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Journal of Humanistic Psychology 2009; 49; 236 originally published online
Nov 18, 2008;
DOI: 10.1177/0022167808327750

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Qigong as a Mindfulness Practice for Counseling Students

A Qualitative Study

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This qualitative study explores the effects of qigong, an ancient Chinese mindfulness practice involving movement, on master's-level counseling students. Students responded in writing both after an initial experience of qigong and after practicing the movements for 15 weeks during a mindfulness-based course in self-care. Themes of physical, emotional, and mental changes were present in both sets of responses. Additional themes of familiarity with the practice as well as group consciousness and interdependence emerged in the final experience of qigong. The results of this study indicate qigong is a contemplative practice that could have positive outcomes for counseling students. Because of its accessible nature, immediate results, and ability to foster connectedness, qigong is currently underutilized as a form of teaching mindfulness.

Keywords: *mindfulness; mindfulness-based stress reduction; qigong; counselor education; training; social interest; interdependence*

Mindfulness practices such as mediation and yoga are beginning to be integrated into training programs in counseling, psychotherapy, and medicine. Qualitative and quantitative studies indicate that mindfulness practices offer students in the health care fields, such as nursing, medicine, and counseling, a number of health benefits both physical and psychological (McCaffrey & Fowler, 2003; Schnauzer, 2006; Schure, Christopher, & Christopher, 2008; Shapiro, Brown, & Biegel, 2007; Shapiro, Schwartz, & Bonner, 1998). For instance, Schure et al. (2008) found that counseling students in a 15-week, three-credit mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) course reported positive physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, and

interpersonal changes and substantial effects on their counseling skills and therapeutic relationships. Shapiro et al. (2007) found that MBSR training for counseling students resulted in significant reductions in stress, negative affect, rumination, and state and trait anxiety and significant increases in positive affect and self-compassion. Such results are consistent with a much larger body of research on psychological and physical benefits of mindfulness for a variety of different clinical and normal populations.

Most notable is the research conducted by Kabat-Zinn on MBSR, which has been taught to more than 17,000 medical patients since its inception almost 30 years ago (Kabat-Zinn & Santorelli, 2008). As designed by Kabat-Zinn, MBSR programs typically focus on the cultivation of mindfulness through meditation, body scan (a type of guided awareness), and hatha yoga. MBSR studies with varied populations have found significant decreases in anxiety, depression, symptoms of panic, present-moment pain, and mood disturbance (Kabat-Zinn et al., 1992; Kabat-Zinn, Lipworth, & Burney, 1985). According to Miller, Fletcher, and Kabat-Zinn (1995), participants maintained reduced levels of depression, anxiety, and severity of panic attacks 3 years after they finished the MBSR program. MBSR has also been found to affect brain and immune functioning (Davidson et al., 2003).

Most research on mindfulness has focused on meditation, with yoga and tai chi coming in a distant second and third. Often overlooked in American and European research is the impact of qigong. Qigong is a 4,000- to 5,000-year-old Chinese tradition designed to cultivate and circulate *qi* (also known as *chi* or *ki*) and thereby maintain or restore health and well-being. *Qi* can be viewed as life energy that must circulate for an individual to remain healthy (Jouper, Hassmen, & Johansson, 2006). Qigong is best thought of, like classical yoga, as a family of practices in traditional Chinese medicine that include movement, meditation, and visualization (Cohen, 1997). The focus of this article is on qigong as a self-care practice, and as a result we do not address external qigong, which requires a qigong practitioner to direct or focus *qi* for healing purposes in a manner similar to Reiki or Healing Touch. We also do not consider tai chi, a specialized form of qigong that was originally designed as a martial art. The practice of qigong aims to direct *qi* to areas of the body where it is needed (Sancier & Holman, 2004) in consonance with the assumption in traditional Chinese philosophy and medicine that illness is ultimately a symptom of *qi* out of balance (Jouper et al., 2006). Qigong attempts to remove blockages and to balance the flow of *qi* in the body (Jouper et al., 2006; Lee, Kang, Ryu, & Moon, 2004), thereby restoring the health and natural homeostasis of the body and mind (Sancier & Holman, 2004).

