



Expertise  
and insight  
for the future

Jemina Moilanen, Hanna Toivainen, Tiina Oinas

**“I Feel Better About My Body Now Than  
Before the Yoga Session.”**

**Case Study: Yin Yoga Sessions at  
a Social Services Organisation for Women**

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Instructors	Niina Manninen, Senior Lecturer, Social Services Satu Hakanen, Senior Lecturer, Social Services
<p>The aim of this Bachelor's Thesis was to examine how the clients of a social services organisation for women, Nicehearts, feel about Yin yoga sessions offered to them.</p> <p>The organisation needed new activities that would fit their objective of supporting the empowerment of women, and since yoga has been helpful in supporting a positive body image, which is an example of a female-specific issue, five Yin yoga sessions were offered. Yin yoga was chosen because it is a gentle form of yoga and suitable for diverse clientele. The study was conducted via a questionnaire, and 16 participants, in total, responded.</p> <p>Results show that all of the participants felt positive after the sessions. Half of the respondents found that the yoga sessions possibly had some impact on the way they view their body. Most of the participants felt that the yoga sessions were helpful in some way. Furthermore, the organisation expressed interest in offering yoga in the future.</p> <p>More research is needed in order to gain a deeper understanding of yoga's benefits as a method in social services when facilitating the empowerment of women.</p>	
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<p>Tämän opinnäytetyön tarkoituksena oli tutkia, miten sosiaalialan naisyhdistyksen, Nicehearts ry:n, asiakkaat kokivat heille tarjotut yin jooga -kerrat.</p> <p>Yhdistys kaipasi uudenlaista toimintaa, joka sopisi heidän voimaannuttavaan naistoimintaansa, ja koska joogasta on ollut apua positiivisen kehonkuvan tukemiseen, päätettiin järjestää viisi yin jooga -kerta. Yin jooga valittiin, koska se on lempeä joogatyyli, joka sopii hyvin erityyppisille asiakkaille. Tutkimus toteutettiin kyselylomakkeella, johon vastasi kaikkiaan 16 asiakasta.</p> <p>Tulosten mukaan kaikilla osallistujilla oli hyvä olo tunnin jälkeen. Puolet vastaajista koki, että joogalla saattoi olla vaikutusta siihen, mitä he kehostaan ajattelevat. Suurimman osan mielestä joogakerroista oli hyötyä. Työelämäkumppani ilmaisi olevansa kiinnostunut tarjoamaan joogaa jatkossa.</p> <p>Lisätutkimuksia joogan hyödyistä sosiaalialan metodina naisten voimaantumisen tukemisessa tarvitaan.</p>	
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## 1 Introduction

In this study, five Yin yoga sessions were offered in a social services organisation for women called Nicehearts. The aim was to see how the clients of Nicehearts who participated in the sessions felt after the yoga. The working life partner for the study, Nicehearts organisation, focuses on women's issues and attempts to facilitate the empowerment of women and girls. They have a variety of groups and activities for women available, but none of them included physical activities. The organisation had, for a long time, wanted to include physical activities as part of their weekly schedule for their clients.

The organisation works with women and deals with issues that involve particularly women and that are female-specific. For example, it is widely known (Untas, Koleck & Rasclé 2009; Kyrölä & Harjunen 2007, p. 22) that body image issues are more common among women and girls. The organisation has, for instance, a body positivity group for young women aged 10 - 28 which deals with body image, building self esteem and challenging the beauty ideal coming from the media. In addition, there is a group called Love yourself for women with immigrant background. The concept of body image is an integral part of the work that the organisation does and, thus, the concept of body image is elaborated more as an example of a female-specific issue in this study. Improvements in body image may empower women to focus on their goals and aspirations instead of obsessing about the imperfections of their bodies (Harjunen 2007, p. 211).

Yoga was chosen as a method for the project, since according to a study (McIver, O'Halloran & McGartland 2009), yoga has been beneficial in helping women overcome body image issues. Yoga has been studied in the context of social services before. For example, yoga was used as a method in a twelve-week course with women with eating disorder after which women reported reduction in binge eating and increase in physical activity (McIver et al. 2009). Young adults' impact on their body image was studied in a five-year program by Neumark-Sztainer, Watts & Rydell (2018).

In conclusion, the study was conducted because the organisation was interested in finding out whether yoga could be something they could offer in the future to help women build a better body image and thus facilitate empowerment. Thus, the study set out to find how the clients of Nicehearts would experience the yoga sessions offered.

The combination of the project team provided a good starting point for the study. One of the members of the project team was employed at the organisation at the time of the study and another member was a professional yoga instructor. On the other hand, one of the team members did not have any background information on either of the two topics. In other words, there was some background knowledge available but also a fresh viewpoint which reinforced the reliability of the study.

Five yoga sessions were offered at the premises of the organisation during a one-month period. The sessions took place in the same space and lasted for the same amount of time, respectively. The yoga instructor was a professional yoga teacher who volunteered to host the sessions. The project team was present in all of the sessions in order to monitor the events. The sessions were open to all Nicehearts' clients.

The study uses qualitative research methods. The data was gathered through a questionnaire with open-ended questions that collected non-numerical answers. The participants filled in the questionnaires individually, the first part before, and the second part after the session. Qualitative analysis was utilised in order to give participants an opportunity to freely express their thoughts and sentiments of the session.

In the following, the working life partner Nicehearts is introduced, after which follows the theoretical foundation of the work: a look at some theoretical concepts of social services, such as empowerment and emancipation, after that, yoga and mindfulness are introduced, and along with these, body image is elaborated as an example of a female-specific issue that yoga has been helpful with (McIver, O'Halloran & McGartland 2009). After that, the working methods, i.e. the yoga sessions and the questionnaire, are detailed. Finally, a presentation of the results and the subsequent analysis are followed by a reflection and a conclusion.

## **2 Working life partner and the project team**

### **2.1 Nicehearts organisation**

Nicehearts is a local non-governmental organisation established in 2001 in Tikkurila. Funding for the organisation comes from various sources, for example from STEA,

Funding Centre for Social Welfare and Health Organisation and the European Union Social Fund. The aim is to provide women and girls with empowering experiences and networks through organising various kinds of activities and workshops and to act as a social influencer. Nicehearts prevents social exclusion by strengthening girls' and women's opportunities for participating in community activities and by advancing their career and educational paths. The organisation supports girls and women to become agents of change in their communities. There are no similar organisations providing services for women and girls in the Vantaa region. Target groups include, for example, women with immigrant background, mothers in suburbs and girls and youth with diverse gender identity between the ages 10 - 28. The space in Tikkurila provides the clients a safe space with a warm and accepting atmosphere to tackle various issues in. The idea is to provide clients with a low threshold meeting place, targeted dialogue groups, individual support and social activities. (Heikkinen-Velican 2015.)

More precisely, the organisation is targeted for women, girls and youth with diverse gender identity. The approach is gender sensitive which means, ultimately, that gender is taken into consideration when it matters but not when it does not matter. The gender of the clients is never assumed or questioned; the idea is that the clients know it best themselves. In this study, all clients are referred to as "they", even in the singular. Some of the issues that the organisation deals with are female-specific, in other words, issues that involve or affect mostly women, or affect women in a different way than men. These issues include, for example, pregnancy, motherhood, sexual health and themes such as sexual harassment, women's rights and, among others, body image. (Heikkinen-Velican 2019.)

