

## **GENDER-BASED YOGA FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

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### **—Abstract —**

Organisations are taking proactive measures to manage conflict and intra-level competition through employee wellness programmes, emphasizing the use of yoga for developing harmonious relationships and positive behavioural changes at the workplace. Yoga has gained enormous popularity worldwide due to its long-term impact on physical, mental and emotional levels of employees. Although yoga has been incorporated as one of the employee wellness programmes in several organizations, its role in conflict management has not been researched comprehensively. Therefore the purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between the implementation of gender-based yoga and conflict resolution amongst employees for improved productivity. In order to obtain relevant data, qualitative research approach was utilized. Three important issues, namely *behavioural changes*, *relationships with others* and *work productivity* were investigated. The results suggest that gender-based yoga enhances the balance of feminine and masculine traits, creating alignment in physical, emotional, and psychological health, thereby improving the general wellbeing of employees within an organisation.

**Key Words:** *Yoga; gender; wellbeing; employees; productivity; conflict resolution*

**JEL Classification:** M14

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Behavioural and psychological studies conducted in the field of conflict management involving gender differences suggest that traditionally (and this is still the case) women “are taught to define their sense of self within the context of relationships” (Brahnam, Margavio, Hignite, Barrier & Chin, 2005:200), whereas men are “taught to define themselves in terms of domination and control” (Brahnam et al., 2005:200). There are constructive and destructive types of conflict resolution. The constructive management patterns include problem-solving, agreement, and negotiation; and the destructive management patterns include non-verbal conflict, withdrawal, disengagement, hostility and threat (Turner, 2007:16). The yogic paths discussed above can be incorporated into organisational culture for implementing constructive types of conflict resolution, thereby maintaining stress-free relationships at the workplace, developing positive perception towards fellow colleagues, and instilling positive personality/behavioural traits. These healthier characteristics are vital for employees to contribute towards improved organisational productivity with heightened performance levels. This study investigates the use of yoga to enhance conflict management in the South African employment sector from a gender perspective. It emphasises the empowerment approach and key traits of empowerment are focused on behavioural changes, a healthier relationship with others, and improved productivity.

## 2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Yoga, an ancient Indian spiritual concept practised over thousands of years has attracted research interest by various scholars, practitioners and holistic organisations (Lasater, 1997; Collins, 1998; Mark & Lark, 1999; Bowling & Hoffman, 2000). Yoga has been explored as a science, an art, a discipline, a technique of “moral integrity and spiritual renewal” (Whicher, 1998:308). Others see it as a “union with the self” (Omar, 2007:42); a form of “self- study” (Prabhu, 2014:1); and a “connection” (Big Shakti, 2014:1). Yoga encompasses the union of *purusa* (the creator: the masculine) and *prakrti* (the creation: the feminine). This union is vital for absolute realization of the self. Gender-based yoga, as a result, concentrates on empowering the masculine and feminine aspects of self. Through the description and significance of yoga explored by scholars and practitioners, it can be deduced that yoga is a practice and discipline that concentrates on body postures and breathing patterns, hence aligning body, mind and soul in equilibrium in the pursuit of wellness. Yoga means unity and when practised

