguration of the spiritual and religious landscape since their special features as "total institutions" (Goffman 1961) embody a more explicit and visible crystallization of the changes (Beckford and Gilliat-Ray 1998). As Irene Becci argues, "in prison, individuals are confronted

76 with existential questions in a particularly intensive way. The conditions of detention
 77 and everyday struggles for freedom in relation to space, time and body create a situation
 78 in which religion gains particular meaning” (2012: 2). Therefore, the analysis of
 79 inmates’ yoga practices in prison can be used as a magnifying glass to better understand
 80 the emergence of new forms of transcendence in contemporary society.

81 The main argument of the article is that yoga is a body technique that offers
 82 inmates the possibility to enter into a ‘finite province of meaning’ and transcend
 83 their everyday prison lives. However, the impact of yoga upon inmates’ lives is not
 84 limited to its physical effects since the learning of yoga comes together with the
 85 acquisition of a spiritual stock of knowledge made up of Eastern philosophy,
 86 holistic concepts and self-help therapeutic narratives that works as a repen-
 87 tance/self-improvement framework. Therefore, the article also states that the
 88 popularity of yoga among inmates is due to its dual and circular character: while the
 89 physical performance of yoga enables inmates to experience transcendence, the
 90 familiarization with a “spiritual stock of knowledge” through teachers’ comments,
 91 conversations with co-participants and the exchange of books helps inmates to make
 92 sense of these lived experiences of transcendence by placing them in a meaningful
 93 and meaning-making narrative. This has an unexpected consequence: thus, inmates
 94 dealing with their situation through their engagement with yoga work in unison with
 95 the prison politics on the improvement of the criminals.

96 The article is divided into three main parts. The first part provides the contextual
 97 background and methodology used in the study. The second part exposes the
 98 theoretical and conceptual perspective adopted in the research. In the third part of
 99 the article, the main findings are presented and organized around three subsections:
 100 one on the body and the concept of the “finite province of meaning,” the other on
 101 the concept of the “spiritual stock of knowledge” and the last one on the role of
 102 yoga in fostering processes of personal changes and alternation (Berger and
 103 Luckmann 1966). The article ends with the main conclusions.

104 **Making the Case: Yoga and Holistic Spiritualities in Catalan** 105 **Penitentiary Setting**

106 In Goffman’s words, entering a “total institution” involves a “series of abasements,
 107 degradations, humiliations and profanations of the self” (1961: 24). In the
 108 penitentiary context, the inmates’ “territories of the self” (Goffman 1971) are
 109 constantly violated by the destruction of privacy, the loss of autonomy and the
 110 limitation of the processes of expressive differentiation and individualization.
 111 However, simultaneously, modern prisons are institutions founded on the rehabil-
 112 itative ideal. Theoretically regarded, the detention should contribute to the
 113 individual’s desistance from crime, and subsequent reintegration into society.¹ In
 114 this context, religion is often held to play an important role, both in coping with the
 115 pains of imprisonment and in facilitating symbolic and material resources for

IFL01 ¹ In this regard, the Spanish Constitution (art. 25) states that “criminal punishments involving
 IFL02 deprivation of freedom should aim towards rehabilitation and social integration”.



116 fostering self-esteem and providing a meaningful narrative about one's life (Clear
117 and Sumter 2002).

118 In recent years, and especially in the US, there has been an impressive amount of
119 studies aimed at discussing the role of religion in conditions of detention (Kerley et al.
120 2005; Clear and Sumter 2002; Johnson 2002). In Europe, the research on religion in
121 prisons has also been on the rise, but it focuses mainly on the policies of accommodating
122 religious diversity in prisons (Beckford and Gilliat-Ray 1998; Becci 2012; Furseth and
123 Kühle 2011; Martínez-Ariño et al. 2015). However, in both the American and European
124 context, research has been mainly limited to analyzing the role of traditional religious
125 organizations. Apart from a few exceptions (Becci and Knobel 2014; Griera and Clot-
126 Garrell 2015b), the increased presence of holistic spiritualities in prisons has been
127 mostly dismissed and ignored. This is not a coincidence, but rather reflects the fact that
128 the growth of holistic spiritualities in penitentiary institutions is a vastly hidden
129 phenomenon that passes unnoticed beyond prison walls.

130 In my case, the “discovery” of the increasing presence of yoga (and especially
131 kundalini yoga) and other holistic activities in prison was not a result of pure
132 scientific inspiration, but rather an outcome of a previous research project
133 concerning the accommodation of religious diversity in Spanish prisons (and
134 hospitals). This former project made me gradually aware of the fact that almost
135 every penitentiary institution in Catalonia offers yoga courses for inmates along
136 with other spiritual activities such as *reiki* or meditation, to name only the most
137 popular. However, these activities are never framed in religious terms by prison
138 staff and authorities, but justified through a non-religious discourse that, by means
139 of a scientific narrative, describes its effects in terms of physical health and
140 psychological wellness. My growing interest in learning more about the role, impact
141 and conditions of possibility of holistic activities in the penitentiary context dates
142 back to this initial insight and led to the design of a new research project.² After
143 adapting its objectives to fit the bureaucratic requirements, official permission to
144 conduct ethnographic work consisting of participant observation in yoga lessons
145 and interviews with inmates, prison staff, and yoga volunteers was obtained.³

146 The research revealed that yoga was first introduced in Catalan prisons in the
147 mid-nineties on the initiative of individuals who offered themselves as volunteers to
148 teach yoga to inmates. The success of these first isolated experiences, together with
149 the emergence of a NGO specifically devoted to the spread of yoga among
150 disadvantaged groups, led to the official recognition of yoga activities in the Catalan
151 penitentiary setting in 2011. That year an agreement was signed between the yoga
152 NGO (*World Prem*) and the Catalan Department of Justice. The agreement officially
153 acknowledged the teaching of yoga in penitentiary institutions and established the
154 basis for the expansion and organization of yoga courses for inmates.

2FL01 ² The research project was designed in collaboration with Anna Clot-Garrell (sociologist) and Marta Puig
2FL02 (criminologist and yoga instructor).

3FL01 ³ The project was structured around three dimensions: (a) the analysis of the impact and meaning of yoga
3FL02 for inmates; (b) the conditions that have enabled the emergence, legitimacy, and dissemination of yoga in
3FL03 prison and its institutional success; (c) and the role of “yoga entrepreneurs” and socially engaged forms
3FL04 of holistic spirituality in contemporary society. Due to space and scope limitation, this article focuses
3FL05 primarily on the first objective (see Griera et al. 2015 for a development of the second dimension).

155 In most penitentiary institutions the yoga course is a one-and-a-half hour weekly
 156 activity taught by volunteers.⁴ Additionally, some prisons also organize intensive
 157 yoga courses. The research project was designed as a multiple case study (Yin 2003)
 158 that examined three of these intensive courses, two of which were held in a large
 159 prison in the outskirts of Barcelona during the summer months of 2013 and 2015.
 160 These two courses consisted of a so-called “yoga quarantine,” i.e., a 2–3 h daily
 161 lesson for a period of 40 days, including a mixed group of male and female
 162 convicted prisoners. The third case consisted of a 2-month intensive course (June–
 163 July 2014), in a remand prison, involving 2-h lessons, 3 days per week.

