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“Scholar–Practitioners”, Reflexivity and the Illusio of the Field: Ethnography, Yoga Studies and the Social Scientific Study of Religion

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Abstract: This article dialogues with “yoga studies” and the social scientific study of religion (e.g., the sociology of religion and religious studies), arguing that both substantially neglect a thorough discussion of scholars’ engagement in the field despite being largely composed by “scholar–practitioners”. This is problematic from a methodological point of view as well as from an ethical perspective. Moving in the interstices between biographical reflections, critical social theory and methodological notes on embodied ethnographic research, I self-reflexively discuss my “shifting positionality” from devoted yoga practitioner to critical scholar, mapping the most significant turning points that I encountered during my research on the pedagogies of modern forms of yoga (2017–current). In so doing, I also discuss my overall positioning, participation and ethical reflections in relation to the main object of inquiry of my research. From this, I posit that the positions of scholar and practitioner are, at least in some cases, incommensurable, while the scholar–practitioner may also foster a unique way of knowing based on reflexivity as a living engagement and on the linkages between theory and practice from which there is much to gain.

Keywords: scholar–practitioners; reflexivity; illusio; ethnography; yoga studies; social scientific study of religion; living engagement; theory and practice



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1. Introduction

“Far from encouraging narcissism and solipsism, epistemic reflexivity invites intellectuals to recognize and to work to neutralize the specific determinisms to which their innermost thoughts are subjected and it informs a conception of the craft of research designed to strengthen its epistemological moorings”. [1] (p. 46)

By the expression “scholar–practitioners”, I refer to all those social scientists whose field of study and private life and/or interests intersect to a considerable degree. Scholar–practitioners may occupy any position in the continuum between the poles of scholarly activity and practical mastery of a specific “art”, profession or system of techniques, be it yoga, martial arts, boxing, etc. Scholar–practitioners are common across fields of study and disciplinary perspectives, although, as I will argue in the following, there is a certain tendency among scholarly communities to conceal personal investment in one’s field of study largely for fear of being judged as a non-rigorous scholar and as a producer of illegitimate knowledge. The opposite is also true; that is, scholar–practitioners may at times be cautious about revealing their research interests to their fellow practitioners for fear of being judged opportunistic rather than genuinely involved with, let us say, dance, yoga or boxing.

According to McClintock, “[t]he term *scholar practitioner* expresses an ideal of professional excellence grounded in theory and research, informed by experiential knowledge, and motivated by personal values, political commitments, and ethical conduct” [2] (p. 393, emphasis in original). This definition highlights, among other things, the importance of transparency about scholar–practitioners’ positioning in the field. Moreover, as is hinted at

by McClintock, and as was already recognized by Clifford Geertz long before, the divide between what counts as scholarly knowledge (etic) and what is instead common sense, insider knowledge (emic) is rather contested, shapeshifting and arguably porous. Nevertheless, I contend that the hallmark of scholarly knowledge, whether produced by scholars who become practitioners in order to accomplish a specific research agenda or by practitioners who become scholars in order to learn more about their communities, is the attempt to achieve a certain “epistemic break” with the “illusio” of the field, that is, the conscious effort to self-reflexively account for the “belief, and involvement in the game that produces the game” [3] (p. 86). This signifies that the “rules of the game” that regulate the field that one practices and studies—the ensemble of beliefs, assumptions, practices and discourses that characterize a given social space—need to be accounted for as socially and discursively constructed and not taken for granted as “natural”. Without this reflexive questioning of one’s posture—in a physical, cognitive, philosophical and moral sense—social scientific knowledge loses its credibility, weakens its generalizability and risks simply reproducing the ideological representations of the communities whose workings of power and power dynamics it should instead attempt to unveil. As Selka correctly argues, in fact, “the idea of positionality challenges the notion of a neutral, disembodied observer” [4] (p. 92) and “[t]he [main] question for the reflexive ethnographer, then, is what is my positionality and how does it shape my fieldwork and writing?” [4] (p. 93).

The disciplines of “yoga studies” and the social scientific study of religion (e.g., the sociology of religion and religious studies) are ideal/typical examples of how scholars relate to their objects of study while simultaneously being members or practitioners of specific yoga groups and/or other religious and spiritual communities. In the former discipline, thorough discussions of scholars’ engagement in the field are generally neglected, despite the fact that it is almost entirely composed by “scholar–practitioners” [5–7]; the latter is similarly characterized by scholars’ personal involvement in the religious traditions they discuss [8–10], often times with little or no acknowledgement of this important methodological and ethical facet.