Research has indicated that the practice of qigong can be beneficial in treating a variety of clinical conditions, including anxiety disorders (Chow & Tsang, 2007), depression in the elderly (Tsang, Fung, Chan, Lee, & Chan, 2006), fibromyalgia (Mannerkorpi & Arndorw, 2004), and chronic fatigue (Craske, Turner, Zammit-Maempe, & Soo Lee, 2007). Sancier and Holman (2004) pointed to stress reduction as one of the main outcomes of the practice of qigong in their study of health benefits from a qigong practice. Chow and Tsang (2007) found that practicing qigong increases an individual's flexibility, stamina, and strength, along with quieting the mind and promoting spiritual growth. They went on to suggest that qigong might become a more widely used modality for treatment of people suffering from anxiety (Chow & Tsang, 2007). Jouper et al. (2006) found that practicing qigong helped induce a feeling of psychological well-being, including increased relaxation, happiness, and energy among a group of participants from a qigong association in Sweden. The results of this study found that after a qigong practice, the participants' major outcomes included emotional and physical calmness and relaxation, increased mobility and smoother joints, better sleep, a feeling of harmony, and improved concentration (Jouper et al., 2006).

Similarly, in an investigation looking at the effects of a qigong practice in an elderly population with depression, Tsang et al. (2006) found a general improvement in mood, self-efficacy, and personal well-being as well as physical and social self-concept in the qigong-practicing group when compared to a control group. The same study found that after completing a 16-week program, the participants' daily self-concept was also improved when compared with the control group. Tsang et al. indicated that qigong could be an effective treatment for relieving depression and improving mental and physical well-being for elderly with chronic physical challenges and depression.

In terms of qigong as a treatment for fibromyalgia, Mannerkorpi and Arndorw (2004) found that participants of qigong experienced an increase in body awareness, positive changes in their posture and balance, and increased relaxation. In using qigong for treating women's issues, Chen, Yeh, and Lee (2006) reported that after a 12-week program, significant differences in bone mineral density were found in women who underwent the qigong training when compared to a control group. In this way, the practice of qigong may be useful in preventing bone-density loss, which typically occurs in middle-aged women and may lead to further issues (Chen et al., 2006).

Chronic fatigue is another area in which qigong may prove beneficial. A study by Craske et al. (2007) stated that after attending weekly qigong classes for 6 months as well as practicing daily for 15 min, participants reported significant beneficial changes in sleep quality as well as quantity,

mental attitude, general mobility, and reduced pain, thereby improving both the physical and psychological functioning of these individuals. Schnauzer (2006) indicated that practicing qigong aided nurses in dealing with fatigue and irritability, dealing with physical ailments such as lower-back pain, and even coping with depression. Similar effects were found after teaching qigong to a school-aged population, as Witt, Becker, Bandelin, Soellner, and Willich (2005) found that after twice-weekly sessions for 6 months, the qigong group had a reduction in the severity of medical complaints when compared to a control group. The students' teachers reported that after the qigong lessons, students showed an increase in appropriate behavior and seemed less aggressive, likely because of the calming and relaxing effects of the qigong practice (Witt et al., 2005).

In terms of potential biochemical changes from a qigong practice, Vera et al. (2007) reported that lower serum levels of urea and blood lipid levels were found in a healthy young-adult group after they practiced qigong every day for a month. This study suggested that the reduced serum levels may have resulted from less blood moving into the liver during qigong, and the strong mindfulness component of qigong could have contributed to a reduction in stress because of the regular breathing patterns (Vera et al., 2007).

Based on our experiences of teaching qigong to counseling students during the past 10 years, we wanted to begin to explore more specifically the kinds of experiences students reported in learning and practicing qigong. Because of our observations that the impact of qigong is immediate, even to first-time practitioners, and that it is initially more accessible than other mindfulness practices, such as meditation and yoga, we decided to study student reports after their first exposure to a brief (15-min) session of qigong as well as after a 15-week, twice weekly course. This study intended to look at the range of effects students experienced on their initial exposure to the qigong practice as well as the changes that occurred after the students practiced more regularly. We did not intend to focus on any particular effect or change but rather to qualitatively assess the variety of individual experiences and views that the students might find through their practice of qigong.

Method

Participants

Participants in this study were 1st- and 2nd-year master's-level graduate students in mental health counseling, school counseling, and marriage and

family counseling who were enrolled in an elective graduate course titled *Mind/Body Medicine & the Art of Self-Care*. Data were collected over a span of 3 years from 31 participants of mixed gender, ranging in age from the mid-20s to the mid-50s. The students were new to the practice of qigong.

Course Description

The 15-week, three-credit elective course had a twofold purpose of (a) familiarizing students with mindfulness and contemplative practices and their relevance for the fields of counseling, psychotherapy, and behavioral medicine and (b) providing students with practical tools for self-care. The course was taught by a core faculty member of a counseling graduate program accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs. The instructor was a licensed counselor and psychologist who had been practicing yoga and meditation for more than 25 years and qigong for more than 10 years.