164 The fieldwork consisted of participant observation in the yoga classes but also
 165 involved surveys of all the inmates participating in the courses ($n = 54$), as well as
 166 interviews with a selection of inmates, yoga teachers, social educators, and other
 167 prison personnel. A total of twenty-five interviews were conducted; these facilitated
 168 a better interpretation of the observational findings, but also led to new questions
 169 and findings. Throughout the fieldwork I also collected inmates’ writings, paintings,
 170 and other documents/artistic artifacts that the inmates themselves offered me. From
 171 the beginning I asked for inmates’ consent to be present. Despite the security
 172 obstacles and other constraints imposed by the prison context, I managed to be able
 173 to move ‘relatively’ freely inside the prison, and to engage in many informal
 174 conversations with inmates, staff, and yoga volunteers. However, this does not
 175 invalidate the fact that the closed nature of prisons, together with the internal
 176 security concerns, has posed specific limitations to the ethnographic practice
 177 (Wacquant 2002; Bosworth et al. 2005; Waldram 2009).

178 The table below summarizes the main profile characteristics of the inmates
 179 participating in the three intensive yoga courses (Table 1).

Table 1 Yoga courses participants’ profile

	1st case. Yoga quarantine (2013)	2nd case. Intensive yoga (2014)	3rd case. Yoga quarantine (2015)
Average age of participants	37,8	40,6	36,2
Sex of the participants	11 men/4 women	24 men	11 men/5 women
Place of birth	Europe (3), Latin America (7), Spain (4), US (1)	Spain (13), Latin America (7), Europe (3), Morocco (1).	Spain (4), Morrocco (1) and Latin America (11)
Average time already spent in prison	3 years	10.6 months	2.9 years

4FL01 ⁴ Most of the volunteers are instructors of Kundalini yoga, with an age range from 28 to 48 years and an
 4FL02 urban middle-class background. There are similar numbers of men and women, and their motivations for
 4FL03 teaching in prison are framed in terms of altruism, apprenticeship, and personal growth. Volunteers are
 4FL04 among the principal carriers—in the Weberian sense of *Träger*—of holistic therapies and activities in
 4FL05 prison.



180 Participation in the course is voluntary, but the inmates need to obtain official
 181 permission from the institution to enroll. In addition, for space and security reasons,
 182 not everybody is accepted. In all three cases there was a waiting list of inmates who
 183 wanted to enter the program. Some of them were accepted after the first week, while
 184 others were expelled because of ‘bad behavior’. ‘Bad behavior’ is described as not
 185 following the class, talking with other inmates, moving out from their own space, or
 186 infringing internal rules of the institution.⁵ Social educators are in charge of policing
 187 bad behavior, but ‘committed’ participants also tend to ‘denounce’ these disruptive
 188 behaviors to yoga teachers or staff arguing that they “break the atmosphere of the
 189 class”. It is important to notice that around 80 % of those inmates who have
 190 followed and finished an intensive yoga course in prison have already been long-
 191 term attendees of the prison’s ‘regular’ weekly yoga class. Therefore, the sample is
 192 not ‘neutral’ but configured by those inmates who already have shown a
 193 commitment towards the activity of yoga. Additionally, in the words of an
 194 educator, “yoga students are not ‘patio guys’ [*referring to those who spend most of*
 195 *their time hanging out in the patio*], they are usually part of the non-problematic
 196 inmates who already participate in many other activities”.

197 We have no data about the criminal records of the inmates participating in the
 198 intensive yoga courses.⁶ However, a consideration has to be made in this respect. In
 199 the case of the remand center inmates have not yet been sentenced, while in the
 200 other prison most of the inmates face long-term sentences. This places the inmates
 201 in a different psychological situation, a fact that has consequences in the way they
 202 take the yoga class. In the remand center, the success of yoga is very much related to
 203 dealing with uncertainty and impatience; in the long-term prison, yoga works more
 204 as a survival strategy. In both cases, however, the yoga class becomes what Crewe
 205 et al. (2013: 218) have termed an “emotional zone” which “cannot be characterized
 206 either as ‘front-stage’ or ‘backstage’ domains” but “enable the display of a wider
 207 range of feelings than elsewhere in the prison”. Johnson (1987) characterizes these
 208 “emotional zones”—such as the yoga class—as ‘sanctuaries’ that offer ‘sheltered
 209 settings’ where the rigid and aggressive emotional regime of the prison can be
 210 altered for a while. As will be further developed, the popularity of yoga among
 211 prison inmates is closely related with the fact that the yoga class provides a
 212 ‘sanctuary’ where a “broader emotional register” is permitted (Crewe et al. 2013:
 213 12). Singing mantras, lying down with the eyes closed, holding hands or even crying
 214 are accepted behaviors in the class (but not in the prisons’ public areas).

215 However, a more structural account of the institutional success of yoga should
 216 also be mentioned. The yoga program is supported by the prison’s management
 217 team, which facilitates its functioning. This support becomes understandable when
 218 considering the following two facts: (a) this is a free activity that emerges at a time

5FL01 ⁵ Internal rules such as not using the class to ‘flirt’ with other inmates—which was especially an issue in
 5FL02 mixed-gender classes—or to exchange letters (often ‘love letters’) between inmates living in different
 5FL03 units. Several inmates were expelled for these reasons.

6FL01 ⁶ When designing the surveys we had doubts about whether or not to include a question about this.
 6FL02 However, due to security, confidentiality, and ethical reasons we decided not to ask. However, we got to
 6FL03 know almost everyone’s offense after some weeks of fieldwork since usually inmates themselves or
 6FL04 prison personnel disclose it in informal conversations or interviews.

219 of economic crisis and crowded prisons; (b) it is perceived as an activity in line with
 220 the therapeutic dimension of the institution, and as a suitable means of pacifying
 221 inmates (Rucker 2005). In other words, yoga is also seen as a form of social control
 222 and a power device aimed at lowering tensions and fostering docility within the
 223 complex world of the “total institution” (Goffman 1961).

224 **Theoretical Framing: Yoga, Holistic Spirituality, and Embodied** 225 **Experiences of Transcendence**

226 My analysis of the practice of yoga by inmates is anchored in two theoretical
 227 observations. First, I argue that the popularization of yoga in Western societies can
 228 be addressed as part of the development of a new religious genre broadly known as
 229 “holistic spirituality” (Heelas et al. 2005). The second observation is that the Alfred
 230 Schutz notions of “finite province of meaning” and “stock of knowledge” are
 231 appropriate to capture the multifaceted nature of the practice of yoga and account
 232 for the relationship between the body, the mind, and the social context. Next, I will
 233 briefly discuss both observations.

