

Contribution of Yoga to Business Ethics Education

Anand N. Asthana

CENTRUM Católica Graduate Business School (CCGBS), Lima, Perú; Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú (PUCP), Lima, Perú (email aasthana@pucp.pe)

Abstract. This research looks at how yoga can contribute to business ethics education in MBA programmes. The effectiveness of yoga practice in breathwork, movement, and meditation was evaluated using a Randomised Controlled Trial on participants of Executive MBA programmes. Half the participants (n = 125) were assigned to the intervention group and the other half placed on the waiting list for the next programme and used as the control group. Mediation analysis was used for statistical analysis to measure the influence of yoga on the participants' performance in business ethics related courses and to quantify the influence of mindfulness which is a mediating variable. Statistical analysis revealed that the increase in performance in business ethics related courses through mindfulness and as a direct increase through yoga were significant. Two thirds of the enhancement of performance came through mindfulness while the remaining one third came directly from yoga practice.

Keywords: business ethics, business ethics education, yoga, mindfulness.

1. Introduction

As an academic discipline, business ethics emerged in the 1970s but the field's popularity gained strength after the multiple corporate scandals of the early 2000s. Disciplines such as medicine, nursing, psychology and engineering explicitly integrated ethics education into university curricula decades before business schools (Gulseren 2021, p. 6); only recently, it has become both a moral and reputational imperative for business schools (Crane 2004).

Outrageous corporate scandals at the turn of the century led to much soul searching in the top business schools as some large companies (e.g., Tyco, Global Crossing, WorldCom, Parmalat and Enron – about which faculty had written flattering case studies on) fell into disrepute (Adelopo 2016; Asthana 2021a,b). Many academics including the past President of the Academy of Management stated their concern that several alumni of top business schools including “chief executive officers and other high-ranking organization members had been arrested for fraud and for ‘looting’ their companies” (Bartunek 2002, p. 138). Perceptive faculty members such as Ian Mitroff (2004) and Sumantra Ghoshal

This shortened version of the article is for promotional purposes on publicly accessible databases.

Readers who wish to obtain the full text version of the article can order it via the url

<https://www.neilsonjournals.com/JBEE/abstractjbee19asthana.html>

Any enquiries, please contact the Publishing Editor, Peter Neilson pneilson@neilsonjournals.com

© NeilsonJournals Publishing 2022.

(2005) argued that there was nothing shocking about the scandals considering that business schools were promoting a management theory that focused on the economic and financial characteristics of business at the expense of all others.

Not everyone agreed with this critique at the time. While agreeing that “economics-based theories, such as agency theory and transaction cost economics, paint managers and organizations negatively, as being driven by self-interest to act antisocially” (Donaldson 2005, p. 109) it was argued that after the scandals “a frequent business school response is to give more emphasis to the teaching of ethics. However, the ethics approach seems to run counter to the research mission of business schools” (p. 111). Then came the financial meltdown of 2007-9 which reinforced the view that business schools should share the blame for the disaster by subtly creating a culture of amorality amongst their students. Their graduates went out into the world to become self-seeking corporate leaders and risk other people’s savings thus triggering a devastating crisis for the rest of the world economy (Giacalone 2009). Formal admission of guilt came when *New York Times* quoted heads of business schools including Harvard and Thunderbird acknowledging: “We cannot say it was not our fault” (Holland 2009).

Businesses have come to accept that shareholders still expect managers to maximise shareholder value but only through ethical means and business schools need to tailor business education accordingly. There is increasing consciousness that the two bases of modern management education and business, namely shareholder primacy and agency theory, are not only incomplete but flawed. In 2004, Business Roundtable invested US\$2.7 million to fund “a years long project to understand and improve public trust in business involving academics’ and practitioners’ contribution” (Harrison *et al.* 2020, p. 1228). Recently, the Business Roundtable in the US revoked its earlier statements on “Principles of Corporate Governance” which had endorsed principles of shareholder primacy – that corporations exist mainly, if not exclusively, to serve shareholders (Business Roundtable 2019a). The new statement outlines a contemporary standard for corporate responsibility including obligations to customers, workforces, suppliers and the society in addition to shareholders. The Statement says: “While each of our individual companies serves its own corporate purpose, we share a fundamental commitment to all of our stakeholders. We commit to:

- Delivering value to our customers. We will further the tradition of American companies leading the way in meeting or exceeding customer expectations.
- Investing in our employees. This starts with compensating them fairly and providing important benefits. It also includes supporting them through training and education that help develop new skills for a rapidly changing world. We foster diversity and inclusion, dignity and respect.

