

Enhancing Social Intelligence in Public Enterprise Executives through Yoga: The Mediating Role of Mindfulness

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Abstract

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

KEYWORDS: Social intelligence, Yoga, Mindfulness, mediation analysis

Introduction

In recent years, the landscape of public sector management has undergone significant transformations, with an increasing emphasis on social intelligence as a crucial competency for executive leadership. This shift reflects a growing recognition of the complex, interconnected nature of societal challenges and the need for public enterprise executives to navigate diverse stakeholder relationships with finesse and empathy. Concurrently, the ancient practice of yoga has experienced a renaissance in contemporary society, transcending its traditional spiritual roots to emerge as a

holistic approach to physical and mental well-being. This confluence of evolving managerial paradigms and resurgent interest in yogic practices presents a compelling avenue for exploration: the potential of yoga to enhance the social intelligence of public enterprise executives.

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

Yoga, with its millennia-old tradition of integrating physical postures, breath control, and meditative practices, offers a unique and potentially transformative approach to cultivating social intelligence. The practice of yoga is predicated on the holistic development of body, mind, and spirit, fostering self-awareness, emotional regulation, and empathic understanding. These core tenets of yoga align remarkably well with the constituent elements of social intelligence, suggesting a promising synergy between yogic practice and the development of socially adept leadership. Moreover, the emphasis in yoga on mindfulness and present-moment awareness may provide public enterprise executives with valuable tools for navigating the complex, often stressful terrain of public sector management.

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

Furthermore, the public sector's unique challenges, including bureaucratic constraints, political pressures, and the imperative to serve diverse public interests, underscore the need for

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

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

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

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

Social Intelligence

The idea that leaders need something more than technical skills is not new. More than a century ago, Columbia University professor Edward Thorndike had pointed out that “the best mechanic in a factory may fail as a foreman for lack of social intelligence” (p. 229). This section of the paper attempts to outline what social intelligence is. The following sections analyse whether and how yoga can enhance social intelligence of MBA students.

The term social intelligence was first used by educational psychologists John Dewey (1909) and Herbert Lull (1911) but the modern concept has its origins in Thorndike’s (1920) formulation: “By social intelligence is meant the ability to understand and manage men and women, boys and girls – to act wisely in human relations” (p. 228). Similarly, Fred Moss and Thelma Hunt (1927) defined social intelligence as the “ability to get along with others” (p. 108). Few years later, another educational psychologist Philip Vernon (1933) provided the most wide-ranging definition of social intelligence as the “ability to get along with people in general, social technique or ease in society, knowledge of social matters, susceptibility to stimuli from other members of a group, as well as insight into the temporary moods or underlying personality traits of strangers” (p. 44). American Psychological Association defines social intelligence as the ability to understand people and effectively relate to them (VandenBos 2015).

The century old concept of social intelligence has had a sporadic development but promises to be a late bloomer. It had been casually dismissed as just general intelligence applied to social situations. Since there was a high correlation between intelligence and social intelligence, there seemed to be no need to pay attention to the latter. The search for social intelligence in pre 1983 literature with its record of disappointing empirical results and substantial theoretical criticism is aptly summarised in the title of Frank Landy’s (2006) paper: “The long, frustrating and fruitless search for social intelligence: A cautionary tale”.

Daniel Goleman (2006) draws on the emerging field of neuroscience research to propose that social intelligence is made up of “social awareness, what we sense about others – and social facility, what then we do with that awareness” (p. 84). It is both sensing what the other person is feeling and based on that having smooth effective interaction. Studies in neuroscience reveal that our social relationships have a direct effect on our physical and mental health (Goleman and Boyatzis 2008).

Operationalisation of SQ had been problematic for researchers for decades. Even Thorndike (1920) had pessimistically noted that social intelligence “eludes the formal standardized conditions of the testing laboratory. It requires human beings to respond to, time to adapt its responses, and

face, voice, gesture, and mien as tools” (p. 231). Such logic, however, has never stopped psychometricians into venturing into the unknown and it could not stop them in this case. True to the goals of their tradition, soon enough psychometricians were translating the abstract definitions of social intelligence into standardised laboratory instruments for measuring individual differences in social intelligence (Taylor 1990). The first attempts were made in 1920’s in George Washington University under the leadership of Thelma Hunt. However, the George Washington Social Intelligence Test (GWSIT) was “so heavily loaded with ability to work with words and ideas, that differences in social intelligence tend to be swamped by differences in abstract intelligence” (Thorndike & Stein 1937, p. 282). Recent advances in factor analysis techniques and growing interest in cognitive neuroscience has given a new life to the notion that SQ is not a mere component of IQ and can be measured in a credible manner.