234 According to Heelas et al. (2005), “holistic spiritualities” are the clearest exponent of
 235 the changes in the Western religious field and indeed appear as a new dominant form of
 236 religion in contemporary Western societies. The term “holistic spiritualities” refers to a
 237 broad range of beliefs and practices that are oriented towards “the attainment of
 238 wholeness, health and well-being of body, mind and spirit” (Harris 2013: 531). A
 239 burgeoning body of literature describes and examines this phenomenon from the
 240 perspective of the sociology of religion (Fedele and Knibbe 2013; Dawson 2011). This
 241 literature emphasizes the experiential and emotional dimension of “holistic spiritual-
 242 ities” (Cornejo 2012) along with their affinity with the process of the privatization of
 243 religion (Luckmann 1967, 1990). “Holistic spiritualities” are conceived as a
 244 characteristically religious form of the late-modern consumer society that has a strong
 245 “individualistic emphasis upon the self as the ultimate arbiter of religious authority and
 246 the primary agent of spiritual transformation” (Dawson 2011: 310f.). Woodhead argues
 247 that the growth of holistic spirituality since the 1960s should be perceived “as the
 248 sacralisation of the wider cultural turn” (Woodhead 2007: 116). Likewise, from
 249 Luckmann’s perspective, the growth of holistic spiritualities goes hand in hand with the
 250 increasing relevance of themes such as “self-realization, personal autonomy and self-
 251 expression” (1990: 138) and is based upon diminishing forms of transcendence. The so-
 252 called holistic milieu includes a wide range of practices, therapies, and beliefs, including
 253 Reiki, yoga, meditation, astrology, channeling, contemporary shamanism, and many
 254 others. There are considerable differences between all these practices, activities, and
 255 therapies, but there is also a “family air” (Wittgenstein) that allows us to analyze them as
 256 belonging to the same meaningful universe.

257 However, one might object that yoga does not constitute a religion per se or a
 258 spiritual practice, nor does its performance automatically imply the experience of
 259 transcendence. Thus, my starting point is to take yoga as a *possible* vehicle for
 260 experiencing transcendence which, in some circumstances, may—or may not—



261 work as a gateway to a holistic spiritual imaginary. Therefore, my analysis focuses
 262 on the “reception” side of yoga classes instead of the transmission side. The vague
 263 and amorphous institutional form of holistic spirituality, along with its attribution of
 264 authority to the inner self, also justifies the relevance of focusing on the subjects’
 265 experiences. That is to say, there is a need to focus on the individual understanding,
 266 appropriation, disposition, and use of yoga practice in order to avoid its over-
 267 interpretation in religious/spiritual terms. In a similar vein, in his research on
 268 modern postural yoga, Klas Nevrin argues against simplistic generalizations about
 269 the nature and meanings of yoga by making a plea to not restrict the understanding
 270 of modern yoga in Western societies to a health-centered individualistic practice. In
 271 keeping with this, Nevrin argues for the need to “look more closely at the relatively
 272 private reflections involved within these practices, which in turn also requires a
 273 more complex view of how the body is involved within these practices, and then
 274 also how all this relates to so-called ‘spiritual’ experiences and practices of
 275 sacralization” (2007: 3).

276 The need to capture and elucidate the role of the body and of embodied
 277 experiences in constructing social realities in yoga becomes a crucial argument in
 278 privileging a socio-phenomenological exploration over other approaches. From this
 279 perspective, the body is not just treated as “our vehicle for perceiving and
 280 interpreting our world” (McGuire 1990: 284) but also a vehicle for the making of
 281 our world. We ‘co-produce’ the world that we inhabit (Berger and Luckmann 1966),
 282 and this is not merely an intellectual task. The corporeal dimension of our selves is
 283 not detachable from the rest and phenomenological approaches are deeply aware of
 284 this (Merleau-Ponty 1962). In this manner:

285 (...) the reassessment of the body as a philosophical problem sui generis
 286 indeed a major achievement of phenomenology. Whereas the body has been
 287 denounced for being a marginal condition or even a confinement for the
 288 subject’s individuation in the metaphysical tradition, phenomenology retrieved
 289 it as a constitutive condition of subjectivity and experience. (Staudigl 2007:238)

290 As I will show later on, Alfred Schutz’ concept of “finite province of meaning”
 291 is useful when accounting for the role of physical work in engendering transcendent
 292 experiences in prisoners. Schutz draws on William James’s theory of sub-universes
 293 of meaning to develop his concept of “finite provinces of meaning”. The central
 294 idea is to acknowledge that as human beings we spend most of our time living in the
 295 ordinary reality of everyday life. This world of everyday life requires, in Bergsonian
 296 terms, a certain “*attention à la vie*” and a pragmatic approach. As Natanson
 297 proposes, “the social world is primarily the world of everyday life as lived and
 298 appreciated and interpreted by common-sense men carrying on the cognitive and
 299 emotive traffic of daily life” (1970: 102). Sometimes, however, the continuity of
 300 everyday life is interrupted and the subject enters a new and different sphere of
 301 reality. Finite provinces of meaning can be identified as a certain set of experiences
 302 with their own cognitive style, experiential consistency, and a particular tension of
 303 consciousness. The concept of “finite province of meaning” can help to understand
 304 the experiences of inmates practicing yoga, and the spiritual meaning that the
 305 practice acquires in the context of prison.

306 Yet, in order to avoid the essentialization of transcendent experiences, there is
 307 also a need to comprehend how actors discursively articulate these experiences and
 308 reconstruct them in a meaningful way. Following Tavory and Winchester (2012: 3),
 309 I argue that it is indispensable to understand how individuals socially anchor and
 310 intersubjectively (re)create these experiences in discursive practices. Thus, it is
 311 important to understand how the concepts and ideas learned in the yoga class are
 312 incorporated into one's "stock of knowledge," and gradually become taken for
 313 granted. The concept of "stock of knowledge" helps to understand how the social
 314 production of knowledge is articulated with everyone's set of typifications, and used
 315 to interpret the past and the present (and, even, anticipate the future). Therefore I
 316 will further show that combining Schutz's concepts of "finite provinces of
 317 meaning" and the "stock of knowledge" can help us to grasp both the embodied and
 318 the discursive dimensions of yoga in their concrete articulation and constitutive
 319 interplay.

320 Main Findings

321 *Yoga, the Body, and the Finite Provinces of Meaning*

322 "Every total institution can be seen as a kind of dead sea in which little islands
 323 of vivid encapturing activity appear. Such activity can help the individual
 324 withstand the psychological stress usually engendered by assaults upon the
 325 self" (Goffman 1961: 68)

326 Miguel⁷ is a 36-year-old Colombian man and advanced yoga practitioner. He has
 327 already spent more than 15 months in confinement. He is waiting for his trial. For
 328 bureaucratic reasons, his trial has been postponed three times, but he does not lose
 329 hope of being released without any sentence soon. He was the first to talk to me after
 330 I introduced myself in the first day of the intensive course in the remand prison. He
 331 asked me about my work and advised me not to sit at the back with a notebook. He
 332 invited me to put my mat next to his mat and to follow the class from there. "If you
 333 sit at the back," he said, "you'll be taken for one of them" (i.e. the prisons' social
 334 educators). From this day on, we almost always sat together in the class and had
 335 friendly conversations at the beginning and the end of the lesson. He wishes to
 336 become a writer and, from time to time, he brought me copies of his writings. We
 337 often talked about my research, and I frequently explained my impressions and
 338 doubts to him. Miguel also takes art classes and sport lessons in prison. Our
 339 conversations often concerned the particularities of yoga and the similarities/
 340 differences with other activities. From his point of view, yoga has similar effects to
 341 smoking marijuana and also some parallels with a religious ritual but he also thinks
 342 that it has some resemblance with bodybuilding. However, what he values the most
 343 is that the practice of yoga has the capacity "to make you feel that you are
 344 somewhere other than prison for a while".

7FL01 ⁷ All the personal names used in this article are pseudonyms.