regularly, brings wellbeing at physical, mental, emotional, behavioural, spiritual, and psychological levels. It leads to changed [positive] perspectives towards self and others. It is therefore an emerging concept in healing/self-healing modalities. Four basic principles underlie the teachings and practices of yoga's healing system (Desikachar, Bragdon & Bossart, 2005:17-39). The first principle is that the human body is a holistic entity comprising various interrelated dimensions inseparable from one another. Accordingly, the health or illness of one affects the other dimensions. The second principle is that individuals and their needs are unique and must therefore be approached in a way that acknowledges this individuality and be tailored accordingly. The third principle is that yoga is empowering, hence the student is his or her own healer. Yoga engages the student in the healing process by playing an active role in his/her journey toward health and furthermore the healing comes from within, instead of from an outside source. This brings a greater sense of autonomy. The fourth basic principle of yoga is that the quality and state of an individual's mind is crucial to healing. When the individual has a positive mindset, healing happens more quickly, whereas if the mind-state is negative, the healing process may be prolonged (Woodyard, 2011). This yogic configuration can be achieved through five paths, namely *Jnana Yoga* or *Jnana Marga* (path of knowledge), the *Yoga of Wisdom*; *Bhakti Yoga* (path of devotion), the *Yoga of Devotion*; *Karma Yoga* (path of selfless action), the path of undertaking selfless service; *Raja Yoga* or *Ashtanga Yoga* (eight-fold yoga), the royal or psychological form of yoga which involves the mind; and *Mantra, Naada Yoga*, the path in which the world of sound is also seen as a manifestation of the Supreme Being (Narasimhan & Prasad, 2012).

Gender is defined conceptually by various scholars and academics (Reeves & Baden, 2003; Scott & Marshall, 2005; Reddy, 2006) as varied personality and behavioural characteristics that are linked to feminine and masculine aspects, such as the diverse nature of responsibilities; varied forms of needs; individualised identity; and distinct perspectives and outlook. Their personage, be it feminine or masculine, demands and deserves equal rights, respect, and opportunities towards personal and professional development, wellness and empowerment (Reddy, 2006; Quirk, 2013). The current study therefore employs the empowerment approach as a theoretical scaffold (Govender & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2013; Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2013; Vyas-Doorgapersad & Surujlal, 2014).

### **3. THEORETICAL SETTING**

#### **3.1 Conflict and yoga**

During 47 visits to the former USSR throughout the Cold War period, yoga teacher Rama Jyoti Vernon developed a conflict resolution technique based on Patanjali's Yoga Sutras. Combining yoga philosophy with deep listening, Vernon guided dialogues between Soviets and Americans to build understanding and trust and enhance peace (Bryant, 2013:1). Yoga and yoga meditations are therefore considered helpful in developing calmness in relationships, resolving inner turmoil (jealousy, ego, depression and frustration) and outer conflicts, such as stress and competition. Yoga is therefore considered a significant means of conflict resolution, stipulated thousands of years ago in yoga literature and scriptures. One of the notable yogic teaching documents is the Yoga Sutras that aligns with Buddhist philosophy and identifies the root causes of varied conflicts. In the modern era the principles of Yoga Sutras are incorporated under conflict resolution by various practitioners to cover issues such as awareness regarding conflict, components of conflict situations, masculine and feminine divergence of conflict, and conflict assessment.

#### **3.2 Conflict and gender**

Conflict due to gender differences has been researched and debated comprehensively. Some of the significant works which express opinions on gender differences and similarities and the problem of coping with work-family conflict include a useful publication by Burley (1994) which exposes the conflict between couples who are career oriented. It was found that there is a relationship between key variables such as gender-role and work-family interface. The findings of another study by Rajadhyaksha, Korabik and Aycan (undated:3-8) reveals that gender-based "multiple roles create psychological tension and conflict". In addition, it is shown that family role conflict is a "significant predictor of strain- and behaviour-based WFC (work family conflict) for both genders" within family and workplace settings. A later study by Birkhoff (2015) emphasising gender-based roles and conflict in the workplace provides significant indications that "women experience different disputes in the workplace" and that their disputes are handled differently from those experienced by men. Furthermore, the outcomes of such workplace conflict are different for the two groups. This current study is important because it "directly correlates the gender differences in workplace dispute origins, processes and outcomes to patterns in

employment inequality” (Birkhoff, 2015:2). These research findings have resulted in several academic and professional discussions on gender-based conflict resolution.