Taking these reflections seriously, in this article I self-reflexively discuss my “shifting positionality” [11] from devoted yoga practitioner to critical scholar (I self-define as a cultural sociologist with an interest in social theory, yoga studies and the sociology of religion). Naturally, cultural sociology, like the disciplines of religious studies and the sociology of religion, has its “rules of the game”. As a consequence, it requires specific efforts—most notably in the form of self-reflexivity—to break from the illusio of the postulated objectivity of its descriptive, interpretative and explanatory tendencies. My main argument is that the positions of scholar and practitioner are, at least in some cases, incommensurable, while the scholar–practitioner may foster a unique way of knowing based on reflexivity as a living engagement and on the linkages between theory and practice from which there is much to gain. More specifically, scholar–practitioners willing to self-reflexively account for their posture in the field may contribute profoundly to our appreciation of the relationship between theory and practice, their boundaries and the type of knowledge is most valued—and by whom—within a specific discipline or community. This helps, among other things, to account for the micro-sociological dimensions of power in specific contexts and to highlight the circular and reciprocally informing relationship between theory and practice in the theorizing process, as well as the “translation” of theoretical knowledge in the organizational and practical repertoires of specific groups.

The article is structured as follows: first, Section 2 discusses two of the most significant turning points that I encountered during my research on the pedagogies of modern forms of yoga, emphasizing the relationship between scholarly knowledge and an anti-essentialist understanding of religious and spiritual teachings (Section 2.1) and the hot issue of conducting research in communities torn by different kinds of scandals (Section 2.2). Second, Section 3 explores the themes of positioning, participation and ethical reflections, underlining, in turn, the importance of exploiting scholar–practitioners’ relationships with their sociological imagination (Section 3.1), reflexive practice (Section 3.2) and embodied

research (Section 3.3). Finally, the article concludes by reflecting on the unique epistemic standpoint of the scholar–practitioner and her ability to contribute—practically, empirically, methodologically and theoretically—to the scholarly and spiritual/religious communities of which she is a member.

2. Significant Turning Points

From 2017 to 2021, I serendipitously encountered several turning points that drastically influenced the refocusing of the overall design of my research and profoundly changed my own life course. Here, I discuss only two of these instances by means of examples of the reflexive and open-ended nature of the research process. To contextualize the impact of these turning points on my positionality, however, I would like to begin with a very short biographical note.

When I formally began this research in November 2017, I moved to Milan, Italy, away from Mooji’s Portuguese ashram, Monte Sahaja, where I previously resided for about six months. Mooji, an internationally renowned neo-Advaita guru who has been at the center of several controversies since 2019, is listed in 59th place in Watkins Mind Body Spirit magazine’s *The 100 most spiritually influential living people 2023*, thus testifying to his importance in the current religious and spiritual landscape. Before moving to Monte Sahaja, I worked as a yoga instructor for about two years in several centers in Genoa, Italy (as has been argued elsewhere, “In Italy, although data on the number of practitioners are unreliable, it is possible to see a gradual increase in interest, with about 2 million practitioners (30 percent of whom are men), 20,000 centers throughout the country (especially in the center—north, with an increase of more than 100% since 2010) and a generated income of nearly 200 million euros” (Yoga: trend e numeri di un fenomeno in crescita—Manageritalia, accessed 21 February 2023 [12] (p. 7)), my hometown, and I had experimented with different styles of yoga for several years before that. These biographical elements are relevant since I am myself a “scholar–practitioner”, as are most scholars currently studying modern forms of yoga [5–7].

This specific positioning in relation to yoga’s practical–discursive universe signified that in the early phases of my research I was personally involved within my field of study. In Bourdieusian terms, I was inextricably entangled with the “illusio” of the field, the tacit acceptance of its “doxa”, the practical–discursive universe taken for granted in a specific social group. Therefore, I approached the study of modern yoga through the ideological lens of the devoted practitioner, positing yoga’s spiritual character and salvific potentials as unassailable truths that I was setting myself up to prove through my own sociological investigations. However, this perspective was short lived, as the recollection of the following episodes will clarify.