345 When the inmates participating in the courses were asked in the interviews and in
 346 the surveys about what they value most about doing yoga, the majority referred to
 347 the possibility of transcending their constrained here-and-now. Indeed, the leap into
 348 a new reality is described in terms of “freedom”. In one of the surveys, David wrote
 349 that yoga and meditation enabled him to forget that he was in prison while Joan
 350 observed that yoga enabled him to “disconnect” from his immediate surroundings
 351 and bring him into a different reality. One day, after the yoga class, the art teacher
 352 asked the inmates to draw their feelings when doing yoga. One of the inmates
 353 painted himself with wings and wrote: “I represent myself with wings because I felt
 354 that I was not here during the class, it was like being in another dimension, I felt like
 355 I was a plane, seeing everything from the sky, but without the plane” (Frederico,
 356 remand center).

357 Several attempts have been made to understand the interaction between the
 358 physical exercises, the feeling of well-being and the spiritual experience of
 359 transcendence (Mold 2006; Winchester 2008; Pagis 2010; Kapsali 2012). Marcel
 360 Mauss (1973) was among the first scholars to note the close link between mystical
 361 states and body techniques such as yoga. He highlighted the relevance of paying
 362 attention to the “moral, magical and ritual effectiveness” of these body techniques
 363 (1973: 74). The work of the cultural anthropologist Benjamin Richard Smith is one of
 364 the most accurate in this regard. Taking a phenomenological approach, Smith shows
 365 the relevance of dealing with “spiritual, as well as bodily and mental aspects of
 366 practitioners’ experiences, and work[ing] towards a description of aspects of practice
 367 and experience that, from the perspective of many Western practitioners, seem
 368 indescribable” (2007: 31). Smith, like the Swedish philosopher Klas Nevrin adopts
 369 a critical stance against privileging “psychologized models of human being” (Nevrin
 370 2008) and advocates giving a more central role to the body and to the modes of
 371 experiencing the physical work involved in yoga. Drawing on authors such as
 372 Merleau-Ponty, Leder (1990), and Csordas (2002), Smith argues that the key element
 373 that explains the feeling of having a “spiritual” moment is the experience of
 374 *encountering oneself*. Smith contends that “beyond the development of physical
 375 ability to execute difficult poses, and the calmness of mind required to undertake the
 376 practice fully, this ‘encounter’ with the embodied self brings about moments within
 377 *asana* practice which practitioners identify as ‘spiritual’” (2007: 40). It is in these
 378 moments that, according to Smith but also my own observations, one has the feeling of
 379 “really doing yoga” (Baranay 2004: 205, quoted by Smith 2007: 40). The aim to
 380 sociologically capture and explain the experience of “really doing yoga”—which
 381 practitioners usually consider as a “spiritual experience”—is what Smith takes as the
 382 *explanandum* of his research. I also consider these feelings of experiencing
 383 transcendence to constitute the singularity of yoga. As I have already stated, these
 384 “acts of transcendence” are the most appreciated component of practicing yoga in
 385 prison.⁸

8FL01 ⁸ This is reflected in the surveys conducted by the authors to course participants’ in the last week of the
 8FL02 courses. They described it in terms of “inner peace,” “connectedness,” “flying,” “mental and spiritual
 8FL03 well-being,” etc.

386 However, notwithstanding its usefulness, I consider Smith's notion of "self-
 387 encounter" as insufficient to fully capture the complexities involved in the practice of
 388 yoga. I argue that Schutz's notion of "finite provinces of meaning" is better suited to
 389 account for the spiritual dimension of yoga and to explain its interrelatedness with the
 390 physical, psychological but also social dimensions of the practice. Yoga is viewed by
 391 inmates as pushing the subject out of ordinary reality into a specific reality, into a
 392 "finite province of meaning". In this regard, it is exactly the breaking with the
 393 "paramount reality" that permits Miguel to say that the practice of yoga bears
 394 similarities to smoking marijuana. Thus viewed, yoga becomes a way of escaping
 395 from the ordinary life of the prison and figures as an entrance into a new reality.

396 As Schutz pointed out, the crossing to another "finite province of meaning"
 397 implies the experience of a "shock" that carries the subject from one reality to
 398 another. Schutz distinguishes between three different modalities for crossing
 399 borders, and one of these is the shock-like transfer that occurs "while changing the
 400 mode of experience, such as falling asleep, going to the bank, opening a book or
 401 starting a word processor" (Sebald 2011: 345). Yoga belongs to this category and
 402 the physical performance of *asanas* and the breathing exercises are the primary
 403 activators for this shift. As inmates express it, the workout routines allow one to
 404 place the mind in a "state of fluidity". At some point, this fluidity is experienced as
 405 a "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi 2000; Bloch 2000) or as an experience of "connection
 406 with oneself" (Smith 2007)—an experience in which the perception of time and
 407 space is modified. According to Ricard, a Catalan-born economist confined in the
 408 remand prison, yoga is practically achieved as a "different reality" through the
 409 combination of intense exercises and meditation practices. In this vein, he stated:

410 Yoga provokes a kind of explosion in your body in a very short time. The
 411 physical exercises are very intense, very difficult and quite hard. After this,
 412 your body becomes relaxed and you can start to meditate (...) I wonder if I
 413 could get the same feelings by running for twenty minutes and then
 414 meditating. I guess not. Yoga also involves stretching, focusing, breathing
 415 exercises (...) All this is necessary to be able to meditate and to silence your
 416 mind, and this is what makes yoga special.

417 In becoming able to experience what is described by inmates as "connectedness,"
 418 "self-awareness," or "flow," the feeling of release from the constraints of the
 419 paramount reality is engendered. This involves a feeling of wellbeing that, interpreted
 420 in mystical-philosophical terms, can be read as offering spiritual comfort. Not all
 421 inmates at all times are able to experience this kind of feeling of gaining access to a
 422 different level of reality; but, according to them, there are moments that are especially
 423 conducive to this, e.g., after physical exertion, when the body is calm and repetitive
 424 exercises such as singing mantras or meditation are being performed.

425 The shift to a "finite province of meaning" is not only induced by the physical
 426 effort nor can it be identified as just an embodied and isolated individual inner
 427 experience. On the contrary, we have to consider it as a collective and relational
 428 phenomenon. Participant observation has revealed that the switch to another reality
 429 is fostered by the role of the co-participants. The act of moving beyond the
 430 paramount reality is eased when the yoga class becomes a *collective* experience.



431 Drawing on Spickard (1991) and Neitz and Spickard (1990), we can apply Schutz's
 432 distinction between "polythetic" and "monothetic" experiences in order to shed
 433 light on the social and intersubjective character of transcendence experiences. The
 434 notion of polytheticity refers to the meaningful living through of an experience in
 435 the inner time from the beginning to the end. Yoga, like music or poetry, is a
 436 polythetic experience that requires sequential experiencing, one *asana* after another,
 437 and from the beginning until the end of the class in order to fully accommodate its
 438 significance. Indeed, this concept gains special relevance in the case of Kundalini
 439 yoga, since in this yoga tradition the specific sequence of poses in the class (the
 440 *kriya*)⁹ is not incidental but is usually defined to serve a specific purpose (e.g., the
 441 Kriya for elevation or the Subagh Kriya for prosperity).