The space employs a so-called safer space policy (Heikkinen-Velican 2019). The policy aims to make everyone feel free from discrimination and harassment so that no-one is subjected to prejudice, discriminatory practices or hate speech. According to the dictionary by Merriam-Webster (n.d.), it is defined as 'a place (as on a college campus) intended to be free of bias, conflict, criticism, or potentially threatening actions, ideas, or conversations'. Originally, the policy was created to protect marginalised groups such as sexual minorities and women from homophobia and sexism, but nowadays it has been extended to entail all kinds of intersections, including, for example, disabled people, people of colour and gender minorities (How to Build Safer Spaces, n.d.). In Nicehearts organisation, this policy entails, in addition to the aforementioned aspects, that no one should judge anyone's body type or openly talk about anyone's body

negatively, including their own. Also so called diet talk is to be avoided. This is to ensure that everyone feels welcome and at ease, in other words, safe. Therefore, yoga practice that could possibly promote a more positive body image for the clients of Nicehearts was seen as a desirable form of activity that the organisation might provide their clients with in the future. (Heikkinen-Velican 2019.)

In addition, Nicehearts wanted to offer physical activities for their clients. Part of this need was due to the fact that there were not many young people aged 16 and older coming to the space in the spring of 2019 (Heikkinen-Velican 2019). In addition, according to a survey (Kosonen 2019) that was conducted as part of the Moodi project (Vantaan sivistystoimen hankkeet ja projektit, n.d.) by the city of Vantaa with young adults aged from 18 to 28 showed that the youth would like to have a hobby that would include being physically active. 48 percent of the young adults would like to be physically active in some way, either through group activities or individual training. Most of them would like to have a hobby in the afternoon (3 pm - 6 pm) or in the evening (6 pm - 9 pm) and most of them would like to attend the activity on a regular basis, for example, once a week. The respondents also mentioned that they would like the spaces to follow the policy of a safer space and that there would be adults who would greet them individually and that the activities would be free of charge or have a minimal fee. Therefore, Yin yoga was considered to be a possibly suitable activity that the organisation could offer.

## 2.2 The project team

The project team consists of three female students in Metropolia University of Applied Sciences. In order to reveal any potential bias, some information on the background of the team members is provided. Jemina Moilanen is a Registered Yoga Teacher, certified by the Yoga Alliance. Hanna Toivainen has practised some yoga in different settings, gradually starting to enjoy it and was employed by the Nicehearts organisation during the project. Tiina Oinas has no previous experience in yoga.



### 3 Empowerment, yoga and body image

#### 3.1 Empowerment

In this study, yoga was chosen as the method, because there is evidence that it may positively impact women's body image (Neumark-Sztainer et al. 2018). Increasing awareness and appreciation of the body as it is, with all its imperfections, fits well with Nicehearts' objectives. The idea is to facilitate, via yoga, acceptance of one's unique body and its functionality, which aligns with a positive body image (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow 2015, p. 122). If women's body image is improved, they might feel empowered enough to start living their best lives instead of waiting for that perfect body which is, in the end, often quite impossible to achieve (Harjunen 2007, p. 211).

This study looks at empowerment and emancipation from the point of view of social pedagogy. Social pedagogy is a concept that escapes a simple definition, but at least the following meanings can be found for it: a principle promoting pedagogically human dignity, spiritual values, welfare, inclusion, integration, and participation in societies; a reformist movement; a system of welfare work based on pedagogical activities aiming at prevention and alleviation of social problems in terms of social help; or a discipline or a sub-discipline in social and educational sciences (Hämäläinen 2005, pp. 93-97). According to DalMaso and Kuosmanen (2008), social pedagogy aims to support people to grow and become independent subjects, who are able to make choices freely. Helping people become liberated from the restrictions that limit their thinking and actions is thus at the core of social pedagogy. (DalMaso & Kuosmanen 2008, p. 35.) This aim to support growth and becoming a subject is the aim behind introducing yoga and facilitating the formation of a positive body image. When the demands to lose weight or look a certain way or have a "normal" body emanating from the society do not take up a person's time and energy, they can reorient their behaviour towards their true aspirations (Harjunen 2007).

Both empowerment and emancipation are concepts that are rather difficult to define and can be understood in various ways. For example, empowerment can be interpreted to aim at developing personal skills in order for the individual to manage within a system, whereas emancipation aims at changing the system (Inglis 1997; Galloway 2011 cited in Ryyänen & Nivala 2017, p. 40). One definition from the perspective of social work that combines both aspects sees empowerment as "the

capacity of individuals, groups and/or communities to take control of their circumstances, exercise power and achieve their own goals, and the process by which, individually and collectively, they are able to help themselves and others to maximize the quality of their lives (Adams 2008, p. xv).”

The concept of empowerment has two main lines of meaning, which can still be specified further. On the one hand, empowerment can have a structural point of view, that looks at society-wide inequalities and difficulties in an individual’s life, and searches for solutions. On the other hand, empowerment can have a very individual perspective focusing on skills, inner strength and resources, that also gives weight to communities’ importance. (Hokkanen cited in Rynnänen & Nivala 2017, p. 36.)

In this study, having a positive body image is taken to be empowering in itself: it is holistic acceptance of oneself physically, mentally, socially and culturally, and it enables cognitive, rational choices to commit to changes in behaviour, habits or otherwise, if the individual thinks this is needed (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow 2015). Also, participating in the yoga sessions is voluntary. Therefore, the research is offering the clients opportunities: to try one type of yoga experience, to participate in a group setting, and to perform a physical exercise that possibly benefits their body and health, meaning it is potentially a kind act toward their body and an act of self-care. The clients have the power to choose to participate and seize these opportunities, or not to, and having the opportunity and power to make this choice might be empowering.

Emancipation is seen as vitally important in this study in order to break free from the harmful media and cultural messages of very narrow and oftentimes impossible idealised images of the body. Women who are not comfortable with their body often put their life on hold until they achieve the body they desire, even if that never happens (Harjunen 2007, p. 211). The idea in this study is that having a positive body image might emancipate women from this burden and empower them to live their lives fully in the present, and that offering gentle Yin yoga might facilitate this. This fits well with social services and the goals of the Nicehearts organisation.

### 3.1.1 Empowerment and body image

Body image was taken as an example of a gender-specific issue in this study, since it is an integral part of the empowering work of Nicehearts with women and girls. Being

able to accept oneself and reach the full potential of their clients is at the core of what Nicehearts aims to do (Heikkinen-Velican 2019).

How people see themselves and their bodies has structural implications. Both men and women are under pressure to conform to the demands of our society, but studies show that women in particular have more problems with body dissatisfaction (for example, El Ansari, Dibba, & Stock 2014; Mintem, Gigante, & Horta 2015; Neumark-Sztainer, Story, Hannan, Perry, & Irving 2002 and Weinberger, Kersting, Riedel-Heller & Luck-Sikorski 2016 cited in Neumark-Sztainer et al. 2018).

In this study, empowerment is seen from the perspective of an individual. Everyone's body is unique and so is their body image and the issues related to it. Nicehearts provides female-specific services and activities and aims to facilitate empowerment of women (Heikkinen-Velican 2019). Work on body image is individual in the sense that the steps required are unique for everyone. According to Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015), body image is both 'stable and malleable', which means that even though body image is fairly stable, it can be changed. They refer to a study by Albertson, Neff, and Dill-Shackleford in which a 3-week self-compassion meditation training with women was studied and compared to a control group. The body appreciation of the participants' of the self-compassion group improved more than the control group's, and this improvement still existed three months later in a follow-up study (Albertson, Neff, and Dill-Shackleford 2014 cited by (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow 2015, p. 124). The Yin yoga offered in this study specifically aimed at increasing self-compassion and acceptance of the unique features of the body even if they do not match the ideal offered by our society.

The concept of 'body image' originates from the Austrian neurologist and psychoanalyst Paul Schilder who wrote a book called 'The Image and Appearance of the Human Body' (1935) (cited in Tiwari & Kumar 2015, p. 1). In the following, the concept of body image and some key findings connected to it will be elaborated.