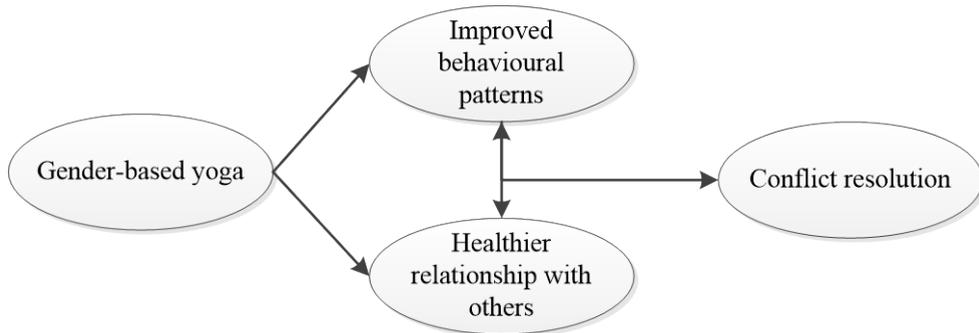
### **3.3 Conflict, gender and yoga**

The spiritual aspect of masculinity (the yang) incorporates characters of being hot and active, while the feminine (the yin) qualities are seen as cold and passive. These qualities need to be in complete balance, avoiding being either excessive or deficient in yang and yin energy levels. Yoga therefore has to offer assorted yoga techniques that are applicable to males (enhancing the yin in them) and females (strengthening the yang in them) to promote the individual’s emotional, physical, psychological, and mental wellbeing. It is also vital to “comprehend the gender-based requirements at professional and personal levels, hence avoiding conflict-based stress”, leading to what Vyas-Doorgapersad & Surujlal (2014) label “improved harmony-based understanding”. This harmonious relationship and conflict-free environment can be achieved if one develops tolerance towards self and fellow colleagues. According to Zarthoshtimanesh (2012) “tolerance increases and becomes a virtue not if one tolerates more, but if [this tolerance] synthesizes itself with other qualities”. Here he mentions a number of positive personal attributes such as patience (*titiksha*); forbearance (*sahanashakti*); calmness (*shantaguna*); forgiveness (*kshama*), knowing, inner determination, and compassion. This implies that employees who are tolerant in the sense that Zarthoshtimanesh (2012) suggests, are more likely to enjoy better relationships with their fellow workers in the organization. Furthermore tolerance has the potential to create a more harmonious and efficient workplace. The elements of yogic practices are becoming increasingly popular in organisations globally and lead to a relatively stress-free and conflict-free work environment. Accordingly, new career paths are currently being created in human resource management portfolios to fill positions such as a Gender Equality and Conflict Resolution Consultant (Centre for Social Innovation, 2015). The task of the consultant is to “work on empowering women and men using conflict resolution tools to transform conflict into peace”. Similarly, using these tools the consultant is required to defuse confrontational behaviour and restore calm; inspire inactive, depressed employees into active participation; and turn frustration into satisfaction (Centre for Social Innovation, 2015:1). One of the techniques to achieve transformed behavioural patterns is making use of yoga practices.

#### 4. CONCEPTUAL MODEL

A literature review guided the development of a conceptual model, labelled Gender-based Yoga for Conflict Resolution (G-b CR) (Figure 1) justifying the aim of this study.

**Figure 1: Conceptual Model: Gender-based Yoga for Conflict Resolution (G-b CR)**



The model proposes that practising gender-based yoga leads to improved behavioural patterns such as greater tolerance, patience, harmony and calmness and that it also promotes healthier relationships with others. Improved behaviour and healthier relationships, in turn, contribute towards swifter and more amicable conflict resolution.