The course included twice-weekly, in-class, 75-min mindfulness practice using qigong, hatha yoga, sitting meditation, and conscious relaxation techniques. Students were introduced to the Eight Brocades of qigong during the first class period, a series of movements lasting about 15 min. Each subsequent class began with the Eight Brocades, and participants were required to practice some form of mindfulness outside of class for at least 45 min, four times a week. The course also included readings, journal writings, and research on empirical studies. Students were graded on attendance and participation, journal writing, and research presentations.

Procedure

As a journal assignment, students responded in writing, in class, immediately after their first experience of participating in the Eight Brocades of qigong, which occurred during the first class. Students also responded in writing to their experience immediately after performing the Eight Brocades during the last class period of the 15-week course. Students received no direction on how long their answers should be, and they were informed that completing the assignment would result in a passing grade for that portion of their journal.

Analysis

Students turned in their responses either as hard-copy documents or as word processing files. Student responses were stored anonymously and

were entered verbatim into word processing software. Content analysis was performed by reading the responses and deciding on labels for the phenomena identified. The responses were analyzed inductively, meaning themes emerged from the data. Emerging themes were examined, compared, and revised by all authors. No notable differences in participant responses were found when analyzing themes across course years.

Results

Three main themes emerged in the initial experience of qigong and were also present at the end of the course: (a) physical changes, (b) emotional changes, and (c) mental changes. Two additional themes emerged in the final experience of qigong: (a) familiarity and (b) awareness or consciousness of the group.

Initial Experience of Qigong

Physical changes. Many students noted physical changes during their initial practice of the Eight Brocades. Students commented on changes in energy level, balance, and body temperature. One student expressed, “As the exercise progressed, I felt myself warming up and stretching out. I also noticed that my balance was improving. Afterward I felt more energized and much warmer. My balance was much better and sensations seemed exaggerated.” Students commented that qigong brought a feeling of calmness, relaxation, and a sense of grounding, as one student explained:

As I completed the exercises, I felt my body’s warmth—in my hands and in my torso. While I first felt a little off balance when finishing from all of the breath work, I then felt a sense of silence and calm. I had the sensation that my feet were deeply rooted to the ground and my breath lacked the urgency and irregularity that I sometimes feel when thinking about the past or future. I felt a sensation of blood moving through my body and that in that moment, what I was doing was right and felt good.

Another student commented, “This was really relaxing for me and by the end I felt like my body was stronger. I sort of felt how I do after I workout but not as tired and weak.” In the short time it took to practice qigong for the first time, students began to notice changes in their breath. One student

wrote, "Even now as I write I am more aware of my breath and it is deeper. I found myself wanting to do this practice more because I could already feel the positive effects of it on my body."

Not all of the physical changes were welcomed. Many students expressed that they felt light-headed, dizzy, or even nauseous after practicing qigong for the first time, as one stated:

When we stopped and stood still I did not feel very comfortable. I had a headache. I started feeling a fluttering in my chest and I felt a bit sick, maybe a little nauseas. As I noticed those feelings and kept focusing on them, they began to mellow out. It almost seemed like they were being integrated into my body, like my body was absorbing them or swallowing them up.

Other students noticed pain and stiffness in areas of their body during the practice. One participant explained, "My back was hurting a lot. Now I feel a little better with my back compared to the beginning of class." Another student noted, "When we started the exercise, I felt stiff in my body—I could feel 'pull' in different areas of my body—in my right hip and left shoulder."

In summary, while completing the Eight Brocades for the first time, students seemed to notice many physical aspects of the practice. These included changes in energy level, body temperature, balance, amount of calmness, breath, and amount of pain and stiffness. Students appeared to focus on the physical aspects of the exercise, with their intention placed on learning the movements correctly.

Emotional changes. Students commented on changes in their emotional state while practicing the Eight Brocades for the first time. Many students indicated feelings of nervousness or excitement at the beginning of the class. One participant wrote, "I felt eager, excited, and slightly nervous about the class and the beginning of the activity. As we practiced the exercises I was aware that I was still excited." Other students noticed anxiety related to learning something new. The following student explained, "I had a difficult time breathing and became anxious about trying to breathe the right way." Another student noted, "I'm excited to begin, but nervous and apprehensive about balance." A number of students noticed that these feelings of nervousness dissipated after completing the Eight Brocades, as one student wrote, "Anxiety about starting the first class and not knowing what to expect disappeared after the exercises."