The majority of studies about body image have focused on negative body image, how individuals have obtained a negative image of their body and which factors have contributed to it (Avalos, Tylka & Wood-Barcalow 2005). Body image can be negative due to stigma connected to larger bodies in our society. A lot of it is based on assumptions that people with larger bodies engage in unhealthy behaviours and make

poor health choices. It is thought that people with larger bodies should lose weight through exercise but at the same time, they can face a lot of hatred and hostility in sports centres and spaces where exercising can take place. This can prevent people with larger bodies taking part in exercise altogether. (Pickett 2016.)

Young adults are highly dissatisfied with their bodies (Bucchianeri, Arikian, Hannan, Eisenberg & Neumark-Sztainer 2013). In a society that idolises thinness, most dissatisfied with their body are females and those of higher weight status (El Ansari, Dibba & Stock 2014; Untas, Koleck & Rasclé 2009). Harjunen (2009, pp. 15-16) addresses the power structures connected to thinness and fatness and talks about the so called thin privilege. Thin privilege is seen in positive attributes, such as intelligence, effectiveness, health and beauty, being connected to thin bodies, whereas negative attributes, such as laziness and stupidity, have been connected to fat bodies (Kissling 1991, Ogden 1992, Brink 1994 cited in Harjunen 2009, p. 16).

According to Harjunen (2007), fat people are expected to lose weight or at least try or want to lose weight if they want to be socially acceptable. In her study about fat women, fatness was seen as a liminal stage, a temporary phase that was not “the real body” or “the natural body”, even though many women she interviewed had never lost weight or would most likely never lose weight. Still, almost all of the women had either tried to lose weight, were trying to lose weight or were planning to lose weight. Losing weight or dieting was considered the natural goal of a fat person. (Harjunen 2007, pp. 206-207.)

Harjunen and Kyrölä (2007, p. 13) point out that health risks of obesity may have been exaggerated and symptoms that overweight people have have been easily diagnosed as resulting from the weight even if a causal relationship has not been proven. Problems often connected to obesity have actually been due to lack of exercise, not because of being overweight (Rissanen cited in Harjunen & Kyrölä 2007, p. 13). According to Neumark-Sztainer, Paxton, Hannan, Haines and Story (2005), body dissatisfaction has been connected to greater engagement in non-healthy behaviors, unhealthy ways of losing weight, and lower engagement in physical activity. Body dissatisfaction also predicts eating disorders and disordered eating behaviours (Bucchianeri et al. 2013, p. 1).

Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015, p. 1) claim that it is insufficient if we try to understand negative body image and reduce the effects of negative body image. Instead, it is more important to study positive body image and try to promote that. Recently, more focus has been directed at the concept of positive body image (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow 2015). Qualities of positive body image include: a favourable view of the body, accepting the body in spite of weight or body shape or imperfections, respecting the body by attending to its needs and aspiring to live in a healthy way, and protecting the body by rejecting media's unrealistic body images (Avalos et al. 2005, p. 286).

Positive body image has been seen to relate to Australian women's greater use of sun protection, skin cancer screenings, and lower engagement in weight-loss behaviors. In the same study, positive body image also protected women against the idealisation of thinness in the media. (Andrew, Tiggemann & Clark 2014.) Programs created to build positive body image have managed to help participants especially with eating disorders via nurturing body awareness and responsiveness via yoga (Cook-Cottone 2015). If a person has a positive body image, there is no need to change the body by eating and dieting, because the body is accepted as it is (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow 2015, p. 122).

Positive body image entails that one accepts and respects one's body and adopts a healthier lifestyle since one feels better about their body (Avalos et al. 2005). Positive body image is a holistic concept that is at the same time stable and adjustable. It is shaped by social identities as it is linked to self-perceived body acceptance from others. In general, it has been seen to be protective of general health and psychological well-being. (Tylka and Barcalow 2015, p. 124.)

Gender differences have been clearly seen in studies. According to their study, Untas, Koleck and Rasclé (2009) found that girls placed more importance on their looks, paid more attention to their appearance, engaged more in extensive grooming behaviors and indicated more anxiety about being too fat, losing weight, dieting, and restrictive eating. Fat women earn less money than their thin counterparts, whereas this bias does not seem to affect fat men (Kauppinen & Anttila cited in Harjunen 2009, p. 16). Harjunen (2009, pp. 16-17) claims that women are supposed to engage in constant control and changing of their body through dieting and exercise, but only as long as the body fits the norm of the ideal female body.

Especially girls who follow social media accounts that post a lot of pictures of fitness related topics are less satisfied with their bodies and have a greater drive for thinness (Fardouly, Willburger & Vartanian 2017, p. 1390). The use of media may cause dissatisfaction with one's body image because beauty standards are internalised and the girls compare themselves to others (Thompson et al. 1999; Van den Berg et al. 2002 cited in Fardouly et al. 2017, p. 1381). On social media, the possibility to edit pictures makes it even harder to see authentic content, which can make the comparisons even harsher and affect the body image negatively (Myers & Crowther, 2009; Vandebosch & Eggermont, 2012 cited in Fardouly et al. 2017 p. 1382).

Research suggests that interventions based on exercise can improve an individual's body image effectively (Tiwari & Kumar 2015, p. 1). Neumark-Sztainer et al. (2005) urge interventions where adolescents' body image satisfaction would be increased and messages likely to decrease body satisfaction avoided. Tiwari and Kumar (2015, p. 1) hope that policy makers would try to help people recognize one's personality, individuality and emotional qualities as "key components of beauty" and suggest that the pedagogical, cultural and social forces should be identified and remodelled.

Harjunen (2007, p. 211) suggests that it might be more beneficial for overweight women to try to accept their weight status and find peace with their weight instead of trying to change it and live in a constant limbo of waiting when they can start living their best lives. Harjunen claims that if women "came out" with their bodies and understood that their bodies were subjected to an endless amount of expectations, unlike men's, they could reclaim their subjectivity and find a new identity (2007, p. 218).

The goal of Nicehearts is to help women become more empowered and be able to start living their best lives (Heikkinen-Velican 2019). Part of this work is the body positivity group. In the group, women and girls try to learn new ways of seeing themselves and their bodies and become empowered in their own lives so that they can live their lives to the fullest (Heikkinen-Velican 2019). The main goal of social services is the same: to help clients become agents in their own lives and live their lives to the fullest (Flösser & Otto 2011). Through charting the experiences of yoga sessions, this study aims to also provide info for the organisation about whether they should start offering yoga classes in the future, and thus, facilitate the empowerment of women.

### 3.2 Yoga

Yoga is a concept that can include many different practices, for example, physical postures, breathing exercises and meditation (Devereux 2002). Yoga is an old practice and there are different suggestions for its age. For example, Devereux (2002) suggested that yoga has been practised for 4000-5000 years. The word 'yoga' comes from the word 'yuj', which is Sanskrit language and means 'union' (Iyengar 2001, p.1).

There is evidence that yoga can be useful in social work (Mensinga 2011). The reason why yoga can be a good method is that it enables the individual to use their body and mind connection as yoga practices usually include also mindfulness (Pagis 2009, cited in Mensinga 2011 p. 651). Mindfulness is a process of being aware of oneself and focusing on the present moment (Langer & Moldoveanu 2000, pp 1-2). The body and mind connection means that the individual can change their mental state also by working on the physical body, and yoga is one example of a practice that can help in this (Mensinga 2011). Yoga has been used as a tool in social work practice with women and the results indicated a shift towards a better general wellbeing (Strauss & Northcut 2014 p. 234). After practising gentle yoga postures, breathing exercises and meditation regularly for six months, the results were showing improvements in wellbeing, more sense of control over one's life and decrease of stress (Strauss & Northcut 2014).