#### 5. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The high demands of globalisation have meant that there is a competitive edge in organisations and a demand for high productivity and improved performance at individual and organisational levels. The consequence is deepened conflict among employees; a power struggle for ego satisfaction; and a status-based need to achieve higher ranks. This competition may impact negatively on the performance of both male and female employees due to conflicting personality traits. There is a marked lack of literature on workplace stress and furthermore, there is no national database available in South Africa on this important aspect of organizational dynamics. Nevertheless there are common factors that create occupational stress and in the South African context, although limited research has thus far been conducted, the findings of such work has shown that there is a conflict between the personalities of employees, their “career preferences, needs, motives and values” and the aims of their respective organizations. According to Coetzee and Villiers (2014:34) this can be ascribed to “individual behavioural outcomes such

as job dissatisfaction, low organisational commitment and engagement, substandard job performance, job stress and turnover”. In addition, “a statistically significant relationship has also been shown between high levels of stress and illness-related absenteeism” (Volmink, 2014:2). Some organisations have implemented Employee Wellness Programmes (EWPs) to deal with workplace stress, but the authors of this article are of the opinion that there is insufficient incorporation of workplace spirituality or spiritual work wellness in these EWPs. Furthermore, the literature review conducted by the authors revealed that empirical research on the utilisation of yoga to resolve conflict at workplace is scarce. Hence this study is a follow-up on a previous study undertaken on gender-based yoga (Vyas-Doorgapersad & Surujlal, 2014), which explored the role of yoga in employee wellness programmes introduced in organisations for the purpose of assisting employees to cope with stress. Stress is also a significant variable that contributes to conflict at the workplace. The purpose of this study is therefore to advance the previous work(s) which posit that yoga is a reliable means of conflict resolution.

## **6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

An understanding of yoga and its significance in conflict resolution was gained by undertaking a detailed review of the literature. According to Webster and Watson (2002:48-49), “a methodological review of past literature is a crucial endeavour for any academic research”. Furthermore, the use of ideas from the literature justifies the application of a particular research approach to investigate a specific occurrence or phenomenon. In this instance a qualitative research approach was used to collect relevant data. This type of approach assists in understanding a phenomenon in the natural context of specific settings (Hoepfl, 1997).

### **6.1 Sample**

In this research initiative the sample comprised 28 participants (n=28) of whom seven were male and twenty-one were female. The participants were drawn from a range of professions such as accounting, education, banking, information technology, animal behaviourism, social work, health and fitness and spiritual practice. The ages of males ranged from 38 years to 45 years while the age of female participants was in the range from 30 years to 71 years. The participants were all employees from organisations that have incorporated yoga into their employee wellness programmes. The criteria used in selecting the participants were a) that they practised yoga in the workplace; and b) that they were involved

in conflict situations in their particular workplaces. Because the number of organizations that have embraced yoga in their wellness programmes is limited, the principal researcher utilised social media (LinkedIn) to identify and contact people and organizations who are involved in yoga-based practices for workplace wellness. In addition to this method, snowball sampling was used to identify other participants for the study.

## **6.2 Instrument and procedure**

An interview schedule was compiled with open-ended questions focusing on issues such as behavioural changes and relationships with others. Examples of questions asked included: 'Describe some of the behavioural changes you experienced'; and 'did you notice any changes in your workplace relationship with others?' All respondents were approached personally by the principal researcher and were asked whether they were prepared to participate in the study. Once consent was received from the participants a web-based interview schedule was sent to them to complete and return. This approach assisted in overcoming geographical and distance constraints. The same set of questions was posed to all respondents in order to ensure standardisation of responses. A timeframe of three months was established to identify participants, approach them for their consent, send out the interview schedule and receive their responses. The principal researcher then went through each of the interview schedules to ascertain whether all the questions had indeed been answered. In instances where the answers were unclear, the principal researcher communicated telephonically with the participant to gain clarity.

## **6.3 Data analysis**

Copies of the participants' responses were made and each researcher conducted a qualitative content analysis independently by reading and re-reading the responses to reduce the data into relevant and manageable information units (Weber, 1990). This was done by using the immersion and crystallization technique to organize the data, examine the text thoroughly and crystallize the most important aspects (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Each researcher then grouped recurring words, phrases and comments into *a-priori* issues, namely *behavioural changes* and *relationship with others*, independently. Thereafter, notes and themes that emerged from each researcher's interpretation of the text were compared and discussed until consensus was reached regarding the analysis of the data. Two researchers who have significant experience in qualitative research then validated the findings.