2.1. Scholarly Knowledge and Anti-Essentialism

The first significant turning point dates back to the very beginning of this research. Between 10 and 12 November 2017, Milan hosted the 12th International YogaFestival, a three-day gathering of international, national and local teachers and yoga enthusiasts, as well as curious and peripheral observers (now in its eighteenth year, the Milan based International YogaFestival is the largest yoga gathering in Italy, and it is among the biggest events in Europe). The festival was held at the Fabbrica del Vapore, a complex of former warehouses in the middle of the city that today are chiefly used for cultural events such as concerts, art exhibitions and fashion shows. My participation in the 2017 event was significant in several regards. First, I had a chance to attend a lecture on Patañjali’s *Yogasūtras* delivered by Prof. Federico Squarcini, a major Italian scholar in the field of yoga studies and the director of one of the few existing masters programs currently available worldwide (the main masters programs in yoga studies are offered by the University Ca’ Foscari of Venice, Italy (of which Prof. Squarcini is the director); the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) of the University of London, UK; Layola Marymount University, Los Angeles, California; Naropa University, Boulder, Colorado; and finally, by the University of

Hamburg, Germany). The lecture was intended to demystify some of the major popular (mis)understandings surrounding the *Yogasūtras*, a text usually considered by modern yoga teachers and practitioners as the “bible” of yoga philosophy. At the end of the lecture, as I introduced myself to Prof. Squarcini and briefly summarized to him my main ideas for the PhD project I was at the time about to begin, he directed me to some reading which proved to be essential for the subsequent framing of my research (most notably, he referred me to Carrette and King’s [13] *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* and Jain’s [14] *Selling Yoga: From Counterculture to Pop Culture*. These readings proved instrumental and equipped me with a critical and non-essentializing understanding of modern forms of yoga). Second, at the festival I also had the chance to introduce myself to a number of yoga school representatives and make contacts for a series of preliminary interviews with yoga teachers which I then undertook in the following weeks.

Through the literature suggested by Prof. Squarcini, I quickly gained a different understanding of yoga than that I previously held to be true. Instead of the ideological understanding of the dedicated practitioner, I was finally exposed to an alternative reading of yoga, this time one focused on its radically modern, transnational and historically bounded character. Moreover, through the preliminary interviews with the yoga teachers (five in total) that followed my participation in the festival, I was forced to reflect on the manner in which I was projecting my own understanding of yoga as an intrinsically spiritual practice onto other practitioners’ experiences, and thus failing to acknowledge that yoga has a variety of meanings and is practiced for a variety of purposes by contemporary practitioners [15–19]. For instance, I discovered that for some of these teachers, yoga had very little to do with anything spiritual, and that it was not necessarily perceived as a path towards self-realization. On the contrary, yoga emerged as something closer to a self-care, therapeutic and leisure-oriented activity, something that for me was unconceivable until that moment. Simply put, I would have considered it not yoga but fitness! These “wake up calls”, coming from both the voices of scholars and from yoga teachers themselves, were crucial aids in realizing—and thus reflexively acknowledging—my own inextricable involvement within the discourses, philosophies and practices studied. Again, following a Bourdieusian framework, this proved invaluable in liberating myself—at least partially—from the “symbolic violence” [20] (pp. 192, 237) [1,3] (and the subtle domination informing the “doxing relation to the social world” [20] (p.168) [1,3] characterizing the “yoga field” [15]).

Consequently, after a series of self-reflexive explorations, I was able to refocus the aim of my research and its overall rationale, moving away from the partial and ideological understanding of yoga typically held by devoted practitioners. I thus reformulated my research towards a more critical appreciation of yoga’s historically constructed nature and malleable character while also attempting to remain sensible of the variety of meanings that yoga holds for social actors, as well as its possible deployments as a pacifying and disciplining device. In so doing, I came to realize that because of its commodified, fitness-like and branded dimensions, the study of modern forms of yoga is a very relevant sociocultural phenomenon worthy of sociological investigation, and this directed my attention to Odaka Yoga, one of the two case studies of my research. Odaka Yoga, as I have discussed at length elsewhere [21–23], presents itself as a poignant case of the changing nature of modern yoga and its adaptation to different sociocultural environments. It is also a fitting example of the legitimizing and differentiating strategies that contemporary yoga brands follow in their attempts to conquer a share of the yoga market in the context of an already saturated and highly commodified field.