According to Brown and Gerbarg (2005b, cited in Strauss & Northcut 2014, p. 230) the breathing exercises of yoga can be helpful in the treatment of stress, anxiety, and depression. Many researches have been done to study the impact of yoga on mental health in social services work (for example, Telles, Singh, & Balkrishna, 2012; Visceglia & Lewis 2011). Yoga has been seen as helpful in managing mental health disorders resulting from trauma, and in the treatment for schizophrenia. In both studies, the results showed improvements in the participants' psychological state and in the general quality of life. (Telles, Singh & Balkrishna 2012; Visceglia & Lewis 2011.)

Paramahansa Yogananda has been considered one of the experts in yoga (Singleton & Goldberg 2014). The state of mind where the thinking mind is more silent, can be approached through yoga and meditation (Yogananda 1946). Yogananda spent his lifetime practising yoga and bringing awareness of its practices to as many people as possible. He believed that everyone needs yoga in order to be able to have a still and

positive mind. According to him, the restlessness of the mind can be channeled through yoga, which he named “the science of mind control”. (Yogananda 1946, p. 251.)

Mindfulness is an important part of practising accepting oneself and it has been described as the core of meditation (Purser, Forbes & Burke 2016, p. 3). In order to build a more positive body image, becoming aware of one’s own thoughts is a way to start working on a kinder way of thinking about oneself (Faulds 2008). McGarrigle and Walsh (2011) studied the influence of mindfulness practice in social work. They found positive effects towards self-care and wellbeing during eight weeks of contemplative practice. The participants were more present and their stress levels decreased over the intervention. (McGarrigle & Walsh 2011.)

Eckhart Tolle (2011) has studied mindfulness and sees it as a way of freeing oneself from the mind. Mindfulness can be used as a tool to be happy about oneself instead of having negative thoughts. Mindfulness is based on the idea that it is important not to judge, but to accept all kinds of thoughts and then let go of them. The ideal outcome of these practices is a calm state of happiness (Tolle 2011). The yoga practice that is offered in this project involves mindfulness exercises integrated in the yoga sessions.

According to Kabat-Zinn (2004), it is possible to decrease stress levels using mindfulness meditation. They studied the effects of mindfulness for coping with stress, pain and illness. Usually, it can take a long time for a person to experience the freedom from negative thinking (Kabat-Zinn 2004.) However, there is evidence that yoga practice can help in this process: a previous study by McIver, O’Halloran and McGartland (2009, p. 196-202) indicates that yoga can improve the way individuals see their body. The study focused on the effects of yoga on women who have binge eating disorder. They were able to see improvements in the level of general activity of the individuals and also a more positive way to see themselves. (McIver et al. 2009.)

Stephen Cope (2006, p. 193) has found that people often have misleading preconceptions about yoga. His main concern is that nowadays many yoga practitioners assume that the yoga postures are only for physical training, while actually the practice is about the inner training of being and learning how to do yoga in a meditative way, concentrating on the sensations of the body (Cope 2006). Faulds (2008) explains how the inner training, such as meditation, becomes important when



focusing on supporting a positive body image. In these types of yoga practices, the goal is to be comfortable with yourself as you are (Faulds 2008, pp. 94-101).

Yin yoga was chosen as the style of yoga for this study. Norberg (2014) describes Yin yoga as a complementary yoga practice to the more dynamic and invigorating yoga styles that are predominant in the Western world today. Yin yoga focuses on slowing down and taking time, which makes it a "tool for healing bodily, mental, and emotional imbalances" (Norberg 2014, p. 25). According to Summers (2019, p. 1), it can also be called the "other half of yoga". In Yin yoga, floor postures are held passively for several minutes in order to access a safe and positive 'stress' on the deep layers of connective tissue in the body (Summers 2019).

### 3.2.1 Yoga and body image

Miller (2016) explains how yoga is often linked with the idea of a perfect body. Therefore, people may not want to take part in yoga practice because of a fear that their physical body is not suitable. In order to avoid this, bodily acceptance needs to be emphasized. One way towards the acceptance is to raise awareness about the appropriation of body positivity. (Miller 2016.)

Neumark-Sztainer, Watts and Rydell address the subject of yoga and body image in their article 'Yoga and body image: How do young adults practicing yoga describe its impact on their body image?' (2018, pp. 156-168). The article explains how yoga is not just about the physical movement, but also includes focused breathing, mindfulness and meditation. Yoga is holistic and yoga practice may have benefits in terms of body image. Self-compassion and self-acceptance are integral parts of yoga practice. Yoga supports body awareness by encouraging yoga practitioners to listen to their bodies and respect their individual needs and abilities. Focusing on one's being may support the formation of positive bodily experiences. (Neumark-Sztainer et al. 2018, p. 157.)

Yoga's impact on body image has been studied previously. Neumark-Sztainer et al. (2018) explored the perceived impact of yoga on body image. Participants found that there was a positive impact of yoga on their body image. Positive impact was seen through perceived physical changes, self-confidence, gratitude for the body, a sense of accomplishment, and seeing different kinds of bodies. However, there was also a negative impact in addition to the positive. The negative impact on body image was perceived via comparative critique, for example, comparing oneself with others and

talking negatively about oneself through negative self-talk. (Neumark-Sztainer et al. 2018.)

While settings in which yoga is practiced may provide a healing and safe environment for many yoga practitioners, some may feel uncomfortable in such spaces due to being different in terms of functional characteristics (for instance, lower skill level in yoga), social factors (for instance, not knowing others, or being from a lower social class), or physical features (for instance, having a larger body size than others practicing yoga) (Neumark-Sztainer et al. 2018). The way women who practice yoga are portrayed in the media is similar to that in the society in general, meaning a narrow manner that promotes thinness and identifies thinness with health (Webb, Vinoski, Warren-Findlow, Padro et al. 2017 cited in Neumark-Sztainer et al. 2018. p.157).

### 3.2.2 Cultural appropriation of yoga

Yoga has been practiced for thousands of years, and its original roots are not in Finland or even Europe, but in ancient South Asia and Hinduism (Straus 2002, 2004 cited by Antony 2018, p. 4). Since yoga is used as the method of this study, the issue of cultural appropriation is a relevant point to consider. According to Rogers (2006), cultural appropriation refers to “the use of a culture’s symbols, artifacts, genres, rituals, or technologies by members of another culture” (Rogers 2006, p. 474). Appropriation has to do with power politics. Cultural exchange, dominance and exploitation take place under different conditions: the new elements may be imposed by force and dominance, as in the instances of colonization, or adopted more voluntarily for some benefit to the individual or a larger group, as in the case of acquisition of a foreign language to enable international business. In this latter case, the voluntary adoption of language may obscure the fact that the reason it is beneficial to learn a new language is that some languages are more dominant and widely used than others, and that gives an advantage to the native users of that dominant language. Therefore, this form of appropriation is not neutral, but presents an adaptive, appropriative tactic by the adopting culture. These tactics reveal the active nature of appropriation. In appropriation, true, reciprocal cultural exchange, where all parties are equal is considered to be ‘a nonexistent ideal’. (Rogers 2006, pp. 474-497.)

In cultural appropriation, the original context, meaning and value of the adopted element often disappear or are misrepresented, and this new interpretation of the element becomes a new, often exotic, part of the dominant culture. In this way, part of

the adopted element's original meaning is left behind, while at the same time a new meaning is constructed for it. Since this adoption hides the original source, it pushes the members of the original culture to the margins and enables the members of the dominant culture to profit from the adopted element instead, thus further maintaining the existing positions of power between privileged and underprivileged groups. (Antony 2018.)

