



## Creative Practices as Mutual Recovery: Flamenco-Yoga

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### Abstract

This article describes the 'learning conversations' that lead to the development of a Flamenco-Yoga workshop aiming to promote wellbeing and mental health. This innovative workshop expands the notion of *creative practices as mutual recovery*, an emerging movement within *Health Humanities* that invites, not only those experiencing mental health distress, but their carers, family and friends into the journey of recovery. Cumulative evidence shows that art-based practices can have a positive effect on psychological and social outcomes, however, lack of motivation, individual differences and preferences can be a barrier for engagement. This workshop presents an appealing and uplifting intervention that can be adapted to suit all audiences.

### Keywords

Creative practices; Wellbeing; Mental health; Mutual recovery; Flamenco; Yoga

### Introduction

At the recent 5<sup>th</sup> International Health Humanities conference, titled "Arts and Humanities for Improving Health, Education and Social Inclusion: Creative Practice and Mutuality" (15<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> September 2016, Sevilla), we presented a creative workshop in which delegates were invited to participate in a Flamenco-Yoga session, an innovative intervention to promote *mutual recovery* and wellbeing. Mutual Recovery [1,2] has its roots in the increasingly influential notion of "recovery" in mental healthcare, and refers to the possibility of achieving a meaningful and more resilient life irrespective of mental health "symptoms" or disabilities. Mutual recovery challenges current individualised and divided conceptions of recovery within social and health care services and policy. Mutual recovery is understood as an interactional, holistic and relational process where all players are present enacting togetherness, instigating a more fully and meaningful understanding of the recovery process. Mutual recovery promotes wellbeing and mental health not only among those people that suffer mental distress but also among their formal and informal carers including healthcare professionals, friends and loved ones. Traditionally, recovery-based interventions tend to focus almost exclusively on treating service users, failing to address the high levels of 'burnout' and work-related stress among informal carers, and health practitioners [3,4]. Enacting togetherness is an important relational concept within mutual recovery [5]. By engaging in creative practices with someone else, we are expecting the participants to

gain access to, and become part of an unfolding enacted narrative that could improve the relationships that take place in, for example, residential setting like children homes or among communities that traditionally have been divided (e.g., clinicians vs. service users).

Sevilla is a central location for Flamenco, an art form including music, dance and singing that has been evolving in the Andalusian area of South Spain since 1770s [6]. Our workshop started with a brief presentation of a previous research project that introduced a 20-week Yoga course among a group of children in care (CiC) and their formal carers [7]. Results from this project showed that by engaging in the yoga practice with others, CiC's and their carers gained access to the other's person experiences and responses to actions, which created spaces for interpretation and empathy. The design of this 20-week yoga course among CiC's and their carers took into consideration the personal attributes and core qualities that CiC's identified as important among residential staff (i.e., physically active, positive, calm) [8], the systematic poor outcomes reported within CiC populations [9], and the high levels of stress experienced by residential staff and management working in children's home [10].

### Flamenco-Yoga workshop at the 5<sup>th</sup> Health Humanities Conference

Conference delegates were invited to experience a 40 min workshop which was previously designed and developed with Kundali yoga teacher Emily Haslam-Jones and Flamenco teacher Diane Pickard, both professionals based at Nottingham (UK). It was anticipated that all prospective participants could be considered as a sample of the general population with a personal and professional interest in creative practices for wellbeing. This sample was considered to be a non-clinical sample that could include different levels of physical ability and previous experiences with both flamenco and/or yoga practice. The style of yoga was based on a secular version of Kundalini yoga and included postures (asanas), breathing exercises (pranayama), dancing and meditation techniques. The session was structured to include gentle warm up exercises, one or two periods of meditation or rest combined with physical movements ranging from warm ups typical from a flamenco technique class, to a peak session of dancing (i.e., flamenco-like movements), combined with some static postures, cooling down, 10 min relaxation, and ending with 3-5 min of meditation. Flamenco music was played at all the times, combining faster rhythms for the more dynamic parts with slower ones for the less intense activities. Kundalini yoga movements were adapted to include flamenco features such as posture, footwork, or hand/finger movements. In some aspects it resembled the newly popular interval/intensity training [11] in that there are short burst of intense activity, however, our approach is combined with the benefits of mindfulness and meditation which balance the elevating effects of exercise.