Introducing Yoga

Yoga is arguably the longest standing curriculum aimed at embodied learning. Over the past four centuries, the Sanskrit text of the ancient Indian book Gita has been translated into a number of languages and is still a favourite with commentators from various philosophical traditions (Lloyd 2015). Recently, western management experts have also been interested in yoga as it is described in the Gita (Turci 2021). Sometime between third century BC and third century AD, sage Patanjali compiled the ‘Yoga Sutras’, the original textbook of classical yoga (Stiles 2021). This is a secular text that has become preeminent in teaching yoga. Other texts and translations that have followed refer to these sutras as being the heart of yogic thought. The eight limbs of yoga in Yoga Sutra are:

1. Yama (Selfless values): Non-harming, truthfulness, non-stealing, self-restraint and greedlessness.
2. Niyama (Self-discipline): Cleanliness, contentment, austerity, self-study and acceptance.
3. Asana (Postures) Body positions that open energy channels and develop physical stability for meditation and other advanced practices.
4. Pranayama (Breathing practices) Cardiovascular control to enhance the flow of vital energy through retraining the respiratory organs.
5. Pratyahara (Withdrawal of senses) Withdrawal of sensory inputs, coming from the five senses into the physical being.
6. Dharna (Concentration): Creation of one-pointedness of the mind.
7. Dhyana (Meditation): Uninterrupted flow of concentration.

8. Samadhi (Merger of individual consciousness with universal consciousness): Highly esoteric practice that cannot be taught. Not practiced in the West.

Modern yoga came into being by bridging the realms of Indian spirituality and European physical culture. It has been moulded in conformity with contemporary aspirations and inclinations that are the common heritage of a cosmopolitan culture. Of the eight limbs of yoga, three - physical postures, breathing practices and meditation - are popular in the West. It is generally accepted that the primary goal of yoga is to maintain physical fitness and to cultivate balance, calm, harmony and awareness.

There is a wide range of research in field and that it is hard to compare and evaluate this research due to the different approaches and styles included as 'yoga' and also the different methodologies researchers use. The yoga of Patanjali is now considered 'classical' (Singleton 2008). Yoga in the West puts more emphasis in the postural practice. It is presented without its religio-philosophical teachings and is therefore compatible with secularisation (De Michelis 2004). Hatha yoga that was used in the programme is the most common form of yoga as practiced in the West and comprises of three of the eight limbs outlined by Patanjali, viz., asanas (physical poses), pranayama (breath control) and dhyana (meditation). The followers of yoga guru Tirumalai Krishnamacharya (1888-1989) from Mysore, India popularised yoga in the West (Alter 2004), the most famous being Pattabhi Jois (Ashtanga yoga), B. K. S. Iyenger (Iyenger yoga) and T. K. V. Desikachar (Viniyoga). Other examples of Krishnamacharya-inspired yoga school are Flow yoga, Process yoga, Power yoga, Yin yoga and Dynamic yoga. They synthesise yoga practices that have originated from the teachings of Krishnamacharya, Jois, Iyenger and Desikachar (Nevrin 2008). Scholars believe that that health, peace and joy are not the primary goals of yoga practice; the ultimate objective of yoga is to release the latent powers within the human body and mind, which leads to care for the welfare of others.

In the recent decades, interest in yoga research has skyrocketed in the West. Numerous empirical studies have demonstrated the therapeutic effects of yoga practices on a wide range of physical and mental health indices (McCall 2007). Yogic science is not just a set of physical exercises or religious rituals but a set of theories about the mind that have bio-psycho-social implications in relation to health and illness (Pradhan 2014). Yoga is also credited with promoting ethical behaviour (Asthana 2022). The growing interest in yoga and its possible applications in health, psychology, and other fields is noteworthy. Yet, the research on effect of yoga on intelligence is not even a trickle as compared to the flood of studies on therapeutic effects of yoga. This study aims to partially close this gap. . The discussion and literature cited above leads us to the formulation of the following hypotheses:

H1 Yoga will be positively related to SQ.

Mediation by mindfulness

Mindfulness describes a present-oriented state of conscious awareness, in which the individual is aware of multiple perspectives. The concept of mindfulness was brought to the West by venerable Buddhist scholar Thích Nhất Hạnh in the 1960's. The person credited most in popularising mindfulness in the west is Jon Kabat-Zinn who had been a student of Nobel laureate microbiologist Salvador Edward Luria as also of Thích Nhất Hạnh. He introduced Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Programme (MBSR) in 1979 at University of Massachusetts Medical Centre. as a flexible vehicle for the seamless integration of eastern meditative practices and perspectives within a western paradigm of behavioural intervention. Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) is a direct extension of traditional Cognitive Behaviour Therapy. It was initially developed to prevent relapse among patients who had recovered from depression. Interest in incorporating mindfulness is on the rise and it is being used in treatment of various psychiatric disorders including generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, social anxiety disorder (Baer 2003). As pointed out by Grossman & Van Dam (2011), “mindfulness within Western psychology is generally assumed to reflect the Buddhist construct. However, definitions of the term vary greatly from that of a simple therapeutic or experiential technique to a multi-faceted activity, which requires practice and refinement” (p. 220).