In her research, Mary Grace Antony (2018) looks at how yoga is constructed by mainstream press media in the United States and Britain. She identifies three different styles of presenting yoga: 1) a form of exercise intended to achieve physical, emotional, and mental wellbeing with often scientific arguments; 2) a sporty platform of a concept that allows other religions and beliefs to attach their ideology into it, creating hybrids such as Christian yoga Christoga (Miller cited in Antony 2018) and Kabbalah Yoga (Marks cited in Antony 2018); 3) a luxury commodity that denotes exclusivity and functions as a symbol. (Antony 2018, pp. 6-9.)

In this study, religious or spiritual aspects of yoga are excluded, in part because it serves the working life partner Nicehearts better. Nicehearts is not a religious organisation. In addition, the short period of time of five yoga sessions would not have made it possible to thoroughly or even adequately introduce and appropriately appreciate new religious and cultural concepts and ways of thinking. After all, Hinduism and the Indian culture are not very well known in Finland in general, so any previous knowledge could not have been assumed.

The project team discussed cultural appropriation, how to take it into consideration and how the effects could be minimized. It is now acknowledged here in written form for transparency. No fees were collected from the participants, and the project team, nor the organisation, did not benefit financially from offering the yoga sessions.

#### **4 Working methods**

Five yoga sessions were organized starting from 3rd of April until 30th of April 2019. Each session lasted approximately one and a half hours. Before and after the actual yoga practice approximately 15 minutes was dedicated to the filling of the questionnaire (Appendix 1). The intention was to chart the participant's experience of the yoga sessions, certain aspects of their body image and how they feel after the

sessions. It has been found that the more there are people with diverse body types present in yoga sessions, the more it supports the building of a positive body image (Neumark-Sztainer et al. 2018, pp. 156-168). Since the project team consisted of different body types, the team took part in the sessions themselves. This also helped in observing the situation from the practitioners' point of view.

The questionnaire consisted of two parts: the first part was filled prior to the session and the latter part after the session. The two sheets of paper were stapled together and the participants were able to see all of the questions at the beginning of the session.

#### 4.1 Yoga sessions

The main method in this project was yoga. Gentle Yin yoga sessions were requested from a professional yoga instructor. Since the project team wanted to provide a safer space for all body types, instructions from research by Neumark-Sztainer et al. (2018) were delivered to the yoga instructor. The instructions are attached in Appendix 2. The instructions recommend, for example, that yoga studios and instructors try to enhance the positive impact of yoga by providing spaces that would be more inclusive of participants with diverse body shapes and sizes. This is one of the reasons why the project team participated in the yoga session. In addition, in the instructions, the yoga instructor is encouraged, for example, to use language that promotes positive body image, use techniques to decrease comparative critique, acknowledge that progress takes time, implement policies and practices to welcome diversity and take extra steps to help vulnerable students feel comfortable. (Neumark-Sztainer et al. 2018.)

In this study, the yoga instructor was instructed to plan the classes for this particular client group, meaning women. The instructions provided for the instructor were meant to work as guidelines for organizing yoga for this particular group and organisation that aims to facilitate the empowerment of women. This can be seen as an example of the work that the organisation does. Outside help is always informed about the safer space policy and other working methods that there are before they can start working in the facility (Heikkinen-Velican 2019). The facility promotes a safer space where all kinds of bodies are welcomed and respected with no judgement (Heikkinen-Velican 2019). The idea behind the instructions was also to make sure that the sessions would be as similar to each other as possible. Thus, the guidelines were there to reinforce the reliability of the study.

The yoga sessions took place in the premises of the Nicehearts organisation in Vantaa on the 3rd, 10th, 17th, 24th, and 31st of April 2019. Before the yoga sessions, yoga mats were placed on the floor and the space cleared from tables and chairs. The lights were turned off and blinds were folded. Pillows and sofa cushions were placed on the floor next to the yoga mats for additional assistance. The questionnaires were placed on the mats to be filled in prior and after the session. Pencils were placed next to them.

Prior to the session, the participants were asked to fill in the questionnaires. This was done individually, apart from a few of the participants who needed assistance filling their answers in because they were not able to write in Finnish or English. Therefore, those participants did not write the answers down themselves, but they were assisted by a worker of Nicehearts.

The yoga sessions started always with everyone placing themselves onto the yoga mats. In the beginnings, the yoga instructor explained what the session was about and that everyone can do the practice in their own way. She talked about breathing, the pressure to compare oneself with others and how important it was to accept oneself as they were. The instructor verbalised that it is important to be thankful of one's body as it was.

All of the yoga sessions included short mindfulness exercises. The yoga instructor guided the participants through breathing exercises and meditation, in order to create a calm atmosphere. Most of these were done in a seated position. Some were done lying down on the yoga mat and focusing on the sensations in the body. In this exercise, the instructor guided everyone to scan through their body in their mind. This is called body scanning, and it is a tool used in mindfulness practices, in order to release tension in the body and relax the mind (Scott 2019).

The yoga postures were gentle and focused on the whole body. They were long static poses, where the participants were able to stay for several minutes per posture. The instructor helped the participants with the postures that they found challenging. Pillows were offered as yoga bolsters in order to provide extra support. The postures included stretching for the legs as well as for the upper body. The yoga instructor talked about the benefits of Yin yoga for the muscles and calming the mind.

The yoga lasted about one hour in each session. After yoga, the participants filled in the latter part of the questionnaires. After the clients left, the mats were stored away and a reflection session was held with the project team. The team reflected on how the session went and made notes about the session.

#### 4.2 Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of two pieces of paper. The first page charted the situation before the session, the second page charted the situation after the session, and the two pages were stapled together. The paper format was preferred over online version for practical reasons, since there would not have been enough computers or laptops available for the participants and it was not known whether all participants would even know how to use a computer. Also, all the answers needed to be recorded immediately after the session in order to chart the immediate sentiments after the yoga session and retain the connection to the experience of yoga.

A questionnaire was thought to be a practical tool to gather and store individual answers in a recorded manner. The questions were both in Finnish and in English. These languages were chosen since the study was done in Finland but it was impossible to predict who would participate in the yoga sessions. Since the thesis is written in English, it was practical to present the questions in English in order to broaden the language options.

In the book *Real World Research*, Robson (2011, pp. 235-277) speaks about questionnaires as a way to collect data in qualitative research. One example of gathering data is to use a survey. In the study of this project, the data collection type is self-completion survey. All of the participants were given a copy of the same questionnaire. In this study, open-ended questions were used. Open-ended questions enabled longer answers than 'yes' or 'no' and this was prompted by an addition 'Feel free to elaborate'.

Since body image was one of the aspects in this study, the questionnaire was inspired by the Body Appreciation Scale (BAS) (Avalos et al. 2005) and the Body Appreciation Scale-2 (BAS 2) (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow 2014), but it was modified to suit the needs of this particular study. Since this research was limited in terms of resources and the aim of the study involved aspects of yoga and meditation, which were not included in

the BAS studies, only some of the questions were utilised, and all were modified. The aim of the questionnaire was to gather qualitative information, so the statement format used in the BAS 2 was changed into question format. In addition to questions inspired by the BAS 2, questions related to yoga were added. In the following paragraphs, all of the questions are deliberated in detail.

The first two questions of the questionnaire were: 'Have you practiced yoga before?' and 'How many yoga sessions offered by us have you participated in?'. These questions were chosen in order to gain some background information of the participants. It was considered possible that the respondents' previous yoga experiences might have had an impact on their experience and their answers. Therefore, also previous sessions offered by the project team were charted.