The most commonly reported emotions at the completion of qigong were an increased sense of calmness or peacefulness. One student noticed

that with calmness came a sense of renewed energy, as the following comment demonstrates:

After we stopped the exercises I felt lively and full of energy, yet still very peaceful. I certainly had some energy, but it was a quiet energy. My mind was quiet from what few thoughts had been there at the beginning, and I was having no inner monologue at the end either. My mood state was peaceful, but slightly lethargic and tired at the beginning. At the end, I had moved into more of a calm liveliness. I felt good physically in my body throughout the exercise—just a little cold.

Other students noticed they felt more relaxed after participating in qigong, as one student explained, “Movement coordinated with breathing is calming and relaxing.” Another student indicated, “I feel more awake. My back muscles feel looser and more relaxed. I feel more relaxed in general. My mind feels clear.” Some students referred to how the practice allowed their emotions to return to a neutral state, as indicated by the following student:

I began the morning with an energized and restless body, a sour mind, and jagged emotions. . . . The deep breathing and focus calmed my mind, allowing it to relax into a restful state. My jagged emotions seemed to disappear. . . . As we completed the movements, I felt a calm, quiet and focused mind, neutral emotions, and a loose, calm body. . . . I am more aware of my breath and I find myself content focusing on my breath.

In summary, it seems the most commonly reported emotional state at the beginning of the exercise was nervousness, mainly because of learning something new. Many students reported feeling some sense of calmness or relaxation after practicing qigong.

Mental changes. During the initial experience of qigong, most students commented on their mental processes, and many students addressed feeling distracted at the beginning of the practice. One student stated, “Before we started I noticed that I was jittery, distracted, and wide awake. I couldn’t concentrate very well and I was thinking about lots of different things.” This student went on to describe the change in mental state that occurred after practicing qigong, as he or she stated, “When we finished, my thoughts had slowed down and I was able to concentrate more. I felt very focused and ready to do what was necessary.” A number of other students commented that qigong helped them focus their minds on the present moment while

they performed the Eight Brocades. Students seemed to become aware of how rapidly their thoughts changed when their mind was not focused:

My thoughts were very active during this exercise. They were calmed slightly by the effort I used to focus on the postures/stretchers and to be still. However, when the activity was over, they came racing back as if I had missed the constant chatter in my mind.

Another student explained, "My focus seemed to have improved and it is easier to recollect my thoughts and actions during the exercise." Along with a more focused mind, students noticed a sense of calmness related to their thoughts. One student shared the following:

I noticed that it was easier than I had anticipated to stay focused. Usually I'm constantly thinking of one thing or another, but during the exercise I was able to calm my mind and focus on my body, what I was doing, and the environment. This experience was different but pleasant.

After reading the responses, it became clear that judgment played a role in some of the experiences of qigong. A few of the students referred to wanting to perform the exercises correctly. It seemed that focusing on the Eight Brocades helped clear some of these judgments from the mind, as the following student stated:

I felt a bit anxious as I anticipated what we might be doing specifically and if I would do things "correctly." I also felt a bit unaware of my body, as if I hadn't physically arrived to the classroom at that point. As I participated in the breath and movement of the Eight Brocades, I felt my body come alive and I felt so focused on the task at hand that it was impossible for my mind to wander, as is its nature to do.

It appears the qigong practice not only helped students notice the quality of their minds but also provided focus for them to quiet their minds. Although students initially noticed judgments about whether they were doing the movements correctly, these judgments seemed to dissipate as they continued to practice the Eight Brocades.

The themes that emerged during the initial response to qigong, consisting of physical, emotional, and mental changes, indicated a level of awareness in each of these areas by the students. This awareness also seemed present during the final practice of qigong, as students noticed more subtle aspects of their experience.

Final Experience of Qigong

At the end of the 15-week semester, the themes relating to physical, emotional, and mental changes as a result of the 15-min qigong practice remained consistent. However, in this second set of responses there were subtle but important differences in the kinds of changes students reported. Two additional themes of familiarity and awareness or consciousness of the group emerged during the final experience of qigong.