2.2. *Ethnography and “Scandals”*

A further serendipitous event was a meeting that occurred with Prof. Amanda Lucia during the early phases of a visiting period at the University of California Riverside (UCR) in the Spring of 2019. Having heard that Mooji’s teachings and ashram was one of the two main case studies of my research, she asked me if I knew anything about

the “scandals” and accusations about Mooji’s sexual misconduct with some of his young followers. I did not. So, once back in my office, I carefully read Be Scofield’s [24] anti-cult investigation *Becoming God: Inside Mooji’s Portugal Cult*, and although the article in question was clearly written in an accusatory tone and presented some inadequate information regarding Monte Sahaja and its social organization, it hinted at the fact that more than one person had recently spoken out against Mooji. This prompted me to search the internet for more detailed accounts and personal narratives. I discovered several anti-cult blogs and platforms and familiarized myself with a counter-narrative regarding the illegitimate, unethical and even criminal behaviors of the guru I had felt strongly devoted to until very recently. This discovery was crucial, to say the least, as it allowed me to gather a plethora of useful information that would have been extremely difficult to obtain during my fieldwork in Portugal. Furthermore, together with the ashram’s refusal to conduct interviews with some of its members, these revelations definitively pushed outside the community of which I was once a proud member.

To be more precise, in January 2019 I began a close correspondence with the ashram’s publication office with the intention of obtaining formal consent to conduct interviews in Monte Sahaja. I presented to them an overview of my research project, a link to a copy of my article *Serving, Contemplating and Praying* [25]—in which I provide a series of post-autoethnographic reflections on my experience in Mooji’s ashram—and a formal request to come back to the ashram later that same year to interview around 10 devotees. Together with this initial query, I provided a preliminary interview grid and a list of concepts that I intended to use to analyze the interview material. I was initially told that my request would be brought to Mooji, but I had to solicit the ashram twice before I was able to set up a skype talk with the ashram’s publication office, which finally took place on 2 April 2019 after having been rescheduled a couple of times due to their last-minute unavailability. The talk, although always friendly, was slightly uncomfortable, as my position as a researcher clashed with the devotee mindset of the two persons with whom I was speaking. As I presented my research to them, they found it simultaneously intriguing and potentially inappropriate as it aimed to bring under critical scrutiny the teachings of their guru and the manner in which his community was organized.

For instance, as I jotted down notes during our talk, one of my interviewees commented, “I would not want to convey Mooji’s teaching as a process of socialization since the way we are moving in Sahaja springs naturally from everybody’s heart”, and, “I see as problematic to bring something that is beyond concepts into a conceptual framework”. Nevertheless, during this talk I was reassured more than once that my request to interview Mooji’s devotees would be brought to Mooji as soon as possible. However, the ashram’s publication office also made it clear that for this to happen, a series of conditions would have to be met: first, the ashram itself wanted to select the informants and keep copies of the transcripts of the interviews; second, they requested access to the final manuscript of the PhD thesis and the right to revise it, asking for two months to revise the whole manuscript before submission; and third, they suggested that I sign a document indicating that I would subscribe to the ashram’s terms and conditions regarding how to dispose of the data I gathered. This, I was reassured, was a normal procedure as Mooji’s teachings—or rather, his videos and books—were under copyright, and so the circulation of any material pertaining to them ought to be checked by the ashram’s publication office.

I felt that my position as a researcher placed me under suspicion, and that my previous involvement in the community as a devotee was finally over. I decided that it was better not to sign any such document, even if this would mean not being able to carry out any interviews. My correspondence with the ashram slowed down, and I only heard back from them at the beginning of July when I was notified via a short WhatsApp audio message—from one of the two people with whom I had previously spoken—that Mooji had decided to deny me permission to conduct any type of interview with his devotees. The core message of the audio was as follows: “We very much love you and regard you

as part of the *Sangha* (term that designates the community of believers) but the PhD itself does not feel like a strong enough reason to come and spend time here in Sahaja”.