442 Finally, how is yoga's polythetic character related to its collective dimension?
 443 Spickard develops this very clearly when noting that "experiences are patterns of
 444 inner time; like all patterns in inner time, they can be shared. People experience time
 445 together in many religious settings, but especially in rituals" (1991: 197). From this
 446 perspective, the yoga class can be considered as a pattern of inner time that is
 447 orchestrated by the yoga instructor and reproduced and shared by the participants.
 448 Therefore, as Spickard continues:

449 (...) rather than focusing on rituals' cognitive contents—their theologies and
 450 symbols—a Schutzian approach could focus on the ebb and flow of their
 451 activity. Rituals, in this view, help people "tune-in" to one another, to share an
 452 inner state of consciousness. Seen in this light, the experiences people have in
 453 religious settings are profoundly social—and in a quite basic way. (1991: 197)

454 To some extent, if Smith describes the yoga practice as a mechanism to "tune in"
 455 *to oneself* through the body, Spickard underlines the process of tuning in *to others*
 456 through the experience of a shared inner time (*durée*). The observation of the class
 457 enables us to highlight the importance of the group in favoring and sustaining the
 458 shift to another reality.

459 Likewise, the empirical material from the interviews reveals the importance of
 460 what Collins (2004) calls the "collective energy," which is considered as decisive
 461 for experiencing transcendence. Therefore, despite the fact that most of the
 462 advanced yoga students state that they also practice when alone in their cells, they
 463 also attest that it is in class that they are closer to "really doing yoga".¹⁰ In this
 464 regard, it is interesting to note that while Knoblauch is absolutely right in
 465 emphasizing that currently the most popular forms of experiencing transcendence

9FL01 ⁹ As Spickard notes, "the meaning of a written passage, however, can be grasped all at once—
 9FL02 monothetically to use Husserl's term. One understands a philosophical conclusion without having
 9FL03 continually to recreate its proof. Unlike conceptual thought, however, art is polythetic: it takes as much
 9FL04 time to reconstitute the 'meaning' of a piece of music as it did the first time one experienced it" (1991:
 9FL05 197).

10FL01 ¹⁰ In a similar fashion, McGuire observes, "if we combine Schutz's insights about the complex way
 10FL02 people can transcend everyday boundaries between self and other with Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the
 10FL03 immediate connection between a person's body and consciousness, we get clues about how religious
 10FL04 experience can be a deeply subjective yet shared experience" (2008: 113).

466 “are not to be had vicariously (not even in many Catholic charismatic movements)
467 through the mediation of religious virtuosi [...] [but rather that] each person is
468 expected to have, even to have had, such an experience” (2008: 143), it appears also
469 crucial to emphasize that the co-experience of others eases the shift to another
470 (transcendent) reality.

471 In the case we are dealing with, the entrance to a “finite province of meaning” is not a
472 momentary experience but a longer period characterized by a specific tension of
473 consciousness, including a definite tone of feeling, and with the beginning and the end
474 clearly demarcated. In our case, the start and end of the class mark the temporal
475 boundaries of the experience. Nonetheless the shift to another “reality” does not mean
476 entering a totally uniform, stable and homogeneous reality, but rather a sphere wherein
477 individuals experience varying degrees of tension punctuated by peak moments.

478 Finally, it is important to acknowledge that there are other factors that play a role
479 in facilitating the transition towards a “finite province of meaning”. The fieldwork
480 has revealed that there are three specific contextual elements that significantly
481 contribute towards strengthening the inmates’ capacity to transgress the boundary
482 between the “ordinary” and the “extraordinary” reality, which are the *scenography*,
483 the *affective regime*, and the *order of sociality*.

484 Firstly, the *scenography* of the class plays a significant role in facilitating the
485 shift towards another province of meaning. Catalan prisons are crowded, dirty, and
486 noisy settings where social relations are mainly founded on indifference, conflict,
487 and rigidity. The yoga class reverses the institution’s symbolic order by converting
488 the class into a “haven of peace and tranquility,” as one inmate put it. In this
489 context, the use of music—live or recorded—together with the scent of incense
490 sticks and the soft lighting of the room helps to build an “extraordinary”
491 atmosphere. As Neitz and Spickard observed, “religious rituals manipulate sensory
492 stimuli to focus their participants’ concentration” (1990: 22). This is exactly what
493 happens in the case of yoga classes, too. Secondly, the dominant *affective regime* of
494 the institution is challenged in the class. This is illustrated by a yoga volunteer being
495 interviewed after class: “Today’s class was extremely beautiful. I’ve met them all,
496 holding their hands and making a circle. I think it is difficult to do this in a prison.
497 They were all smiling and quite excited”. Holding hands, hugging or lying with
498 one’s eyes closed are extremely rare practices in the prison context and they are far
499 from what is considered as normal in this setting. Likewise, the penitentiary *order of*
500 *sociality* is also a contested terrain in the class. After a two-month course, one of the
501 inmates expressed that what he liked the most was “the feeling of being away from
502 everything that relates me with my criminal status and feeling valued as a human
503 being by the people who manage everything related to yoga”. To some extent, the
504 yoga class becomes what Crewe et al. have termed an “emotional zone” that
505 challenges the “normal”, i.e., “unwaveringly sterile, unfailingly aggressive or
506 emotionally undifferentiated” prison environment (2013: 2).

507 *Spiritual Stock of Knowledge, Biographical Relevancies, and Meanings*

508 “Yoga connects me with the divinity. Years ago I smoked marihuana, I have
509 also taken drugs (...) and with yoga I have felt similar sensations. However,
510 this is not a drug, this is not false, this is not hypocritical, and this is not



511 happening because someone else is giving me drugs. This doesn't come from
 512 outside. This comes from inside of me, it comes from my own serenity, and I
 513 feel happy with myself (...) I feel happy, and I am able to understand my
 514 context, I see how things really are (...) and I say to myself: Uauh, I feel so
 515 good!". (Miguel, remand center)

516 The practice of yoga in prison works as a catalyst for experiencing transcendence
 517 and for moving oneself beyond everydayness. However,

518 [...] the kinds of transcendence with which modern consciousness is
 519 concerned or the ways in which it is concerned with them—or both—differ
 520 conspicuously from the kinds of transcendence with which religions in
 521 traditional societies were concerned, as well as from the way in which this
 522 concern was translated socially into belief, dogma, ritual, and institution.
 523 (Luckmann 1990: 127)

524 Given this, it seems evident that yoga neither constitutes in and of itself a
 525 religion, nor are the implications of becoming a yoga practitioner equivalent to
 526 being a member of a "traditional" religion in terms of beliefs or institutional
 527 membership. Nevertheless, this does not imply that these modern forms of
 528 transcendence are free-floating phenomena completely detached from institutional
 529 affiliations, structures of belief, or expressions of theodicy. Physical yoga exercises
 530 do not exist alone but are surrounded by words, metaphors, stories, and narratives.
 531 Our fieldwork observations have shown that every class starts with a brief
 532 explanation of the purpose of the day's lesson. Each new *asana* is explained,
 533 contextualized, and commented upon. Indeed, yoga teachers usually make general
 534 comments aiming to encourage inmates to hold difficult poses or guide the final
 535 relaxation. Likewise, the meaning of mantras is explained and, sometimes, short
 536 stories are told to account for the meaning of some difficult concept. The teacher
 537 even, in some cases, devotes several minutes to providing a reflexive philosophical-
 538 spiritual comment on the nature of life.