Some questions were designed to chart aspects of body image of the participants. In the BAS 2, there are statements such as 'I feel good about my body' and 'I feel love for my body'. In this study, the questions 'How comfortable with your body's appearance are you?' and 'How comfortable with your body's functionality are you?' were included in order to find out how the respondents felt about their appearance and functionality. According to Tylka & Wood-Barcalow (2015), body image is a holistic concept that includes both the outside appearance and functionality of the body. In body positivity movement, the functionality of the body has been considered equal in importance to appearance (Miller 2016). Therefore, in this study, both aspects were taken into consideration.

The question 'Are there characteristics in your body that you appreciate?' aimed to have the respondents ponder whether there are any aspects of their body that they like, so that more detailed information could be received in relation to the two previous questions. This question offered an opportunity to reflect on the possible positive aspects of their body. The question was inspired by the BAS 2 (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow 2014) in which there is a question 'I appreciate the different and unique characteristics of my body'. The statement was altered because a question format was considered more fruitful in order to provide lengthier responses instead of a binary yes-or-no answer.

The question 'How do you take care of your body and its needs?' was inspired by the statement 'I am attentive to my body's needs' in the BAS 2. The reason why the

question 'How does the beauty ideal coming from the media make you feel about your body?' was chosen for the questionnaire was to find out if the respondents feel the media has had an impact on their feelings about their body. The next question was in a statement form, 'I like my appearance even if I am different from media images of attractive people.', and it was modified from the BAS 2 (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow 2014). It aimed to find out if the respondents like their appearance even if there was a conflict between their appearance and the media images. The corresponding statement in the BAS 2 is 'I feel like I am beautiful even if I am different from media images of attractive people (e.g., models, actresses/actors).'

The question 'How do you feel after the yoga session?' offered the respondents an opportunity to express their feelings and sensations freely. The question was open-ended in order to allow the respondent to elaborate on both the physical and psychological aspects of the experience. It was considered important to have this question, in order to see how the participants were feeling after the yoga. This information was considered helpful in finding out how the clients of Nicehearts experienced yoga activity.

The questions 'Did you find the yoga session helpful in any way?' and 'Did you find the yoga session challenging in some way?' aimed at finding out whether the respondents found the experience helpful or challenging, and if so, in which way. The idea was to give the respondents an opportunity to share both positive and negative effects of the session. The questions provided the researchers with an opportunity to gain additional information on the possible benefits of the session or areas of development.

The last question of the study was 'Do you feel that the yoga session had some impact on your body image?' The aim was to find out whether the respondents felt that there was an impact right after the session. In this case, a 'yes' or 'no' question was chosen because a clear answer was hoped for. However, there was space for a longer answer, in case someone wanted to elaborate further. The question did not specify whether the impact on body image was positive or negative, because leading questions were to be avoided. Nicehearts organization wants to work in a way that facilitates their clients' healthy body image (Heikkinen-Velican 2019), and finding out if yoga could have an impact on it is relevant, if they want to offer yoga in the future.



## 5 Analysis of the results

The analysis of the results was done according to the features of qualitative data analysis (Robson 2011, p. 469). The material was studied thoroughly and similarities in terms of expressions and meanings were found and marked down. The responses were grouped into separate categories and given colour codes. The responses were divided into categories in order to obtain generalizable information. The categories were background information, body image and the experience of the yoga session. These categories were chosen after studying the data, since the main points of the responses fell into these categories. The data was divided into categories primarily based on the content of the response and not the question they were responding to. Some of the responses were overlapping or fell into more than one category.

The category on background information contained responses to the questionnaire before the sessions, including the participants' previous experience of yoga, whether they felt comfortable with their body's appearance and functionality, whether there were characteristics of their body that they appreciated, whether they took care of their bodies, how did media's beauty ideal make them feel about their body and did they like their appearance even if it differed from media images.

The second category, body image related data, included responses about appearance and functionality of the body, characteristics appreciated, the impact of the yoga session on body image, and impact of beauty ideal coming from the media.

The last category was the experience of the yoga session. It included responses about whether the participants found the yoga sessions helpful or challenging, and how they felt after the yoga session.

### 5.1 Background information

Category on background information gave the project group some additional information on the participants. Most of this information was gathered from the sheet that was filled in before the yoga session.

Five respondents had practiced yoga before, 11 had not. It is noteworthy that quite a number of the respondents were practicing yoga for the first time. Before the yoga

session, nine out of 16 responded that they were comfortable with their body's appearance, at least to some degree. 11 reported that they were comfortable with their body's functionality. The same number, 11 respondents, found that there were some characteristics in their body that they appreciated. 10 respondents announced that they were taking care of their body and its needs by exercising or doing physical activities. In an open question, where the characteristics of their bodies that they appreciated were inquired, four participants mentioned being able to be physically active. Examples of the responses include "My body functions well enough for me to be able to try new activities" and "I appreciate that my body moves the way I want it to without any pain or ailments." Eight respondents, which means half of the respondents, admitted that the beauty ideal coming from the media makes them feel negatively about their body. Ten out of 16 respondents stated that they like their appearance despite it possibly being different from the images in the media.

## 5.2 Body image

Body image related data revealed interesting details about the holistic nature of body image. Interestingly, 15 participants out of 16 were comfortable or reasonably comfortable with their appearance and functionality. '[I feel] somewhat more comfortable than before the session. My body feels calm and energised', the respondent described.

The participants described their bodily feelings: 'A little bit happier, the body feels calm and awake now'. About the functionality of their body, the participants wrote, for example, 'It felt a little bit stiff but I am still satisfied' and 'I am very satisfied'. 13 out of 16 found characteristics in their body that they appreciated: 'I like everything', 'My hands work in an impeccable manner' and 'I am happy with my legs,' they described.

Half of the respondents found that the yoga sessions possibly had some impact on their body image. The participants described their sensations in the following manner: 'I felt that the session supported and reinforced my body image in a positive way' and 'I feel better about my body now than before the yoga session'. However, the question itself does not clarify on whether the impact was positive or negative. Almost all of the participants, 13 out of 16, responded that they like their appearance at least sometimes even if they were different from media images of attractive people. However, over half

of the group, 10 out of 16, answered that the beauty ideal coming from the media makes them feel, or previously made them feel negatively about their body.

### 5.3 Experience of the yoga session

The last category, experience of the yoga session, provided information about the participants' experience. All of the participants, 100 percent, felt positive after the session. The participants described their feelings in the following way: 'I feel good and relaxed', 'Happy', and 'Calm'. All but one participant reported that they found the yoga session helpful. The participants verbalised their experience: 'It was a different experience. A good one.', 'Yes, I found the yoga session helpful, the stretching helped.', '[Spinal] twists were helpful', and 'Neck feels better now'. Some of the participants wrote that they felt 'Much happier than before the yoga session' and '[My body's functionality] was OK and I was able to participate in varying positions'.

Six of the participants found that the yoga session was challenging. Some of them commented: 'Some of the positions were challenging for the back', 'It was hard to get up from the floor', and 'At some points yes. Some positions were harder than others.' A couple of participants had previous experience of yoga and, according to them, that was why they did not find the sessions challenging: 'I did not find it challenging, because gentle yoga practise is familiar to me'. This might indicate that practicing yoga makes the practice easier in the long run. Also, yoga could bring empowering opportunities for the clients of Nicehearts since the practice of yoga can bring experiences of empowerment (Nevrin 2008, p.119). The majority did not find the sessions difficult.

### 5.4 Key findings

It seems that there was no difference in the responses of those participants who had practiced yoga before, and those who had not. Regardless of the amount of experience in yoga, the responses varied from each other before the sessions. Many people were new to yoga and were able to get a good experience out of their first yoga class. After the sessions, all of the participants seemed equally satisfied despite the differences in experience.