As prospects for further fieldwork vanished, I came to spend significantly less time focusing on Mooji’s teachings and instead prioritized a dedicated reflexive analysis of my positioning as a scholar–practitioner. It was at this point that I finally ceased to see Mooji as an embodiment of the truth I was after and began to problematize his message of salvation as well as my spiritual search. In other words, I finally understood Mooji’s teachings as the outcome of very specific historical and sociocultural conditions and their translation and adaptation in the West (as yoga scholars have poignantly argued, contemporary forms of yoga, including Mooji’s teachings, are the outcome of transnational and transcultural practical–discursive constructions—at the intersection of biomedicine, esotericism, Hinduism, para-psychology and different physical cultures, among other cultural forces—where adherence to tradition, innovation and reinvention have had, and continue to have, a pivotal role in defining the specific pedagogical repertoires that characterize modern forms of yoga today. See De Michelis [26], Singleton [27] and Newcombe and O’Brien-Kop [28] for more details), or, as Bourdieu might say [1,3,20], as disguising very specific forms of domination and symbolic violence under their spiritual and religious framings. This represented a drastic shift from my previous adherence to the legitimate discourse of self-realization promoted in the ashram, which posits enlightenment as an ahistorical and universal category that eludes rational scrutiny, to a critical understanding of this as a “mere” cultural construct. (For similar processes of repositioning in relation to religious and spiritual groups, see Stefania Palmisano’s [29] *La Sindone, Lo Yoga e il Tofu*, which provides a scholarly account of an interrupted conversion to an Italian religious movement, and Emmanuel Carrère’s [30] *Le Royaume*, a stinging biographical account of the author’s discovery and rejection of his Christian faith. Remski’s [31] *Practice and All is Coming* is also instructive in this regard). I came to the following conclusion, masterfully elucidated in Alter’s [32] (p. 238) discussion of yoga and self-realization:

“All claims to Universal Truth that purport to transcend the domain of culture are seductive. But because these claims always emerge from situated social and time-bound knowledge they are, in many ways, based on a profound contradiction. Social science is designed to study the manifestations of this contradiction on different levels, and in different forms, by coming to understand all knowledge as a social construct. However, the unself-consciousness of claims to Universal Truth found in religion and science are of particular interest as forms of knowledge, because they provide a means by which to engage in critical social analysis on a scale that extends beyond situated knowledge and the cultural form of any given construction”.

Skepticism towards “all claims to Universal Truth” and their “seductive” power is at the base of any serious sociological study, especially in the field of religious and spiritual disciplines. However, as has been underlined by Bourdieu [9] (2010), Altglas [33] and Wood [34] among others, there seems to be a tendency in the contemporary sociology of religion to take social actors’ claims of self-realization and self-determination at a face-value, without inquiring into their socially constructed and disciplining nature [35]. In contrast, my own biographical trajectory from devotee to scholar has allowed me to fully understand both worlds, that is, to capture the importance certain discourses and practices hold for Mooji’s devotees without failing to see them in the light of their socially and discursively constructed nature. This vantage point is particularly important when studying contested spiritual and religious communities and their leaders as it enables one to avoid simply reproducing their visions or disqualifying them altogether. The ethnographer’s task, is, in these cases, one of crafting a synthesis between what is believed, practiced and brought forward in specific groups and the critical tools, both methodological and conceptual, that help us understand and interpret those processes of social and discursive construction through which specific “truths” become dominant in a given social group.

In the following section, I am going to introduce and briefly expand on my positioning and participation and offer ethical reflections in relation to my shifting positionality.

3. Positioning, Participation and Ethical Reflections in Ethnographic Research

Questions about scholars' positioning, participation and ethics are now tropes in ethnographic research [36–38]. In this section, I discuss some of the most important facets of my own positioning and participation within the communities I studied and how they relate to the self-reflexive study of modern forms of yoga and spiritual and/or religious groups. I also briefly expand on how these issues connect with broader ethical considerations in the social sciences more generally. Three interrelated pillars of the sociological trade constitute the heart of this section: first, an overall propensity to integrate biographical instances and sociological theorizing, as suggested by a certain type of interpretative sociology [39]; second, the previously mentioned reflexive sociology of Pierre Bourdieu and his invitation to historicize the researcher's role [1] (pp. 36–37) [40,41]; and third, the focusing of attention on a sensuous, affective and bodily involvement with the field as advocated by the multisensorial, carnal and participatory approach to ethnography [42–45]. Each of these informed my research.