539 From class to class and from word to word, a complex system of meaning is
 540 transferred to inmates, who, thus, become gradually familiar with it. Therefore,
 541 although there is no formal and explicit transmission of a belief-system, a tacit
 542 socialization in a specific universe of meaning is evidenced. The invisibility of this
 543 socialization process does not render it irrelevant—quite the contrary. Through the
 544 lessons, concepts like *energy*, *karma*, or *chakra* become familiar to inmates without
 545 any suspicion of brainwashing or indoctrination being aroused. These notions are
 546 approached with normalcy and are gradually taken for granted by everyone involved
 547 (Goffman 1971). Yet, this appearance of normalcy is precarious and has clear
 548 boundaries that become visible when being transgressed. The following vignettes
 549 are illustrative of this: in one of the intensive yoga courses one of the invited
 550 professors extended his talk for more than 20 min giving advices to inmates on how
 551 to face the pains of imprisonment and give meaning to their future. The tone was
 552 quite normative. During the talk, some of the inmates started to whisper among
 553 themselves, and others looked distracted. After the class, many inmates, but also
 554 social educators, expressed discomfort about what they considered and labeled as an

555 ‘inappropriate religious sermon’. In another case, a yoga volunteer decided to
 556 distribute a fragment of the Bhagavad Gita to the participants of the course. As I was
 557 there, one inmate, who declares himself a Muslim, asked me what the text was
 558 really about. I felt a bit uncomfortable but I explained to him it this was a traditional
 559 Hindu text. Then, he insisted by saying: “But is this a religious text?” The social
 560 educator heard the question and also joined the conversation. After a short silence,
 561 the only thing that came to my mind to say was: “I guess you can give it back to
 562 Maia [*the yoga teacher*] if you want”. The differences between spirituality, religion,
 563 and philosophy, and the respective labels, are understood and lived in a different
 564 manner by the actors in the field.¹¹

565 It is extremely difficult to develop a coherent and ordered exposition of the
 566 knowledge disseminated in the lessons since it is transmitted in bits and pieces and in a
 567 highly fragmented manner. In addition, every yoga teacher works with a slightly
 568 different approach since each has his/her own formative journey in yoga but also in
 569 other holistic domains such as Reiki, the Akashic Records, or Vipassana meditation, to
 570 name just a few. However, there are some points in common that are generally shared
 571 by everyone. The most common is the idea that every person has an inner authentic
 572 truth that constitutes one’s genuine selfhood. This notion is associated with the
 573 conviction that this “authentic self” has been (and is being) constrained, hidden, and
 574 even denigrated in the course of our lives. Fear, anxiety, or other “bad” feelings—
 575 generated by our social and personal circumstances or even by factors located beyond
 576 this world’s reach—have blocked the access to our “inner self” and have inhibited our
 577 capacity to live in harmony with it. There are different techniques to reach this “inner
 578 self”¹² and release its potential, and yoga is considered to be one of those. Being “in
 579 contact” and connected with your “inner self” is considered to be of great importance
 580 since authentic wisdom is said to exist in the realm of the inner world. This conviction
 581 is harmonious with the so-called “subjective turn” widely explored by Taylor (1991),
 582 which has strong implications for the revised concept of the self and bears
 583 consequences for the ways to face life. In this sense, “I am called upon to live my
 584 life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else’s. But this gives a new importance
 585 to being true to myself. If I am not, I miss the point of my life, I miss what being human
 586 is for me” (Taylor 1991: 29). Observations in class revealed the centrality of these
 587 views in the teachers’ speeches. Here, ideas concerning the self are underpinned by
 588 “Eastern” notions such as *dharma*, *karma*, or *reincarnation*, and with more
 589 contemporary concepts such as *holism*, *synchronicity*, or the *law of attraction*. All
 590 these notions construct a spiritual imaginary that offers inmates a new repertoire of
 591 knowledge, which is incorporated into their individual “stock of knowledge” and
 592 helps to give meaning to their extraordinary situations.

593 Sociological literature initially identified “holistic spiritualities” as belonging to
 594 the private sphere and to be weakly institutionalized. This approach was widely
 595 influenced by Bellah’s (1985) idea of *sheilaism*, which tends to hide the public,

11FL01 ¹¹ We have developed this aspect in more detail in Griera and Clot-Garrell (2015a, b).

12FL01 ¹² To some extent, it is said that in order to find harmony, balance, and peace it is necessary to become
 2FL02 connected to the “all-pervading ‘Force’ or ‘Energy’ which is seen to be sacred and which is not believed
 12FL03 to be separate from the individual” (Rose 1998: 13).



596 intersubjectively-shared and institutionalized dimension of new spiritualities. In
 597 contradistinction to this position, I argue that the relevance of yoga in prison lies
 598 precisely in the fact that it is not only a body technique that provides inmates with
 599 private ways of experiencing transcendence but that it also offers a gateway to a
 600 specific universe of meaning that is gradually gaining public acceptance. The
 601 interviews conducted have shown that the practice of yoga is not an isolated activity
 602 but has to be situated in a wider frame and connected with a spiritual stock of
 603 knowledge. This “stock of knowledge” conforms a rather coherent set of beliefs
 604 that, as Aupers and Houtman pointed out, “is in fact unambiguously individualistic
 605 and less privatized than most sociologists hold it to be” (2010: 158).

606 Many of the most experienced yoga inmates describe the class as the starting
 607 point of a “spiritual journey” in which books are crucially important. One of the
 608 inmates, Carlos, described it very memorably by observing that “something very
 609 magical has happened to me since I started the yoga class: what I’m reading in
 610 books harmonizes with what I’m studying in the yoga class and with what I’m
 611 feeling at this precise moment. So, I guess that I am awakening (...).” Paulo Coelho,
 612 Osho, Dyer, and Eckhart Tolle are some of the most popular spiritual authors among
 613 yoga students, and their books are also widely read within the prison walls. Prison
 614 libraries hold a significant number of this kind of books and inmates also frequently
 615 exchange them or ask their families to buy them for them. Books not only provide a
 616 discursive repertoire that helps to better narrate the yoga practice but also offer new
 617 “inspiring” practices for the inmates’ ‘spiritual journeys’. This is evidenced by an
 618 inmate who proposed and guided a ritual of love described by Coelho in a therapy
 619 group or by another who learned new yoga *asanas* and meditation techniques in a
 620 book from the prison library. All this knowledge is not absorbed in isolation but
 621 shared with other yoga students and discussed at the beginning and end of the
 622 lessons in small groups,¹³ within a process of mutual intersubjective validation of
 623 recently acquired notions and conceptions (Hervieu-Léger 2001; Clot-Garrell 2011).
 624 As Chandler argues, “life spirituality shares a sufficiently common spiritual-
 625 philosophy, or lingua franca, that makes it possible for life spiritual seekers to
 626 communicate and interact in mutually agreeable ways” (2010: 84).

627 At this point, it appears important to note that the yoga class is the tip of the
 628 iceberg or merely the starting point of the inmates’ process of familiarization with a
 629 complex spiritual “stock of knowledge”. Our interviews suggest that the plausibility
 630 of a spiritual “stock of knowledge” is grounded not only in yoga classes and books,
 631 but is also anchored in the everyday therapeutic context of the prison. Talk about
 632 energy, self-realization, or holism is not an exclusive feature of the yoga class but
 633 prevails in the therapeutic language of rehabilitation activities or art programs, too.
 634 Although holistic spirituality is not addressed directly in these contexts, it is
 635 indirectly infused in the vocabulary and in some therapeutic practices. The
 636 increasing existence and plausibility of such a spiritual “stock of knowledge” in the
 637 penitentiary setting is open to a twofold explanation.