## 6.4 Ethical considerations

Ethics in research means that “data should be legitimately obtained and credit accorded to those who contributed to the research” (Bazeley, 2010:439). The following ethical issues as discussed by Strydom (2005) were addressed: a) all participants were briefed on the purpose of the study and their written consent to participate was obtained; b) participants were informed that their involvement was voluntary and could be terminated at any stage; and c) core ethical issues such as respect, honesty, confidentiality and anonymity were adhered to throughout the study.

## 7. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Gustafsson, Hassmén, Kenttä and Johansson (2008) posit that the description and interpretation of data in most qualitative studies are closely linked. Therefore, in order to avoid repetition the results and discussion have been merged into a single section.

### 7.1 Behavioural Changes

Participants in the study were requested to provide information on the way practising yoga had influenced their professional attitude (tolerance and patience at the workplace). One of the most marked improvements experienced by the participants was an improved professional attitude. This is evident in the following comments made by participants:

*“One becomes more tolerant, objective, and confident. One also develops feelings such as being more peaceful, centred and relaxed at the workplace. I developed an awareness of my fellow students/workers as bonded, close comrades.”*

*“One becomes calmer, less stressed, less angry, happier, more detached from workplace conflicts. I am more relaxed, more accepting of self. I also feel more grounded and positive in my outlook on life.”*

*“I’m afraid it took about 9 years for me to experience behavioural changes. I guess I am a pretty stubborn person. And self-centred. I am now a vegetarian and see the world around me in a completely different way. I am less self-centred (or so my friends tell me) and more inclined towards the idea of ‘giving something back’ to the world around me.”*

The responses revealed that yoga has a positive impact on behavioural changes by developing higher levels of tolerance, patience, and the avoidance of conflict through the acceptance of self and fellow colleagues. This form of conflict resolution was identified in a study by Jensen and Kenny (2004). In providing guidelines to deal with behavioural attitudes towards others, the authors emphasized that alternative and complementary treatments, such as yoga, are needed to optimize therapeutic effects. Jensen and Kenny (2004:205) explain that “yoga is a systematic body of knowledge concerned with the physiological and mental processes that change the physiology of the body through respiratory manipulation (breathing techniques), postures, and cognitive control (relaxation and meditation)”. The literature review confirms this view and Gard, Noggle, Park, Vago and Wilson (2014:9) provide a more detailed physiological rationale in maintaining that practising yoga “facilitates self-regulation via an ethically motivated monitoring and control process”. This, they explain, “involves initiation and maintenance of behavioural change as well as inhibiting undesired output by both higher-level and lower-level brain networks in the face of stress-related physical or emotional challenge”. The evidence points to yoga having a positive influence on conflict resolution in the workplace.

## 7.2 Relationship with others

Participants were also requested to provide information on how practising yoga had influenced their relationship with others in the workplace. One of the greatest improvements noted was the positivism participants were able to develop with other colleagues in the workplace. This is evident in the following comments:

*“One becomes more tolerant, objective, rational, and logical, more open to new ideas and better able to cope with stress.”*

*“I have had to become more assertive with difficult students and have firmly and resolutely [without becoming aggressive] stuck to my convictions and in the end won my silent battle.”*

*“I am less irritable and much more tolerant. I listen better and have become more considerate of the needs of others.”*

The positive responses regarding the link between yoga and improved relationships with others are supported by Dworkis (2015:2), who postulated: “As [you] pay attention to the ‘perfection’ of [your] body and as [you] begin to apply yoga’s subtle details to [your] practice, [your] body becomes increasingly balanced. Likewise, as [you] learn to pay attention to the ‘perfection’ of others,