3.1. Scholar–Practitioners and the Sociological Imagination

Scholar–practitioners, due to their ambivalent role in relation to their objects of study, should pay particular attention to the manner in which their biography intersects with and unfolds within broader social processes. This, as Mills famously argues in *The Sociological Imagination* [39], is one possible avenue towards completing the arduous task of bridging the timely issue of the individual–society divide that has haunted sociology since its beginning. According to Mills, in fact, “[t]he sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society” [39](p. 6). More specifically:

“The sociological imagination enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals. It enables him to take into account how individuals, in the welter of their daily experience, often become falsely conscious of their social positions. Within that welter, the framework of modern society is sought, and within that framework the psychologies of a variety of men and women are formulated. By such means the personal uneasiness of individuals is focused upon explicit troubles and the indifference of publics is transformed into involvement with public issues”. [39] (p. 5)

Taking the sociological imagination seriously, I recount how my own biographical involvement with the field played a role in my understanding of it, and how it took some serious self-reflexive work to turn this position into an opportunity to better interpret and understand the social processes (knowledge transmission, subjectivation, the adaptation of Asian religions to the West) I was both living as a practitioner and studying as a scholar.

I began practicing yoga in 2013 after having first encountered mindfulness meditation. Within the space of a few weeks, I was completely hooked on the practice. I quickly established a two-hour daily routine consisting of one hour of mindfulness meditation and one hour of *āsana* (postures). Yoga and meditation became an integral part of my life and identity. In the succeeding years, I experimented with a variety of meditation practices (based on the breath, visualizations, mantras and/or a combination of these) and a variety of styles of postural yoga. This focused devotion to practice lasted for about four years. I have also been an avid consumer of South Asian religious literature, from the “classics” of yoga, such as the *Yogasūtras* and the *Bhagavadgītā* to Daoist and Zen Buddhist texts and a series of popularized renditions of these Asian philosophies translated by modern teachers and self-help luminaires.

Between the end of 2015 and the beginning of 2016, I participated in an Intensive Yoga Teacher Training course at *Villa Vrindavana*, the Italian headquarter of the national branch of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKON). Shortly after the

end of the teacher training, I began to teach yoga classes in several studios in Genoa, Italy, where I was living at that point. I taught for two years, during which time I conducted my own course in two holistic centers and performed substitutions in other studios as the occasions presented themselves. I finally decided to quit because I felt unprepared to deal with the complexity of people's lives and recognized (or felt) that I was not a competent instructor (not so surprising after only 200 hours of formal training!). I felt that my grasp and mastery of yoga practices and philosophy was not sufficient to lead people into what I strongly believed was a way of life. Moreover, I was increasingly gravitating towards a more introspective style of yoga, and I had begun to see postural yoga in trivial terms, as a sort of "spiritual gymnastics". In other words, when I approached Odaka Yoga as one of the case studies of my research, I had already had a longstanding involvement within the larger postural yoga field and held a set of established ideas and preconceptions about what yoga was and how it ought to be practiced. Of course, these elements simultaneously facilitated and challenged my sociological appreciation of this specific style, especially at the outset of the research.

Integral to—and running parallel with—the trajectory delineated above is my progressive involvement with Mooji's teachings. It all started in 2013, during the same period in which I began to meditate and practice yoga postures. Back then, I also began to listen to Mooji's talks on YouTube, and although I was struggling to cognitively understand his message of salvation, I would feel a strong and reassuring sense of peace and calmness whenever I played his videos. In October 2015, shortly before embarking on the teacher training course discussed above, I decided to participate in a seven-day silent retreat with Mooji. The retreat was held in the ecovillage *Zmar*, located about one hour's drive from Monte Sahaja, Mooji's ashram. It was on that occasion that, after the retreat, I decided to stay around for a few days and visit Mooji's ashram. Over the following months, I remained close to his teachings via online resources until I eventually left my employment as a yoga teacher and decided to go and spend some time in Monte Sahaja. Gaining access to the ashram premises was not straightforward; it required a rather lengthy online application process followed by a skype interview. Finally, at the beginning of May 2017, I entered the ashram as a member of its construction team and stayed there for several months [25].