13FL01 ¹³ Through our research the crucial role of intersubjectivity in the acquisition of new knowledge and the
 13FL02 construction of new life meanings becomes evident, a fact that raises more arguments against practices
 13FL03 such as solitary confinement (Guenther 2013).

638 Firstly, many educators, psychologists and social workers interviewed appear
 639 familiar with holistic spirituality, some of them being expert practitioners of Reiki,
 640 mindfulness, etc. Thus, they are able to speak the same language as yoga students
 641 and are also members of the scattered community of “New Agers” (Chandler 2010).
 642 We do not have precise data concerning the proportion of the staff involved with the
 643 holistic imaginary, but according to our interviews it is not a tiny minority but a
 644 growing proportion of the therapeutic staff. The personal inclination of educators,
 645 social workers, and psychologists toward such imaginaries contributes to the greater
 646 sway of this “stock of knowledge” since they also employ “spiritual resources” in
 647 their daily work.¹⁴ Amelia, a committed social educator, gave us this example:

648 With regard to the kidnapping of hundreds of schoolgirls in Nigeria we
 649 decided to make a ball of energy instead of praying. So we made the ball of
 650 energy and sent it to the little girls in Nigeria. We formed a circle, made the
 651 energy ball and sent it to Nigeria. Is this Reiki? I guess it is but it will not be
 652 called this here nor will the board be told.

653 In the same vein, Ismael—a yoga student who is also in detox therapy—reported
 654 that the psychologist who runs the group therapy sessions also teaches them some
 655 yoga and Pranayama exercises. These cases show that the semantics of the holistic
 656 universe are silently and gradually gaining ground in the prison setting.

657 Secondly, there is also a more structural explanation for the growing plausibility
 658 of the holistic universe in prison, i.e., the existence of an elective affinity between
 659 the therapeutic *ethos* and the holistic spirituality. As Sherry and Kozinets point out,
 660 “with the spread of the ‘culture of authenticity,’ the rise of ‘expressive
 661 individualism,’ and the flourishing of the therapeutic ethos—each coinciding with,
 662 if not originating in, the consumption ethic of late capitalism—a ‘reflexive
 663 spirituality’ of ‘lived religion’ has attracted legions of converts in the past few
 664 decades” (2007: 120). There are indeed strong connections between the “triumph
 665 of the therapeutic” (Rieff 1966) and the growth of holistic spiritualities in contem-
 666 porary societies. We can also refer to a sort of continuity and similarity between the
 667 conceptualization of the idea of the subject in both worlds, as well as in the
 668 language used to make sense of “disrupted” biographies. The rise of the therapeutic
 669 *ethos* is also highly visible in penitentiary settings, where it contributes to
 670 strengthening the plausibility of the holistic universe. To some extent, as Illouz
 671 propounds, “the therapeutic discourse has crossed and blurred the compartmental-
 672 ized spheres of modernity and has come to constitute one of the major codes with
 673 which to express, shape, and guide selfhood” (2008: 6). This affinity between the
 674 therapeutic *ethos* and holistic spiritualities becomes especially clear in the context
 675 of contemporary penitentiary institutions where prisoners are encouraged to take
 676 responsibility for their own self-improvement and ‘good order’ (Bosworth et al.
 677 2005). Drawing on Foucault et al. (1988), yoga can be conceived as a “technology

14FL01 ¹⁴ Indeed, as stated in Griera and Clot-Garrell (2015b) the role of the prison staff is crucial in promoting
 14FL02 and guaranteeing the success of yoga and holistic activities in prison. The success of these types of
 14FL03 activities in the current penitentiary institutional context would not be possible without a strong personal
 14FL04 interest in making it succeed.



678 of the self” that instills inmates with the ideal of self-improvement, thus
679 internalizing the disciplinary regime of the institution.

680 *The practice of yoga in prison: a doorway to a spiritually shaped journey of self-*
681 *improvement*

682 “Well, I think that when people are ready for change, to take that step, to look
683 for something else, yoga helps because yoga makes you see that there is
684 something more. At least, this is what happened to me. Yoga helps you to look
685 within you and to seek to improve yourself”. (Ander, remand center)

686 The acquisition of new spiritual concepts, ideas, and beliefs is not inconsequen-
687 tial or trivial but rather has an impact on inmates’ everyday lives. This impact can
688 be assessed principally on three different levels: in their everyday coping with life in
689 prison, in their relations with others and in their use of new categories of
690 biographical articulation. First, the acquisition of this new stock of knowledge has
691 an impact on the conduct of inmates in prison, which is apparent in the way they
692 handle daily activities such as waiting in line or doing their work. In this regard,
693 Miguel said that since he started this spiritual journey, when “I have to wash the
694 elderly [*he works in the prison nursing home*], I do it with love, with all my heart. If
695 I do it in this way, I feel this lovely energy”. In a similar fashion, Marco stressed
696 that “while I’m cutting the lettuce I do breathing exercises and I get to enjoy it”. On
697 a more complex level, Ismael said: “Here, if you guide yourself by your animal
698 instincts you never get out because you fight, you are in a bad mood (...) I decided
699 to stop all of that. Why? Because yoga changed my way of being, my way of
700 thinking; one thinks in another way”.

701 Secondly, the holistic universe not only gives practical resources to cope with
702 unpleasant jail experiences, but it also offers guidance in building a code of
703 interpersonal conduct. Along these lines, Antonio argued that

704 (...) there was a confusion inside me. I couldn’t understand why people hurt
705 each other or why some people are good and others bad, and then I understood
706 that we hurt each other because of ignorance [...] and all of these answers
707 came to me thanks to meditation, yoga [...] because before this there was
708 confusion within me and I was very aggressive.

709 Most yoga students report that their personal relations have improved since they
710 have taken part in the class. In some cases, this is attributed to the fact that they are
711 ‘more relaxed’; in others, such as Antonio, a new ethics of conduct along with a
712 pseudo-philosophy of action is seen as the cause.

713 Thirdly, as mentioned in the previous section, there are different degrees
714 of acquisition or immersion into this spiritual universe. These also have
715 consequences in the way this knowledge repertoire is used to interpret one’s life
716 situation and biography. The inmates most deeply committed to this spiritual world
717 show a process of alternation (Berger and Luckmann 1966) that favors the use of
718 new categories to understand their own biographical path. One common pattern
719 concerns the activation of a “self-reflection” process that enables one to reflect their
720 past, present, and future. In Miguel’s terms: “This is the moment when everything
721 ceases to be mechanical and you ask yourself: Why am I doing what I am doing?”

722 Yoga and the related spiritual “stock of knowledge” help to provide answers to this
 723 question and scripts for understanding the past and facing the future. As Schutz
 724 argues, “at times, we revise our former schemes of knowledge when special
 725 motivations emerge, such as the irruption of a ‘strange’ experience not subsumable
 726 under the stock of knowledge at hand or inconsistent with it” (1973: 228).
 727 Imprisonment indeed is a deeply problematic situation that can cause a revision of
 728 our former beliefs and a search for new categories of biographical articulation. The
 729 holistic spiritual imaginary is a resource that can help inmates “[...] to transform
 730 those imposed relevancies, which prevent [them] from achieving projected aims,
 731 into disposable volitional ones” (Staudigl 2007: 243). Marco’s words are illustrative
 732 of this: “It sounds a bit cruel but sometimes we need to get to places like this [*the*
 733 *prison*] to land, to start to learn”. Similarly, another inmate stated: “It took me
 734 getting here before I could start to understand that I had a ‘mechanical’ life, that I
 735 didn’t know where I was going”. Füredi similarly puts forward the idea that
 736 therapeutic culture celebrates “personal troubles and dysfunctions” as milestones
 737 toward a spiritual awakening (2004: 43). Here, the “spiritual stock of knowledge”
 738 creates the possibility for inmates to reinterpret their painful situation as part of a
 739 spiritual path that can lead to spiritual awakening.