The workshop was run twice during the conference. No formal feedback was collected after or during the workshop but the first author captured anecdotal feedback and received numerous invitations to deliver the workshop again in different settings. To date, the first author has run the workshop several times among children and young people and is planning a systematic evaluation to understand the effects that creative practices as mutual recovery can have among clinical and non-clinical populations.

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Received: November 14, 2017 Accepted: December 18, 2017 Published: December 22, 2017

## Methodology

In order to design an engaging Flamenco-Yoga workshop, the first author liaised with both Kundalini teacher Emily Haslam-Jones and Flamenco teacher Diane Pickard in a series of conversations and consultations with the view to learn from their expertise and find plausible strategies to combine both practices. These *learning conversations* [12] took place over three sessions in which demonstrations and suggested activities were videoed recorded. These conversations were transcribed and analysed according to grounded theory approaches [13] involving the construction of theory through the analysis of data. The data transcribed was reviewed by the three authors, concepts or themes were identified and further elaborated. The audio transcripts were first read several times and then double coded for themes independently by one of the authors (E.P.V.) and also by an independent researcher with experience on qualitative analysis. Any disagreements in coding were addressed in discussion. Coding consisted of searching for sought themes and emergent themes in the transcript. We used NVivo v10 and Microsoft Word Office 2010.

## Results

Below we have selected extracts from the *learning conversations* that took place while preparing the workshop. These are moments of reflection in which Emily Haslam-Jones (EHJ) and Diane Pickard (DP) discussed key element of both Kundalini Yoga and Flamenco practice, its similarities as well as differences. The comments in brackets are further descriptions that the authors included to add clarity or further meaning to their narratives.

EP: What is yoga?

EHJ: Yoga means union or *yoke*, and it is about creating that connection or union within yourself [body, mind and spirit] but also with the universe, the world around you. It is this strange paradox by going inwards you connect better outwards. The thing interesting about Kundalini is not about trying to space out and getting into a kind of Holy Grail kind of consciousness it's got this pragmatism to it where it says 'Ok this is the world we are'. This [Kundalini Yoga practice] is part of what we do [at Yoga Nova]

[What is Yoga? In the Sutras [14], Patanjali describes yoga as 'calming the fluctuations of the mind stuff'. That is to say that the goal of yoga is to calm the mind and affect the way we not only think, but how we interact with the world. Through asana and pranayama we can positively affect our lives and interactions with others.

Kundalini Yoga, originally designed as a preparation for the body for meditation, has become well recognised for the ability to de-stress, and improve many mental and physical conditions. Yoga is a non-pharmacological intervention with few if any adverse effects [15] and it can be practised both in groups and individually. Yoga is highly versatile and offers a valuable self-help tool that can be adjusted and tailored to individual needs [16]. Cumulative evidence documenting the therapeutic benefits of yoga has grown considerably in the past few years with more healthcare practitioners drawing attention to these more contemplative eastern For example, the British National Health Services (NHS) recommends the practice of mindfulness to treat stress, anxiety and depression. Not only has the quantity of studies increased but the quality of those studies has improved exponentially, now including controlled trials and active control groups [17]. The positive benefits of yoga have been extensively

reported in studies tackling several mental health issues such as depression, sleep disorders, anxiety and panic disorder as well as insomnia (for a comprehensive review see [12]).

Kundalini yoga differs from other more classical styles of yoga where quiet still postures are predominant. Called by practitioners, 'the yoga of awareness', Kundalini yoga includes repetitive vocalisations (i.e., chanting), breathing exercises, yoga postures and meditation to facilitate a calmed and relaxed state of mind and body. This approach is much more suitable for those who have high levels of anxiety or trauma as it gives 'hooks' for the mind, keeping the practitioner occupied with following the rhythms of the practice. When practiced in a secular way, Kundalini merges traditional mantras with uplifting fun music whilst stimulating the 'feel good' brain chemistry. This combination improves relationships (e.g., sense of connection to others and self), promoting compassionate thinking, and attentional focus. Practised regularly over an extended period of time these changes in perception have the potential to affect the approach to life of participants in positive and profound ways [18]].