- Dealing fairly and ethically with our suppliers. We are dedicated to serving as good partners to the other companies, large and small, that help us meet our missions.
- Supporting communities in which we work. We respect the people in our communities and protect the environment by embracing sustainable practices across our businesses.
- Generating long-term value for shareholders, who provide the capital that allows companies to invest, grow, and innovate. We are committed to transparency and effective engagement with shareholders.”

The Chair of the Corporate Governance Committee of the roundtable, Alex Gorsky, summarised: “This new Statement better reflects the way corporations can and should operate today. It affirms the essential role corporations can play in improving our society when CEOs are truly committed to meeting the needs of all stakeholders. This Statement isn’t an achievement; it’s a call to action” (Business Roundtable 2019b). The CEO of Business Roundtable, commented: “Business Roundtable welcomes the ‘Common-sense Principles of Corporate Governance 2.0’ and their emphasis on advancing both high ethical standards and long-term economic value creation” (Business Roundtable 2019b). The Chairperson of the roundtable Jamie Dimon, explained: “Major employers are investing in their workers and communities because they know it is the only way to be successful over the long term. These modernized principles reflect the business community’s unwavering commitment to continue to push for an economy that serves all.” (Business Roundtable 2019b). Even if the statement lacks teeth, it is certainly “the next step in a steady retreat from a purely financial approach” (Grove *et al.* 2020).

It is the needs of businesses that drive how business schools innovate and change (Schlegelmilch 2020). There is a growing realisation that businesses are a part of a social contract with individuals, civil society and the state (Shafik 2021), and stand alone business ethics courses have been introduced and ethics has been incorporated into other business courses. In the faculty rooms of top business schools across the world, the discussion has veered round to “What more can we do?” Mechanisms that may enhance ethical behaviour of future managers will benefit society and are worth exploring. In this empirical study we therefore examine the role that yoga practice may play in cultivating ethical behaviour and in enhancing the academic performance of MBA students. We also examine the mediating role of mindfulness in the process.

This research focuses on the physical and mental practises that make up the ancient tradition of yoga, which has a long and illustrious history. The ancient Indian book *Gita* is dated back to the second half of the first millennium BC and has been translated from Sanskrit to several languages during the last four

centuries. It remains a popular text for commentators belonging to various philosophical schools. Of late, yoga as explained by *Gita* has been a subject for western management scholars as well (e.g., Hee 2007). Yoga has a wide range of meanings due to its use in a wide variety of contexts. *Gita* gives a number of definitions describing yoga as “evenness of mind” (Chapter 2; verse 48), “renunciation of selfish purpose” (Chap 6; v 2); and “harmony in all that we do”.

The “Yoga Sutras”, the first textbook of classical yoga, was compiled by the sage Patanjali sometime between the third century BC and the third century AD (Cope 2006). Over the last few centuries, this secular text has become preeminent in teaching yoga and other texts that have followed refer to it as being the centre of yogic thought. The eight limbs of yoga in Yoga Sutras are yama (abstinences), niyama (observances), asana (yoga postures), pranayama (breath control), pratyahara (withdrawal of the senses), dharana (concentration), dhyana (meditation) and samadhi (absorption). Modern yoga has developed as a product of a process that bridges the worlds of Indian spirituality and European physical culture. It has been sculpted to suit modern aspirations and inclinations that are the common heritage of a cosmopolitan culture. In 2014 in recognition of the worldwide appeal of yoga, the UN proclaimed 21 June as the International Day of Yoga. Of the eight limbs of yoga, three – physical postures, breathing practices and meditation – are popular in the West (Sarbacker 2021; Singleton & Mallinson 2017). It is commonly accepted that the chief aim of yoga is to preserve physical fitness and to nurture balance, calm, harmony and awareness. US National Center for complementary and Integrative Health (NCCIH 2020) describes yoga as “a meditative movement practice” (p. 4).

2. Yoga and Ethics

For historical reasons an impression remains in the West that yoga as a part of Indian tradition is inward looking. The influence of orientalist among historians and philosophers created a diptych wherein westerners were supposedly outward looking and easterners were insular inward looking (Said 2004).

Several Western scholars (e.g., Irwin 2007) have branded orientalist’s idea of this diptych as “malignant charlatanry, in which it is hard to distinguish honest mistakes from wilful misrepresentations” (p. 4). In August 2022 the name of the “Faculty of Oriental Studies” at Oxford University was changed to the “Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies” signifying the retreat of orientalism.

Ancient Indian thought was never insular. The idea of “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam” as introduced in many Indian writings like the Maha Upanishad and the Rig Veda more than three thousand years back is:

“The world is a family:

One is a relative, the other stranger; say the small minded.

The entire world is a family; live the magnanimous.”