Physical changes. Students reported an increased awareness of their physical experience. Similar to that of their initial experience of qigong, they noticed an increase in energy level, changes in body temperature, an increase in pain in certain areas, an increase in attention to balance, and feeling grounded. One student reported, “My balance came back to me and I could stand centered without so much swaying. My energy felt distributed and the aching in my thighs had subsided.” Another student explained, “After qigong I felt much more balanced. I could feel tension leak out of my body.” In the second set of responses, students also mentioned feeling light headed or dizzy, but no one reported feeling nauseas as they had during the first experience. In addition, less focus was placed on flexibility and stiffness, and no one mentioned feeling more relaxed after the practice. Although students seemed focused on physical changes, they were also attuned to how the physical was connected to other parts of their experience, as the following student explained:

It seems like the practices are embedded in the subconscious and thus providing guidance. Doing the practices provides rest of mind and a feeling of really being in my body. On a physical level it makes the back pain seem less severe and it feels like the exercises are providing oil for the joints.

Another student noted,

When I begin, I notice my increased ability to “drop into” my body more quickly and create space for being in the present. I am amazed when I finish the postures, how different it feels to be in my body. One of the things I notice most are my feet—they feel rooted like tree trunks to the ground and there is a sense that I can face anything as long as I can remember this feeling of groundedness. I also have a sense of being aware of my own aliveness and vitality, as if before I was just sleepwalking—going through the motions.

It appeared that students paid more attention to their breath during the final practice of qigong. One student reported, “What I noticed most was an

increased capacity to stay within each moment and breath, and not be thinking about other things. . . . I seem more open to energy in general and I believe qigong has helped in this.” Another student wrote about the breath and how it connected him or her to other parts of the experience:

What stands out to me about practicing qigong at this point is the depth of breath. Breathing deep, full breaths and expelling the air forcefully seems to really increase my energy and clear my head. It’s almost like a cleansing of my lungs and mind. I can also feel the energy moving in my body, and it doesn’t matter how tired I am starting out, the energy always starts to move. On most days, my mind remains focused on the movement and breathing, which is like taking a vacation from the pressure and stress of everyday life. I generally feel refreshed and ready for the day in my mind and body after practicing.

In summary, students experienced a variety of physical effects, such as an increase in energy, an improvement in balance, and a sense of feeling grounded. Although the participants noticed pain in areas, there seemed to be less of an emphasis on flexibility than in the first set of responses. Students noticed increased attention to their breath, and this connected them with other aspects of the qigong practice. This level of awareness seemed to allow for an integrated view of their mind and body experience.

Emotional changes. Similar to their initial experience with qigong, students responded that they felt an increased sense of peacefulness and an overall sense of calmness after the Eight Brocades. One student explained, “Doing the exercises today really centered me. I don’t feel so spacey. The movements today felt smooth and nice and I could feel my body warming up. I feel less numb. I feel less scattered—very calm and peaceful.” In the responses at the end of the 15-week class, no participants commented that they felt nervous or anxious as they had during the initial experience. Some students commented that they experienced less performance anxiety than when they started the Eight Brocades at the beginning of the semester. Other students noted that they felt sadness, mainly because of the group practice ending:

I loved the imagery with each move/Brocade. Today compared to the first day, the difference is not feeling silly, but feeling strong, and thankful, and focused for the knowledge of the practice. I am also feeling a little sad, as it is the last time we will practice all together so it will never be the same.

Overall, students indicated an increased sense of peacefulness after practicing qigong, which remained constant through both sets of responses. Participants generally experienced less anxiety, partly because of the familiarity of the movements. The decrease in anxiety could relate to less judgment about performance, as discussed below.

Mental changes. As in the initial experience of qigong, students reported that the exercises helped them gain mental focus. One difference was that in the final practice of qigong, students did not mention their level of distraction like they had in their initial experience. Rather than notice how distracted their minds were, they seemed to concentrate on their ability to focus and remain in the present moment, as the following student shared:

Today after finishing the practices I was more able to draw my attention inward. I was able to gain a sense of the heavy feelings in my hands, the sense of my feet on the ground, and for the most part I was able to clear my thoughts. This is something that I have been working on all semester. In the past I have noticed that I am thinking about what I need to do later in my day or I have been thinking about others in the room. Today I did not notice my thoughts wandering as much. I have finally become comfortable with the practices.

Furthermore, a few students indicated they experienced less judgment toward themselves after practicing qigong for a semester. It seems they may have developed a more accepting attitude. One student explained that changes included “fewer thoughts about what I was doing, probably in part due to knowing the motions and feeling comfortable in the movements. But also much less judgment or critique, both of myself and others. More surrender and less skepticism.”

In summary, participants experienced an increased ability to focus their minds through practicing qigong. This enabled students to stay in their present moment experience. They also noticed judgments falling away as they became more focused on their inner experience.