DP: Do you think this is because it [Kundalini Yoga] has a physical focus, as well as a spiritual focus for some people, that then it facilitates that response to the world around you? Or is it the other way around, when you are responding to what is around you by needing to have some meditative state?

EHJ: I think it's both, and I think the reason why practices that are high energy or more challenging [i.e. Power Yoga] are nowadays more popular is because that is the way Westerners have interpreted the yoga practices and that is a response to the work we live in. One of the biggest kind of divisions you get within the yoga community is that there are practitioners that think that have to be still and practitioners that think that you do not need to be physically still to induce the state of stillness inside you. So it is not necessary any right or wrong on that account. I do think people's life experiences of trauma all can be, you know, in a state of high agitation so they find hard to get into their calm part of their nervous system or find it easier to get into a practice that has movement involved. It does not say that they cannot find that state of stillness.

DP: Don't you think that has more to do with the personal relationship we develop with the material [yoga practice] that we are learning and practicing? If we are using that to resource, then that has to be a personal choice, surely.

EHJ: Yes and no. It is a very complicated debate. Do you know Ayurveda? Ayurveda is an Indian art; food as medicine. It is similar to Chinese medicine. Certain personality types [...] we all start as Kapha, is kind of lethargic, is warm, is slow and we are all moving toward Vata which is dry and airy. So if you are Kapha, to do a very slow yoga practice in which you have to stay 10 mins in a pose is not for you because it can make your more slowful. So this is how your body and your metabolism work.

DP: Ok, that makes lots of sense to me because it is about opposition and in many ways if you are a high energy sort of person, you may well have to learn how to be quiet in yourself within your mind, within your body and that could be, I would imagine, for some people very challenging, and vice versa, is equally challenging. Imagine... the same with Flamenco, you have the old school, the very much... the purist, who... in a nutshell, they may believe that is only the traditional material, it is all about the traditional songs and you are not allowed to explore or experiment with the art form.

EHJ: Yes, but in every discipline you have the traditional and the innovators...

DP: But in order to encourage people to come into it, and engage with the art form and engage with themselves and their bodies and everything else, you got to keep moving forwards because ...

EHJ: Tell me about it! Most of the yoga we do today come from the 1940s influenced by Indian relativism and gymnastics.... But where does tradition exactly lie, anyway?

[Both traditions; flamenco and Kundalini Yoga, look back to their origins in order to move forward. Our workshop incorporates more traditional elements to create an innovative creative practice]

DP: For my art form, for Flamenco, I do believe, the traditional... if you like, has a huge amount of value and your knowledge should come from that traditions, that is your foundation, without that knowledge how are we going to push the boundaries? If there is a respect to show... the foundations are in the tradition, in your experience, your knowledge in order to then move forward with confidence and strength, so you are emotionally, or physically, or whichever element you are exploring anyway, it has a kind of safety net, is a thing you can always go back to. Ok, I got lost here, somewhere in my journey. Just give a few steps back.

EHJ: Yes, go back, go back where you started. I do the same thing, I go back to tradition where all started, that gives me the first step to get started.

DP: Flamenco technique offers a platform to work from, a place of strength which is the body, but it is also about finding and embracing discipline and its power and its connection to what is inside you and determine what is an applied act onto your physical bodies or whether you are actually moving from....

[Flamenco and Yoga teach body awareness and invites students to initiate the movement from the solar plexus or core area (i.e., abdomen)].

EHJ: In yoga it does not need to look perfect. It [yoga] is a different thing than flamenco, it is not a visual thing. Yoga is just getting into that [inner] place DP: I still think, this is where the challenge comes with people who want to do something perfectly so they apply an external action and they never feel it from the inside and actually if you watch somebody who may be technically perfect but nothing coming from the inside, and I much rather watch somebody that is slightly not 100% on the technique or does not have this perfect... you know, because you can see them, you can actually see and feel from them what is coming from the inside.