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

Yoga lays more emphasis on mind-body awareness than it does on exact physical posture alignment (De Michelis 2007). Pranayama focusses on awareness of breath (Iyenger 1981) and meditation is a scaffolding to mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn 2005). Accordingly, yoga practice is expected to enhance awareness of the present moment. Danielle Shelov and colleagues (2009) discovered that yoga intervention was a practical way to raise levels of mindfulness in their study of 46 staff and students from two institutions in the Bronx, New York. Similar outcomes were recently discovered in a study of 47 nursing students in Turkey (Erkin & Senuzun Aykar 2021). Janika Epe and colleagues (2021) discovered in a study of 26 students and employees at a German institution

that various yoga practices improve mindfulness. The discussion and literature cited above leads us to the formulation of the following hypothesis:

H2 Yoga will be positively related to Mindfulness.

H3 Mindfulness will mediate the relation between yoga and SQ.

Materials and Methods

Study Design: Since our purpose is to evaluate the hypotheses deductively, we chose a quantitative instead of a qualitative technique. The Randomised Controlled Experiment covered public sector executives undertaking Executive development programmes. This was not a clinical trial as no specific pathologies were being treated. No measurements were made by clinical instruments. All participants had prior management experience and were well-educated. Average age was 35 years 10 months. Prior to joining MBA programme average work experience in managerial capacity as in the participants' bio-data was 5 years and 2 months.

Sample: The personal information of the participants was encrypted using a secure key code. Individuals could request a personal report with their results after the tests were completed. Neither the faculty nor the administrators were given access to questionnaires or study data. Following baseline measures, the participants were randomly assigned to either the next batch (intervention group) or the waiting list (control group) using a computer-generated randomisation sequence, and they were notified via automated emails.

Intervention: Yoga classes were scheduled every day for 90 minutes, seven days a week for ten weeks. The schedule comprised 5 minutes of warm-up, 45 minutes of asanas (physical poses), 20 minutes of pranayama (breathing exercises), and 20 minutes of meditation. Those who could not spare that much time on a particular day, were advised to do a shorter version at home and report at the end of the week. The unit of measurement was hours per week.

Measures: Tromsø Social Intelligence Scale (TSIS) designed by Silvera et al. (2001) is used in this study to measure social intelligence. TSIS is a twenty-one-item self-report instrument of the scale with social information processing (e.g., "I can predict other people's behaviour"), social skills (e.g., "I often feel uncertain around new people who I don't know") and social awareness ("I often feel that it is difficult to understand others' choices.") as sub-dimensions. The scale has good psychometric properties (Grieve & Mahar 2013). Recently, this scale been used in several research studies similar to this study (e.g., Swain et al. 2022). The items in the scale are accompanied by a Likert-type rating scale (1-7). In our study Cronbach alpha was 0.86. MAAS (Mindful Attention Awareness Scale) designed by Brown and Ryan (2003) has been used to measure mindfulness. While

MAAS has many detractors, it continues to be used more widely than any other scale for mindfulness. It was decided to use MAAS as a unidimensional scale – rather than using a multidimensional scale such as the Five Factor Mindfulness Questionnaire – because our theorising does not differentiate among different mindfulness dimensions. The Cronbach’s alpha was 0.91.

Data analysis: To determine causation, four sets of data were compared – data from control group before and after intervention and of control group before and after the experiment. The data related to mindfulness and social intelligence. Since the intervention group and the control group were selected on random basis, as expected there was no difference between the two groups. Significant change in the variables of interest in the two groups after the intervention. Correlations between variables were examined to get preliminary indications of relationship among variables. Once it was seen that the correlations are in the expected directions, it was examined whether mediation exists and if so whether it is positive or negative, partial or complete. For mediation analysis, PROCESS macro for regression (Hayes 2022) was used.

Results and Discussion

The effectiveness of the yoga intervention is shown in Table 1 in a difference-in-differences manner. Over time change in mindfulness and social intelligence of the control group was insignificant. The intervention resulted in substantial increase in mindfulness and social intelligence.