Familiarity or routine. One theme that emerged from the second set of responses was familiarity with practicing the Eight Brocades. Students noted that this familiarity helped them reduce performance anxiety and focus their minds on their present experience of qigong. It seems that learning the movements may have brought about greater awareness of subtle aspects of the practice, as one student indicated:

I find that during the exercises I am more comfortable moving at a slower pace. I am feeling less pressure to move fast or "get it over with." My familiarity with the movements is helping me focus more intently on the subtler aspects of my body/mind during the exercises. . . . This gives me a peaceful and connected type of sensation. It feels like I am moving in slow motion at times or as if I am moving underwater. After the practice, when I focus inward, I notice a calm emotional quality. I notice my breathing. It feels like my whole body is expanding and contracting with every breath. In short, I feel connected to my body and my concentration seems strong.

Another student stated:

I also felt somewhat calmer and my thinking was slower and less cluttered feeling. I remember that the first day doing these movements I was much more focused on the physical. Though I think my mind is more able/free to wander now that I don't have to think about the movements, it also seems to be more free to align within, despite my sometimes racing thoughts. I think at the beginning the thoughts were racing about my body, how it felt, getting confused about right foot forward, turn right, kinds of thoughts. Now the movement is automatic and it is difficult to remain focused on what I am doing, but it is also freeing.

Nearly all participants noticed this familiarity they developed with the movements. It seemed to add something to their experience of qigong and likely influenced their awareness of the group process.

Group awareness or consciousness. Another theme present in the final experience of qigong was group awareness or consciousness. Many students seemed attuned to the energy in the group and noted this in their responses. This attention to the group was not present in the initial set of responses. It seems it was something that developed and grew over the semester, probably in part because of the familiarity of the practice and the people in the group. One student remarked:

When I begin qigong now, after practicing for a semester, I notice my own impatience because of the familiarity, but as I continue through the Brocades, the restlessness turns to calm and presence. The group feels like me and I feel like the group.

Many students mentioned feeling connected to the group, as the following student stated:

The poses felt so familiar to me and that seemed comforting while we were doing them. There was a point when I felt really connected to everyone in the room—since we were all doing the same poses at the same time.

Another student commented:

I experience much less performance anxiety. I'm much more in tune with what is happening inside my body and my immediate awareness. While this would seem to remove/isolate me from the group experience, I've found that the opposite is true—that I'm more in tune with the group as a whole now than since the beginning of class.

Awareness, whether physical, emotional, or mental, was a factor present throughout many of the previous responses. The following student spoke to this increase in awareness as a result of practicing qigong and noted how feelings of harmony with the group helped lead to harmony within:

It feels very natural, smooth, and in sync to do the Eight Brocades at this point. I feel as though my entire body is opening up as I breathe. It provides me with a sense of body awareness and allows me to be better in touch with what is happening for me mentally and emotionally. It seems as though my body, mind, and emotional state are more integrated. Participating in qigong as a part of a group gives me a sense of being in harmony with others, as well as being in harmony with myself. As I go through a practice now, I feel more balanced and often carry that sense of balance with me throughout the day.

Another student reported:

I dread coming to class, but I always feel better after I am here. It is nice to allow myself to ignore the mental chatter, ignore the massive to-do list, and allow myself to gently move and be myself. In group practice I notice how much I enjoy and feed off the group energy.

Although some students felt an increased connection to the group, others noticed a connection to something larger, as one student observed:

Awareness comes to mind. It seems that on some level I know or witness more of my own interaction with the world. I seem to get tuned in somehow. What I am getting in tune with is a larger question.

In summary, many participants reported an awareness of group energy or consciousness in the second set of responses. It seemed that awareness

of subtler aspects of the practice and a familiarity with the movements allowed students to tune into this deeper level of experience during qigong. Indeed, many students commented on feeding off the group energy, and this could prove an important concept for further exploration.

Discussion

A qualitative design seemed most appropriate for this study because examining the effects of qigong as a mindfulness practice is a somewhat new area of research, at least within Western scientific literature. By using a qualitative design, we were able to look for all possible effects rather than limit the responses we would find. This open-ended approach proved useful in eliciting a wide variety of responses from students.