DP: Flamenco is a melting pot...

AHJ: ... And the traditions and stories we tell ourselves, tell us more about us... they always do. I know a bit about the history of Flamenco.

DP: Its very basic element is the gypsies, they travel...

[Brief History of Flamenco as imagined through the migrants from India, who arrived in Spain in the 15 century, and came to be known as the Gypsies. These people are believed to have been composed of three groups/castes: metal smiths working in iron, copper and bronze; practitioners of animal husbandry such as horse doctors, farriers and dealers in live stock; and entertainers such singers, dancers, conjurers, magicians, jugglers, fortune tellers and acrobats. These fiercely proud

nomadic groups, divided into two major migratory routes with one faction heading northward towards Russian along the Caspian coast and the other faction heading southward through Iraq, Persia, Egypt, Arabia and North Africa before arriving in Spain via Mediterranean Sea through the Straits of Gibraltar on trading vessels and overland caravans trains, known as kumpanias. Both the music and culture of these people were highly influenced by the cultures they had reached along their journey and the melodies and rhythms alive in the culture of Spain that the gypsies heard upon their arrival planted the seeds for the birth of the art of flamenco. Flamenco has evolved as a forceful and exciting art form. It involves both physical and emotional intelligence and is a dance form characterized by hand clapping (palmas), percussive footwork (taconeos), intricate hand (floreos), arm (braseos) and body movements combined with a highly tuned in emotional structure that spans the deepest songs of the original gypsies through the styles influenced by Cuba and South America all the way to today, with traditional flamenco being fused with jazz, pop and World Music styles. Without dispute, flamenco is the most familiar form of Spanish dance. With its fire and intensity, its insistent rhythms, its soulful guitars and its passion, it has the power to draw people in and after watching a performance, everyone is ready to strike a pose and stomp their feet [19]].

EHJ: Is there an exact root that they say they are coming from?

DP: Well, some say it started in Andalucía, but you can look at other dance forms like Kathak with the hands, Irish dancing with the clogs, there are similarities with folk dancing that is not Flamenco from Spain.

EHJ: These traditions always melted. If you are into this and you see something else 'Oh! I like a bit of that and a bit of this'. That is what happens...

[In essence, this Flamenco-Yoga workshop is also a melting pot, acquiring some elements from flamenco and specific aspects from Kundalini yoga, a fusion to aims to promote wellbeing and mutual recovery].

EHJ: I sat once next to a yoga teacher in a Flamenco show and we started talking about chakras and I could see some of the dancers really well connected to their chakras and other not connected at all...

DP: ...Disconnected

EHJ: Some were really, really dancing, you can see a real connect of all the bits of body working together, and you can think about this as physical isolation, but there is something else going on inside, and that also relates to Yoga. It is interesting to see how the body is an energetic expression of what is going on. The idea that we have Kathak dance, which is very earthy with your feet, with your bare feet on the ground [stamping]. Flamenco [on the other hand] looks more angry with the shoes on than Kathak and is odd, and if you look at the differences of where you are in the world...

DP: It is very interesting that you mentioned the connection to the earth, because although there is very much a framework where your body works within, if you like, it is actually one of the biggest compliments you can receive as a dancer is that you were connected to the Earth, that you worked from the Earth, because this actually where you draw your power from, and then your body moves as a whole, but it is all driven from the center, so in terms of teaching, you [the teacher] has to break it out so that you [the student] are using your back, this is where your movement is going to start, it is not just



'bend here', it is done actually through stretches rather ... EHJ: From a martial arts kind of view... if you are connected and so skilled the shoes does not matter. Is like a good yogi, it is not about if you can do this on the mat, is about how do you behave in the world outside.

PD: This is the same for the shoes. They are there for percussion. What you do with your feet? the emphasis is on the lifting of the foot, not on the bang. Allowing gravity to do the work for you.

EHJ: I see, its the opposite.

DP: Your effort is on the up, not on the down.