According to the results, the participants seemed to have a positive experience of the yoga sessions. In addition, the yoga sessions were helpful for almost all of the participants. Majority of the participants said that they like their body at least in some way. Half of the respondents found that the yoga sessions possibly had some impact on their body image. However, it is not certain whether this refers to either positive or negative impact. In this study, positive responses to the questions concerning the experience of the yoga sessions are interpreted as an indication that yoga could be a suitable addition to the set of activities provided by Nicehearts. The overall positive reception to yoga by the participants suggests that the clients might be willing to participate in yoga sessions in the future. Naturally, however, the decision whether to offer yoga or not in the future lies in the hands of the organisation.

## 6 Reflection

The project team found the process very educational and illuminating. The feedback from the participants was mostly positive and the working life partner, Nicehearts, gave good feedback about the project. The positive responses about the experience of the yoga session may give an indication that yoga might be an activity that social services organisation Nicehearts could use in the future. However, generalizations to the wider population about the results of this study should not, perhaps, be made, since the number of participants was small. In the following, some aspects of the project are reflected upon in more detail.

Effort was put into making sure that the study was as reliable as possible. The questions in the questionnaire were the same for everybody every time. The location was the same and the duration of the session was the same. The project team was also present every time.

The questionnaire was seen as the best way to collect data, since it was considered the least invasive way to approach the clients. The clients had the opportunity to fill in the questionnaires on their own and at their own pace. The study did not require any extra time from them in addition to the time allocated to filling in the questionnaire. From an ethical point of view, it was considered important that the study process would bother the clients as little as possible. An interview would have required a special meeting to be arranged with the clients. This way, it was possible to arrange the study

as part of the normal schedule of the organisation, which made it as authentic of a scenario as possible.

Anonymity was seen as an important factor. Especially since the number of participants was small, anonymity was an issue that was taken seriously. It was considered important that the clients were given the opportunity to reveal as much as possible without having to think about what anyone else might think. Since the questions were rather sensitive and personal, this was seen as an important factor. In an interview, the clients would have been recognised. This was especially important considering that one member of the project team was employed at the organisation at the time. Anonymity was protected by numbering the answer sheets and giving the participants privacy when answering in order not to identify the hand-writing. In the final analysis, the participants' anonymity was ensured by processing the answers so that all sessions were collected in one spreadsheet in a way that individual responses could not be identified.

Other factors that were taken into consideration when it comes to the reliability of the study was the fact that the yoga instructor was the same each time. It was considered the best option, from an ethical point of view, that the yoga instructor was an outsider, and not the project team member who is a yoga teacher. The yoga instructor was given the ethical guidelines about how to make the yoga session as safe and inclusive as possible in order to make sure that the sessions would be performed according to the values of the organisation and that no harm would be done to the clients.

The organisation aims to facilitate the empowerment of women, and a part of this is supporting their body image. Thus, it was considered important to try to minimize the possible negative effects of yoga and try to make sure that the yoga sessions were executed in a way that respected the organisation's policy of safer space and facilitated empowerment by supporting and acknowledging all kinds of bodies. This was the leading ethical consideration that was to be kept in mind through the whole process. The project team could not take any risk of damaging the clients' wellbeing or the policies of the organisation. In such, the study can be seen as an authentic example of a project conducted in a real social services organisation, done according to the organisation's rules and regulations. In studies like these, the project team has to balance between the working life partner's wishes without, naturally, compromising the integrity of the study.

The location was always the same, the space in Tikkurila. In addition, the length of the sessions was always the same; each session lasted for 1,5 hour. 15 minutes were allocated for filling in the questionnaire before and after the session. The project team was also present in each session and took part in the activity. This was because it was considered important for the project team to observe the sessions and make sure that they were as consistent and similar to each other as possible. All the yoga sessions were planned by the yoga instructor. The main structure of yoga session was the same in all of them. Every session included yoga postures and mindfulness exercises.

Since the clients of the organisation participated in the sessions voluntarily and no sign-up in advance was possible, the number of the participants was not known in advance, nor was their age, language skills or any other characteristics or special needs that they might have. This caused some challenges for the project group.

For example, the participants were from various linguistic backgrounds. This meant that the language of the questionnaire seemed slightly problematic for some to understand. Even though the participants had a choice between two languages, Finnish and English, it might have been useful to have a greater choice in language options. Another option would have been to have an interpreter interpret the questions for the participants before and after the session. On the other hand, interpreting the questions on the spot might have affected the responses as the answers would not have no longer been given anonymously but face to face with the help of a third party, the interpreter. Luckily, there were people present who were able to interpret the questions for the clients so this was not a major issue.

Another challenge, in addition to the language, were cultural differences. For example, traditional clothing was found to be too restrictive for some of the participants to be able to take part in the yoga session. They requested if they could be present at the session but not get down on the floor and perform the poses. This was, naturally, respected by the project team and no one was forced to participate in the session without their consent.

The dangers of cultural appropriation are acknowledged in this study. The religious and spiritual aspects were left out of the yoga sessions because the hosting organisation, Nicehearts, is religiously unaffiliated, and including religious and spiritual aspects would have been inappropriate. It would not have been possible to gain a proper appreciation

of new, spiritual concepts and their larger meanings and connection to yoga and the originating culture in one session. These elements were not included as it was not possible to know if people would attend more than one session. The pace of the yoga sessions was slow and included plenty of focus on the sensations of the body, which made the yoga quite meditative. In part, this was because Yin yoga was the chosen yoga form, and in part because the focus on the body was a part of the interest in the study. No fees were collected from the participants for attending the yoga sessions, so no monetary benefit was involved in the study.

There was no follow-up study attached so the questionnaire only addressed the immediate experience after the session and did not chart the long-lasting impact. The reason the study was conducted was not to see if there would be long-term change, but to find out how the participants felt after the session and, eventually, to see if yoga could be a beneficial method for a social services organisation for women.

## **7 Conclusion**

Social sector is a very dynamic field of work and operators are constantly looking for new ways of serving their clients better. One example of this explorative attitude is the attempted and abandoned reform of the entire Finnish social and health services (Tolkki 2019), which is now an ongoing process in a different form again (Programme of Prime Minister Antti Rinne's Government 2019). Searching for new and better ways of delivering services keeps actors agile and on their toes, and eventually benefits the clients and the greater society by offering better services. Research projects like this study may be important because they make sure development is based on some evidence. The selection of activities that Nicehearts offers is very important to its clients, after all, from their point of view that is what the whole organisation is about.

Yoga and mindfulness, and their principle of accepting ourselves as we are might be good tools in becoming aware of the limitations that our culture's narrow ideals offer us. Practicing yoga in a group can be educational in several ways: the instructor guides the participants through a session and facilitates the formation of new understanding of the body and mind both as they are to us and as they are in a social setting.

The improvement of body image can have a positive impact in society as a whole. If women were comfortable with their bodies, they would have one thing less to worry

about, one thing less stopping them from doing what they want out of shame or guilt, and one thing less that makes them feel they have to diet or perform some other routine to fit in. This frees time and energy to do things they genuinely prefer to do. If the body image of women is improved, they are able to feel more empowered and get out of the so-called waiting limbo where they are only waiting for their bodies to change before they can start living their lives to the fullest. If this can be achieved by organising yoga sessions, for example, it might be worth considering that as one of the working methods in social services.