The results of this study indicate qigong is indeed a practice with immediate effects. Physical, emotional, and mental changes emerged from the students' accounts of their initial exposure to the qigong practice, lasting a mere 15 min. At first, students seemed mainly focused on their physical bodies and their physical reaction to the practice. It seemed that students quickly became aware of their sense of balance, or in some cases the lack thereof, the movement of energy through their bodies, an increased awareness of temperature, and a sense of lightheadedness as they moved through the Brocades. Awareness of breath was mentioned numerous times in the students' responses and became one of the main themes of the entire practice. Each of these physical sensations seemed to come in the form of a stronger sense of awareness of what the students' bodies were doing and feeling, perhaps not simply from the movements themselves but from the awareness that the practice brought to the body. The strongest theme that emerged from the students' initial exposure to the qigong practice was that of awareness and a stronger sense of what the physical body was doing and feeling.

Along with these physical changes came experiences in the emotional and mental domains. Emotional states included nervousness about learning something new as well as feelings of relaxation and calmness after completing the Eight Brocades. For the most part the exercises proved calming and appeared to serve as a tool for relaxation. Participants quickly realized the "mental chatter" present in their minds and used the Eight Brocades to focus their thoughts on the task at hand. The responses after this initial practice of qigong seemed to focus on the individuals' internal experiences and were often related to learning the new and unfamiliar movements of the Eight Brocades.

Once the students had practiced the Eight Brocades regularly for 15 weeks, their responses shifted, and new themes of familiarity and awareness of the group emerged. Unlike in the initial experience, when the students seemed focused on the physical sensations of the movements, they appeared to find more connections among the physical, mental, and emotional realms of their experience with qigong. During their last group experience of practicing qigong, students still emphasized physical sensations. However, they appeared to focus more on how the physical aspect connected them to their present moment experience and breath rather than viewing the physical sensations in isolation. A number of responses included the idea of familiarity, which seemed to manifest in a physical, mental, and emotional sense. As they became more familiar with the movements, it led to a state of remaining present, calm, and peaceful. Learning the routine of the movements seemed to enable awareness in other areas of their practice. For example, a strong awareness of breath and how it moved through the students' bodies became evident in the final response to the qigong practice. As the students moved through the Eight Brocades, they expressed an awareness of their breath being linked to the now familiar movements, thus creating a sense of connection and energy from within. This allowed for an awareness of energy to come into focus, both in an individual and in a group sense.

The concept of energy seemed to bridge a number of categories, as it appeared in a physical realm, with the students commenting on their increased sense of energy in their own bodies, as well as in a mental sense, with a feeling of energy in their minds. Along with this, a strong sense of connection emerged, not only on an intrapersonal level but also through the interpersonal connections that were formed through the practice. A number of students discussed a sense of energy within the group that came through practicing these movements together and being supported by the energy of the group. Participants expressed a feeling of being in harmony with others as they moved through the Eight Brocades together, and they noticed a decreased concern about the specifics of how to do the movements. Thus, the students seemed to cultivate the ability to accept both themselves and their peers and to connect with each other on a deep level. This connection appeared to begin with the individual students learning to feel, observe, and sense their own experience of the movements and then work outward in sharing this connection with others. In this sense, qigong seems to transcend the individual effects of a mindfulness practice by encouraging a sense of community and strengthening connections within the group.

Although common themes emerged from the responses, we noticed during the data analysis that it was challenging to parse the students' comments into different domains of being (physical, emotional, and mental). It may be that this difficulty reflects the ontological poverty of these categories. The experiences of the student participants seem to reinforce and experientially illuminate recent work in cognitive science (Bickhard & Terveen, 1995; Damasio, 1994) as well as philosophy and social theory (Bourdieu, 1977; Heidegger, 1962; Merleau-Ponty, 1964; Taylor, 1995) that undercuts the dualistic presuppositions (e.g., mind vs. body and cognition vs. emotion) that underlie much of Western thought (Christopher, 2008). Experiences during qigong may be a kind of pre-Cartesian way of perceiving.

This study is useful for looking at a broad range of effects because of practicing qigong. Our research highlights the potential role qigong can play in the training of counseling students, although the benefits may prove transferable to broader populations. This study could serve as a basis for future research to expand on the idea of qigong as a mindfulness practice that produces immediate results and is accessible to a wide range of populations. Further studies could include more specific investigations, including quantitative methods, on reactions to qigong as well as looking at the integration of these practices into the participants' daily lives.