EHJ: It is the same in yoga. People think that we [yogis] are pushing and stretching but in fact, it is not about making an effort, it is about, letting it go, and letting it happen itself. If you let it go, your body behaves differently, you become more flexible and you progress in a way that you cannot do by trying...

PD: This why the techniques sessions are important and you have to teach them slowly because you can only give people so much information, when you dance your body is going to react differently is lifting up power instead of banging on the floor, how the body is connected and where is it connected to, EHJ: Yes, yes, the use of the whole body. There is this posture in Kundalini where you stand straight and you balance in one leg, some people only use their legs, and no, you have to use your whole body to stand like this for two minutes, otherwise you are going to be fighting yourself to it.

[This section below highlights the importance of self-care in order to support and care for others, hence the relevancy to mutual recovery]

DP: This is a social thing as well, which is... we are... Society, whatever society is, it decides that we should be open, and helpful... and that the self is not the important thing, and as a matter of fact, the self is the first thing, if you cannot come from yourself, if you do not have the strength to recognize yourself and be 'true to yourself' or whether is a sense of your internal power, how can you possibly be of any support to somebody else?

## Conclusions

These *learning conversations* highlighted commonalities between Flamenco and Yoga as well as the elements that could be combined to promote wellbeing. Both Flamenco and Kundalini Yoga are embodied practices with a focus on the inner space and generating movement from the solar plexus. Mindful awareness on the breathing or the body as a whole helps connecting to oneself and others. Both practices also emphasise the connection to the ground or Earth. This creates a triage between the person, others and the ground. This connection was facilitated by inviting delages to do the workshop bare feet. We are also aware that wearing shoes can be useful to create specific rythms and promote the sense of connectiveness and togetherness in the group.

Both Flamenco and Kundalini Yoga are very dynamic, including fast movements. For some people, especially those carrying lived experiences of trauma, classical styles of yoga can be perceived as 'too slow' and, consequently, generate more anxiety that psychological benefit. Moments of stillness can generate distress in the unsettled mind. Some people may require a more dynamic practice, a practice that is physically challenge, one that requires engaging with the body and the breath. A somatic approach can radically alter the body's physiology by regulating the balance between the sympathetic and the parasympathetic nervous system [20].

Our Flamenco-Yoga approach was guided from the understanding that due to our emotions being embodied, a therapeutic response must also work with the body. Whether a person chooses yoga, running, boxing, Pilates or another body-based therapy for releasing past trauma, everyday stress, or simply investing in self-care and personal wellbeing, it is important that the decision is not imposed but choosen. This personal choice and the subsequent levels of engagement, will depend of multiple factors including; previous experiences with similar practices, accessibility, current perceptions and cultural trends, personality and metabolism types.

We conclude that creative practices like Flamenco-Yoga are more suitable for those who want to improve their wellbeing and mental health as well as for those individuals that have high levels of anxiety or trauma as it gives hooks for the mind, keeping the practitioner occupied with following the rhythms of the practice. When the nervous system is over taxed due to stress, coming to a quiet still place requires a physical release provided by combining challenging physical fitness with dynamic meditations. Flamenco-yoga merges traditional dancing movements with uplifting music facilitating a calm and relaxed state of mind and body, whilst stimulating the 'feel good' brain chemistry. This combination improves the practitioners relationships (e.g., sense of connection to others and self), promoting compassionate thinking and focus. Practiced regularly over an extended period of time these changes in perception integrate and affect the practitioners approach to life in positive and profound ways.

Flamenco-yoga benefits embodied processing by combining elements of breath awareness, for example, by using the breath to create flamenco movements while being mindful not to over push or stretch the body. This is where the research shows it has powerful effects on the nervous system, and, of course, the mindful, meditative aspect contriburtes to its welbeing and mental health benefits.

Everything discussed, of course, re-enforces what we know about "movement" being good for well-being. Our concerns are about trying to get people to engage in any form of movement will always be about the intellectual understanding of the benefits; we are presenting material to people who already have an understanding and belief that movement is good for us. True success will only be achieved when those with less understanding of the benefits actually take part in activity.

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