740 Thus viewed, yoga can be conceived as a technique to foster “cognitive
 741 transformation” (Giordano et al. 2002) by favoring a refashioning of self-identity
 742 and “changes in the meaning and desirability of offending” (Farrall et al. 2011: 22).
 743 For some inmates the study of yoga has an even more direct and material appeal
 744 since it appears as a viable future employment option. *World Prem* offers inmates
 745 with more yoga experience the possibility to become instructors when released from
 746 jail.¹⁵ Mireia, a prisoner participating in the second yoga quarantine, is one of those
 747 who expressed her hopes of becoming a yoga teacher. When asked to write down
 748 why she decided to participate, she stated:

749 (...) *my main reason is to improve my quality of life*—in physical, emotional
 750 and spiritual terms. Yoga is an intelligent way of giving meaning to our lives
 751 that are too contaminated by the western way of thinking. Yoga enables me to
 752 gain mental balance. Yoga has already helped me to overcome hypertension.
 753 Yoga also helps me to control my emotions. Now more than ever I need that
 754 my emotions not to overwhelm me. I am going to be released very soon after
 755 11 years in jail!! But above all, I WANT YOGA—AND THE TEACHING
 756 OF YOGA—TO BECOME A WAY TO REDIRECT MY LIFE IN THE
 757 FUTURE [capital letters in the original].

758 A period of reflexivity—together with the “envisioning of an appealing and
 759 conventional replacement self” (Giordano et al. 2002: 999 quoted by Farrall et al.
 760 2011) and “the exposure to some opportunity to change” (Farrall et al. 2011: 224)—
 761 is almost always the first stage of a desistance process (Cusson and Pinsonneault
 762 1986). Our research did not cover an adequate time-span in order to assess whether

15FL01 ¹⁵ In this regard, the most shared petition among inmates after the second yoga quarantine in the prison
 15FL02 was to be able to get training for becoming yoga instructors while in prison. Inmates perceive it as a
 15FL03 suitable future employment option. World Prem volunteers positively received the petition, and started to
 15FL04 explore its feasibility.



763 yoga can become a real tool for fostering crime desistance, but some inmates
764 described it as such.

765 Conclusion

766 Yoga has become a very popular activity worldwide and its popularity has also
767 penetrated the penitentiary context. Yoga, along with meditation, has gained
768 presence in the penitentiary settings of many different countries like the US (Rucker
769 2005), Switzerland (Becci and Knobel 2014), Chile (Rabi Blondel 2011, 2012), the
770 UK (Bilderbeck et al. 2013), and many others. The introduction of yoga into the
771 penitentiary context has been legitimized by scientific research that underscores its
772 efficacy in lowering depression and anxiety among prisoners by emphasizing its
773 capacity to foster emotional self-control and self-esteem (Bowen et al. 2006;
774 Samuelson et al. 2007; Sumter et al. 2009, 2007; Harner et al. 2010, Bilderbeck
775 et al. 2013).

776 However, from the perspective of the sociology of religion, the analysis of
777 yoga raises questions concerning the definition of *religion* in contemporary society
778 and how to demarcate the boundaries between religion, spirituality, health
779 therapies, and sport. Knoblauch's (2003, 2008) emphasis on the centrality of
780 transcendence experiences in contemporary religious forms is particularly
781 pertinent for this examination. The research presented here has shown that the
782 vast majority of inmate yoga students identify "transcendence experiences" as the
783 most singular aspect of the practice of yoga. According to the inmates' narrations,
784 yoga is able to transport inmates to a "finite province of meaning" where reality
785 has a different taste, texture, and color. At first sight, however, there seems to be
786 no radical difference between what yoga and other physical exercises such as
787 dance or running offer. The distinction becomes apparent only once we analyze
788 the language used to describe these experiences and parse the discursive
789 dimension of this practice. This shows that a clear *emic* difference between yoga
790 and other sports exists for yoga students. One of the inmates explicitly addressed
791 this in an interview: "This is something different. When you do sport you can
792 stretch but here you see your own true self"; another inmate added that "this
793 gives meaning to your soul, it is a divine experience". Accordingly, I argue that
794 yoga is not only physical work but also, in some cases, a doorway to a "spiritual
795 stock of knowledge". While it provides inmates with a specific language to make
796 sense of the transcendence experiences in class, it also offers an entry into a more
797 expansive spiritual semantic framework. Indeed, physical movements and spiritual
798 accounts constitute one another in the practice of yoga, thus opening up a pathway
799 into a different reality; movement and spiritual discourse inform one another —
800 and it is precisely in this reflexivity that "transcendence experiences" are created
801 and yoga is made meaningful and important in the improvement-setting of the
802 prison.¹⁶

16FL01 ¹⁶ I owe this formulation to an anonymous reviewer whom I thank for the comment.

803 For some inmates the practice of yoga is the starting point of a “spiritual
 804 journey” into a holistic spirituality that can lead the subject to immerse him/herself
 805 to an alternation process (Berger and Luckmann 1966). In these cases, a
 806 transformation of the personal system of relevancies and categories of biographical
 807 articulation, as well as a process of changing habits, attitudes, and routines takes
 808 place. Thus, from these inmates’ perspective, yoga becomes something more akin to
 809 a religion—a religion considered as a symbolic universe (Berger and Luckmann
 810 1966), as an “objectivated meaning system that relates the experience of everyday
 811 life to a ‘transcendent’ layer of reality” (Luckmann 1967: 43)—than to a simple
 812 physical exercise. This observation also demonstrates that while it may be said that
 813 holistic spirituality does not have a formal institutional structure, it is far from being
 814 a totally private and individual form of religion. It is, rather, a socially forged,
 815 culturally grounded and intersubjectively sustained system of meaning that blurs the
 816 boundaries between the therapeutic, the spiritual, and the popular culture.
 817 Furthermore, it is also important to remember that there is not one single path
 818 toward this spiritual universe but multiple points of entry. However, yoga is
 819 particularly conducive to it in the context of prison. As Becci suggests “prison life
 820 affects the most basic aspects of the inmates’ selves: the control over their own
 821 body” (2012: 91). The conditions of detention bring one to experience the loss of
 822 the capacity to govern one’s body, while the ongoing practice of yoga offers the
 823 feeling of recovering control over one’s body and mind (Baarts and Pedersen 2009).
 824 Hence, the “absent body” (Leder 1990) becomes a “present body” again and the
 825 raising of an awareness of the physical sensations experienced is often connected to
 826 a spiritual universe co-constituted by teachers’ comments, participants’ conversa-
 827 tions, and books. Here we touch upon a process in which a correspondence is being
 828 generated between what the body feels and experiences, and the available linguistic
 829 resources that give meaning to the physical symptoms. The bodily sensations serve
 830 to authenticate the universe of meaning that is being acquired while this stock of
 831 knowledge is used to name and interpret what is being experienced in the class. Or,
 832 as Miguel expressed it: “Books give me the answers, yoga gives me the practice and
 833 the results are being felt in my body”.

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