[you] become increasingly aware of the subtle ways [this] affects [your] relationships”. Dworkis (2015) then explains: “Yoga, as in relationships, is all about taking personal responsibility, being proactive without aggression and doing less to get more”. Tang, Ma, Wang, Feng, Lu, Yu, Sui, Rothbart, Fan and Posner (2007) conducted a study on the effect of yoga on conflict management. They used a standard computerised attention test to measure how yoga influenced orientation, alertness and the ability to resolve conflict. The results indicated lower anxiety levels and less depression, anger, and fatigue. At the workplace there was also a significant decrease in stress and a reduction of conflict-driven behaviour. These findings are substantiated by a research-based opinion expressed by Srinivasan (refer Sivananda Yoga Camp, 2016) that “through yoga one is able to master one’s emotional strength which will improve the ability to concentrate, focus and remove distractions”. Importantly, if employees are more focused they are also “likely to be more efficient and productive”. Confirmation is provided in another study by Deshpande (2012) who stated that work productivity can be enhanced if a stress-free environment is created by incorporating yoga and meditation in organisations.

### **7.3 Work productivity**

In their responses on the impact of yoga on their work productivity levels there was also positive feedback, as shown in the following excerpts:

*“I feel more productive, get more work done, and I am very focused. I am in less conflict with others and open to new ideas.”*

*“Productivity goes up as one becomes more focused on the important matters. The mind is less scattered and energy levels are higher. The immune system strengthens and one is less prone to illnesses. I am more tolerant, less egoistic, and stress-free. I am productive.”*

*“One feels a lot more accepting and comfortable with one’s body, weight and form. Emotionally one becomes less volatile and hence one avoids conflicts. This creates a more productive environment.”*

The responses linking yoga with reduced levels of conflict and improved work productivity are supported by a research initiative conducted by Hall in 2009 to observe the impact of practicing yoga in organizations. These findings indicated that yoga is beneficial on three levels: it allows for greater bonding; it promotes psychological flexibility; and it encourages employees to work out their disagreements. The outcome was that higher levels of productivity were achieved

(Hall, 2009:3). In 2010, a study to explore the influence of “the yoga way of life” on organizational performance was carried out by Adhia, Nagendra and Mahadevan. The authors claimed that yoga not only improves job satisfaction and enhances organizational commitment but also has a positive impact on “organizational citizenship behavior, and goal orientation of managers”. They maintain that yoga contributes to the general performance of the organization and decreases levels of stress and conflict (2010: 54). In the area of conflict resolution particularly, research has indicated that gender affects dispute handling mechanisms (Birkhoff, 2015:2) because males and females react differently to conflict-related situations. At an individual level too, men and women have different tendencies to deal with stressful situations and emerging conflicts. Women are more likely to lose their calm and become extrovert and verbal, while men react by tending towards quietness (Marshall & Robson, 2014; Birkhoff, 2015). It is important to be “aware of and understand the effect gender may have on ... approaches to conflict” (Marshall & Robson, 2014: 5). From an analysis of the responses in the present study it can be deduced that practising yoga is significant in promoting a wider, more focused approach and promoting team spirit, thereby creating a harmonious working environment. Furthermore, the responses correspond with the empowerment approach which emphasizes that “both men and women deserve equal appreciation” inside and outside the workplace (Govender & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2013; Vyas-Doorgapersad & Surujlal, 2014) and this is vital to avoid gender-based, discrimination-oriented conflict.

## **8. CONCLUSION**

Gender-based yoga can bring balance to feminine and masculine traits and thus create an alignment of the physical, emotional, psychological and medical wellbeing of employees within an organisation. Through regular practice, yoga improves behavioural patterns that are so vital for a healthy relationship in the workplace. With time, employees begin to focus on team-work, common goals, a shared vision, and unison in their thinking, which in turn reduces conflict. An organisation where employees work in harmony and synchronicity yields improved productivity at both individual and organisational levels.

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