Our research is not without limitations. The reliance on self-reported information is one limitation, and it would prove useful in the future to apply quantitative forms of measurement to the study of qigong. In addition to qigong, students also participated in other forms of mindfulness during the class. Although this would not have affected the first exposure to qigong, it could have influenced the final experience. The changes in the qigong practice over the 15-week course may have been influenced by yoga, meditation, readings, and class discussion. Thus, it is difficult to determine the extent to which qigong produced changes independent of the other practices for the final session of qigong. Another limitation to the research includes the self-selecting nature of the population enrolled in the course. Although the class was part of a counseling curriculum, it was offered as an elective. Students who enrolled in the course titled *Mind/Body Medicine and the Art of Self-Care* were perhaps more interested in mindfulness techniques and possibly more open to noticing changes from the practices. In addition, the fact that many students knew each other and had taken previous classes together could have influenced the connection felt from the group process. Future research could control for these variables. Despite these limitations, it seems our study is a solid starting point for exploring the impact of qigong in more detail.

Conclusion

Based on this study, it seems that teaching the practice of qigong may have positive implications for counseling students. Consistent with results found by Chow and Tsang (2007), students in our study reported increased flexibility and quieter minds after practicing qigong. Students noticed increases in energy level and concentration and feelings of harmony, calmness, and relaxation, similar to results found by Jouper et al. (2006). Responses from this study indicated that students showed less judgment and performance anxiety after practicing qigong. Students expressed increased awareness as well as acceptance of themselves and others around them, consistent with findings by Shapiro et al. (2007) that MBSR programs can lead to an increase in self-compassion. This exposure to an ancient and traditional form of self-care seemed to strongly affect each student to whom it was introduced, and some students expressed that they would like to continue the practice beyond the class sessions.

The initial practice seemed to bring up sensations and feelings in an isolated physical sense, with students noticing parts of their bodies, or their current mental or emotional states, of which they might not have been previously aware. The focus appeared to be mainly on the movements themselves, with the students especially concerned about how to do the practice correctly and how their body felt as they performed these new movements. The responses seemed to emphasize an intrapersonal aspect of the practice, as the students focused inward to notice how they personally experienced the Eight Brocades.

As the students gained familiarity with the Eight Brocades, they seemed more able to allow the movements to flow through their bodies, minds, and emotional selves and were also able to share the experience with others in the group. They expressed a strong sense of connection to both themselves and those with whom they practiced, as many discussed a feeling of harmony and energy within the group. It appeared the participants proved able to let go of judgments about their performance, as they became less concerned with the specifics of how to move and more focused on simply experiencing.

Although most research on mindfulness has focused on meditation, it seems that introducing students to a variety of methods of self-care could be beneficial, as they can choose the method that works best for them. As an easily accessible branch of Eastern medicine, qigong appeared to bring an increased awareness of breath and movement as well as a sense of connection to the students in this study. Because of its accessible nature and the

ability to produce immediate results, qigong is underutilized as a mode of teaching mindfulness. Future research would prove important in determining the full effects of qigong and its potential for introducing a wider population to mindfulness practices.

One exciting possible consequence of our study has to do with cultivating experiences of interconnectedness and interdependence. A downside of individualism in American society is social isolation (DeAngelis, 2007; Germer, in press; McPherson, Brashears, & Smith-Lovin, 2006; Putnam, 2000). Current research has indicated that isolation and lack of intimacy can be deleterious to physical and mental health (DeAngelis, 2007). Many of the seminal figures in personality theory have anticipated this problem and had reservations about a narrowly individualistic sense of self as a paradigm of mental health. To counter this narrowness, Adler's (1979) concept of social interest calls for identification with the larger community of which one is a part, and Allport (1955) advocated for what he termed *ego-extension* to include all of humanity. Similarly, Erickson (1968) proposed a worldwide identity, and Bakan (1966) emphasized that the need for communion was as equally important as that of agency. Mindfulness practices such as qigong may serve as an antidote to the isolation of a "bounded masterful self" (Cushman, 1990) by fostering experiences of connectedness, interdependence, and what Rubin (1996) termed non-self-centric subjectivity.

The cultivation of these enlarged and interconnected notions of the self may have implications for ethical and moral development and transformation. Maslow (1954), for instance, found his self-actualizing respondents, those he considered mostly highly developed, to also have social interest. "They have for human beings in general," he wrote, "a deep feeling of identification, sympathy and affection. . . . Because of this they have a genuine desire to help the human race. It is as if they were all members of a single family" (p. 217). And for Adler, social interest is infinitely expandable. The deep identification and empathy "can even go further, extending itself to animals, plants, and inanimate objects and finally even to the cosmos" (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 138). By developing the individual's capacity for healthy identification and connectedness, mindfulness practices such as qigong have the potential to heal the splits of a dualistically divided world and foster the kind of ethics of care and compassion that are sorely needed in our 21st century (Christopher, Manaster, Campbell, & Weinfeld, 2002).

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