Table 1

Scores at baseline and follow-up for intervention and control group

Variables	Intervention group (n=125)		Control group (n=122)		Difference in difference
	initial	final	initial	final	
Mindfulness	3.89 (0.71)	4.12 (1.05)	3.88 (0.69)	3.89 (0.70)	0.22***
Social intelligence	4.48 (0.67)	4.75 (0.75)	4.49 (0.68)	4.55 (0.68)	0.21***

*** $p < 0.001$

Table 2 shows the means, standard deviations and correlations of yoga, mindfulness and social intelligence. All correlations are positive and significant with p value near zero, as predicted. Yoga, in particular, is linked to mindfulness and the latter is also positively linked to social intelligence.

Table 2*Means, standard deviations, correlations, and reliabilities*

	Variable	M	SD	1	2
1	Yoga	4.98	0.78		
2	Mindfulness	4.12	1.05	0.15*	
3	SQ	4.75	0.75	0.29**	0.35***

N = 125 *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

The next step was to see if mindfulness increased through yoga plays a mediating role or is it merely a side benefit. Table 3 shows the regression findings of the mediation model. Our findings demonstrate partial mediation, which means significance of the mediation as also the direct effects.

Table3.*Regression results for mediation model*

	Mindfulness			Social intelligence		
	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>t</i>
Constant	2.16	0.31	3.97***	2.31	0.70	3.30***
Yoga	0.19	0.06	3.06***	0.25	0.12	2.08**
Mindfulness				0.71	0.26	2.73***
Indirect effect				0.33	0.11	3.00***
Total effect				0.58	0.29	2.00**
R ²	0.41			0.53		

Note. Unstandardised coefficients are reported. *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$

Table 2 shows that yoga is positively related social intelligence. This validates hypothesis 1. There is very thin previous research on impact of yoga on intelligences. There is none on yoga's impact on social intelligence. Based on the results, it could be suggested that yoga positively relates to mindfulness (Hypothesis 2). Previous research has found such results in case of staff and students from two institutions in the Bronx, New York (Shelov et al. 2009) nursing students in Turkey (Erkin & Senuzun Aykar 2021) and students and employees at a German institution (Epe et al. 2021). Our results validate this hypothesis. According to hypothesis 5, mindfulness will mediate the relation between yoga and SQ. While a lot of research is available on the effectiveness of MBSR, MBCT

etc., relationship between mindfulness on SQ has been neglected. Results in Table 3 suggest validation of hypothesis 3.

Yoga increases mindfulness while enhanced mindfulness increases social intelligence. Thus, yoga increases social intelligence directly as also through mindfulness. In case of social intelligence, 43 per cent of increase comes from yoga directly and 57 percent through enhanced mindfulness.

As per practice of western scholars, we have subtracted spirituality from yoga and mindfulness and taken a material approach. However, some educationists consider such an approach a Eurocentric bias. Since we are now in a post-secular age, in order to get the full educational benefits of Eastern contemplative practices, these practices could be linked to their spiritual roots (Morgan 2015). Indifference to religious traditions that go beyond narrow practical ideas negate the benefits and a denaturalised practice detached from its soteriological setting is not useful. Future studies could address these issues.

While the results of the research are robust, with due humility it has to be admitted that sophisticated statistical analysis techniques used may not result in a complete knowledge of yoga-based practices. Yoga is not a sensory toy for business students that can be made perfect through theoretical and empirical studies. There could be modes of mind the working of which may only be accessible through far more advanced research capacities yet to be developed.

Conclusion

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

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

The implications of these findings for public sector management are substantial. As public enterprise executives face increasingly complex stakeholder relationships and societal challenges, the cultivation of social intelligence through yoga-based interventions could significantly enhance

their leadership efficacy. Moreover, the mindfulness cultivated through yoga practice may contribute to more ethical, empathetic, and responsive public service leadership.

However, it is imperative to acknowledge the limitations of this study. While our randomised controlled experiment design provides robust evidence, the relatively short intervention period may not fully capture the long-term effects of sustained yoga practice. Additionally, the study's focus on a specific cohort of public enterprise executives may limit the generalisability of findings to other leadership contexts or cultural settings.

Future research should endeavour to address these limitations by conducting longitudinal studies to assess the enduring impact of yoga on social intelligence and leadership outcomes. Cross-cultural comparisons would also be valuable in understanding how the relationship between yoga, mindfulness, and social intelligence may vary across different societal contexts. Furthermore, qualitative investigations could provide richer insights into the lived experiences of leaders engaging in yoga practice and how it shapes their interpersonal dynamics and decision-making processes.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the nascent field of contemplative leadership development by empirically demonstrating the potential of yoga to enhance social intelligence in public enterprise executives. As public sector organisations grapple with the complexities of the 21st century, the integration of yoga-based practices into leadership development programmes may offer a promising avenue for cultivating more socially intelligent, mindful, and effective public service leaders.

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