Society today seems ever more concerned with appearance, and the role of social media is growing. Images in the social media are filled with beautiful bodies, and even ordinary people are now able to process pictures in novel ways. This might increase the pressure of looking a certain way, especially among women and girls. Phenomena such as body positivity and fat activism have challenged this trend and given a voice to bodies outside of the norm, but all the help is still needed in creating a positive body image. When a person is not comfortable with their body, it is possible to become restricted by it and stop living a life that would correspond with one's abilities and aspirations. Becoming free from the limitations of negative body image can be emancipatory and lead to empowerment. This is one of the goals of social services in general and one of the most integral goals of Nicehearts organisation.

The overall positive reactions about the experience of the yoga sessions in this study were interesting. All of the participants felt good or better after the session. The yoga sessions seemed to be helpful for the majority of the participants. Based on this small-scale study, nothing certain can be said about yoga's impact on the body image of the clients, but some of the clients declared that the yoga session had a positive impact on their body image. All in all, it seems that yoga was quite an effective tool in creating positive experiences in this small-scale study.

The working life partner saw several ways in which they could benefit from offering yoga. They were aware that the youth were looking for physical activities they could attend on a regular basis and would like to offer something for them. Heikkinen-Velican (2019) sees that Yin yoga could become a part of an evening-time event for the community that the organisation has been planning. Yoga could be offered as a part of the evening's schedule for those who wish to take part in it. It could bring clients from different backgrounds and age groups together and, perhaps, the staff could also



participate in the sessions. In Nicehearts, it is considered important that the clients and the staff are equal and on the same level so that the agency of the clients is preserved and supported. This is seen as empowering in itself. As long as the yoga offered fits in the organisation's goals, is supporting diversity and positive body image, it could be seen as a part of the organisation's weekly or monthly schedule in the future, according to Heikkinen-Velican. (Heikkinen-Velican 2019.)

When it comes to the suitability of the yoga sessions as part of the activities of Nicehearts, there seem to be a few aspects in favour of it. Based on this study, there might be a need for activities such as Yin yoga and Nicehearts could be a suitable place for organising it in. It might be a good way for the organisation to reach the age group from 16 to 28-year-olds, which was missing in the spring of 2019. Perhaps through attending a physical activity group young adults might find their way into other activities provided by Nicehearts once the place had become familiar to them.

It is evident that more research into the use of yoga as a method in social services and, in particular, in supporting a positive body image and the empowerment of women, is needed. For example, the results of this study say nothing about other participant groups, or about the suitability of some other kinds of yoga. Issues with culture and its impact became more crucial than had been expected. A follow-up study focusing on these topics, as well as other aspects of body image and its connection to social services, would give answers to important questions. Clearly, these would be interesting aspects to study and further research might give directions as to what would be the best practices to introduce and utilize yoga as a method in social services.

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**Questionnaire**

**Tutkimus on osa Metropolian opiskelijoiden opinnäytetyötä.**

**Ennen joogatuntia:****Before the session:**

Oletko harrastanut joogaa aiemmin? Kuvaile halutessasi tarkemmin.  
Have you practiced yoga before? Feel free to elaborate?

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Kuinka monelle meidän tarjoamallemme joogatunnille olet osallistunut?  
How many yoga sessions offered by us have you participated in?

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Kuinka tyytyväinen olet kehosi ulkomuotoon?  
How comfortable with your body's appearance are you?

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Kuinka tyytyväinen olet kehosi toimintakykyyn?  
How comfortable with your body's functionality are you?

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Onko kehossasi ominaisuuksia, joita arvostat? Kuvaile halutessasi tarkemmin.  
Are there characteristics in your body that you appreciate? Feel free to elaborate.

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Miten pidät huolta kehostasi ja sen tarpeista? Kuvaile halutessasi tarkemmin.  
How do you take care of your body and its needs? Feel free to elaborate.

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Kuinka median kauneusihanne vaikuttaa käsitykseesi kehostasi?  
How does the beauty ideal coming from the media make you feel about your body?

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Pidän ulkomuodostani vaikka poikkeaisin median kauneusihanteesta.

(esim. mallit, näyttelijät)

I like my appearance even if I am different from media images of attractive people.

(e.g., models, actresses/actors).

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**Joogatunnin jälkeen:**  
**After the session:**

Kuinka tyytyväinen olet kehosi ulkomuotoon?  
How comfortable with your body's appearance are you?

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Kuinka tyytyväinen olet kehosi toimintakykyyn?  
How comfortable with your body's functionality are you?

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Onko kehossasi ominaisuuksia, joita arvostat? Kuvaile halutessasi tarkemmin.  
Are there characteristics in your body that you appreciate? Feel free to elaborate.

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Millainen olo sinulla on joogatunnin jälkeen?  
How do you feel after the yoga session?

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Koitko, että joogatunnista oli jotain hyötyä?  
Did you find the yoga session helpful in any way?

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Koitko, että joogatunti oli jollain tavalla haastava? Kuvaile halutessasi tarkemmin.  
Did you find the yoga session challenging in some way? Feel free to elaborate.

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Koetko että joogatunnilla oli vaikutusta kehonkuvaasi?  
Do you feel that the yoga session had some impact on your body image?

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## Instructions given to the yoga teacher

(Source: Neumark-Sztainer, Watts, Rydell, 2018)

### 1. Use language to help promote a positive body image

Yoga instructors can use language to help students connect their yoga practice to a more positive body image (e.g., sense of coming home to one's body, greater body awareness and appreciation, acts of self-care), regardless of any physical changes that may occur in response to practicing yoga. Additionally, yoga instructors can communicate that the positive physical benefits of yoga (e.g., greater functionality such as increased strength or flexibility) are likely to improve body appreciation.

### 2. Use language of gratitude

Instructor language and activities aimed at increasing feelings of gratitude for one's current body may enhance yoga's positive impact on body image (e.g., taking time to thank different parts of one's body, encouraging students to modify their practice in line with their current physical and emotional needs).

### 3. Acknowledge progress over time

It is important to focus on meeting one's current body-of-the-day, and not getting attached to "achieving" a certain pose. However, helping students acknowledge their progress and accomplishments over time (e.g., enhanced flexibility, ability to focus on breath, getting into a pose with the use of props) may be useful in improving body image.

### 4. Use techniques to decrease comparative critique

Yoga instructors can use language to help decrease upward comparisons with others; encourage students to come inward or when looking around at other students to do so with the aim of learning and appreciating how different poses look across students. Students may need reminding that, while poses will look different for every body on the outside, all variations will have a positive impact on the inside.

#### 5. If mirrors are present, try to direct students' thoughts in a positive direction

If mirrors are present in the setting in which yoga is being practiced, instructors should be aware of the potential for comparative or inner critique and use language to help students be kind to themselves when looking in the mirror. Remind students to notice their positive attributes (e.g., growing strength and balance), and focus on alignment for safety and inner sensation.

#### 6. Implement policies and practices to welcome diversity

Deliberate steps need to be taken by studios and instructors to attract and retain a more diverse student body in terms of background (e.g., gender, ethnicity) and body shapes and sizes. Some examples include hiring yoga instructors who are diverse in terms of body shapes and sizes, gender, age, ethnicity/race, and physical abilities or disabilities; having text and photos on websites that clearly state studio's policies and practices to ensure all feel welcome; and training teachers to work with diverse students. These changes are likely to benefit everyone.

#### 7. Take extra steps to help vulnerable students feel comfortable

Taking steps to enhance the comfort levels of students may help extend the reach of yoga. Ensuring students' comfort is particularly important for those who may be vulnerable, such as new students and those in bodies that do not fit the cultural ideal. Studios can provide individual or special classes that allow for greater individual attention. The role of the yoga instructor in creating a welcoming atmosphere and using appropriate language is paramount.

Source: Neumark-Sztainer, D., Watts. A. W., Rydell, S., 2018. Yoga and body image: How do young adults practicing yoga describe its impact on their body image? *Body Image* 27, 156–168.