During this time, I completely immersed myself in the life of the ashram and its *seva* program (unpaid, voluntary work associated with *karmayoga*, or yoga of action, its the three types of yoga advocated in the *Bhagavadgītā*), holding positions in the construction, dish washing and Italian translation teams. I finally left the ashram at the beginning of November 2017 in order to pursue my research interests. It was then that I slowly began to move away from Mooji's teachings; instead, I increasingly engaged with sociological theorizing, attempting to make the best out of my own experience as a scholar-practitioner. Appreciating the inextricable links between my personal involvement in both the world of postural yoga and Mooji's teachings, as well as what this privileged vantage point signified for my understanding of these portions of the social world, I began to unveil how the two—that is, the personal and the social—were dialoguing and could be used, as called for by Mills, as integral aspects to the sociological trade.

These reflexive remarks are particularly important as they help to clarify why, in the early phases of my research, I approached the field through the ideological lens of the committed practitioner, positing yoga's spiritual character as an unassailable "truth" that I was attempting to prove through my own sociological investigations. Hopefully, for the sake of my own sociological credibility and the quality of the ethnographic accounts I provide, the series of serendipitous turning points previously discussed, as well as my own sociological imagination, have brought me to sufficiently question my ideological commitment to the field and thereby break from its "illusio".

3.2. Scholar-Practitioners and Reflexivity

Reflexivity as a methodological strategy and as a social scientific praxis has a long-standing history in the social sciences, especially within ethnographic approaches. Particu-

larly prominent is Bourdieu's reflexive sociology, in which reflexivity is understood "as the inclusion of a theory of intellectual practice as an integral component and necessary condition of a critical theory of society" [1] (pp. 36–37). Here, reflexivity "aims at increasing the scope and solidity of social scientific knowledge" [1] (ibid) and not at challenging or vilifying it. Similarly, the philosopher Georgia Warnke indicates, following Gadamer's hermeneutics, the importance of our historical situatedness as researchers:

"the issues we bring to the process of interpretation are not our preoccupations alone but rather refer to issues and concerns that have developed within the historical tradition to which we belong. . .our understanding stems from the way in which the event or work has previously been understood and is thus rooted in the growth of a historical and interpretative tradition. . .these prejudices are not our personal property alone". [46] (p. 77)

In other words, following Mills, Bourdieu and Warnke, the reflexive acknowledgment of the researcher's positioning in relation to the research process and the object of inquiry transcends a simple focus on the researcher's own history and point of view, but connects with broader societal, methodological and disciplinary concerns.

Accordingly, in reflecting on and reframing my role and positioning within the communities I studied, I self-reflexively unveiled the ambivalences intrinsic in assuming a participatory role within Odaka Yoga and dissected the implications of my "shifting positionality" from devotee to critical observer in the case of Monte Sahaja, where I was already an active member before the research started. These "confessional" reflections are useful in clarifying my positioning in relation to the case studies of my research, but, more importantly, a reflexive discussion and acknowledgment of the researcher's own positionality and participation in the communities she studies is paramount across disciplines and fields of inquiry [47–52].

More specifically, zooming in on the social scientific study of religion and yoga studies, these reflections acquire a particular significance. Within the former field, there is a diffuse tendency—on the side of the researcher—to promote a specific religious or spiritual worldview (usually shared by the researcher as well), without questioning the ideologies that inform the groups studied [10]. The latter field, in turn, is de facto composed almost exclusively of "scholar-practitioners" who often fall into the same habit of "misrecognition" [20] critically ascribed to those engaging in religious studies and the sociology of religion. Of course, not all sociologists of religion and yoga scholars conform to the general tendencies of their respective fields, and many manage to implement critical scholarship and acknowledge their positioning. For instance, James Mallinson mentions in passing in his *Yoga and Sex: What is the Purpose of Vajrolimudra?* [53] his role as an initiated ascetic within a specific lineage of Nath Yogis, while Karl Baier's and Jason Birch's biographical synoptics at the end of *Yoga in Transformation* [54] explicitly state that the former, "[b]esides his university employment. . .works as a certified Iyengar Yoga Teacher" [54] (p. 624), and that "Jason is also a professional yoga teacher for more than ten years" [54] (p. 625). Nevertheless, this is as far as these works go in relation to self-reflexive remarks and discussing scholars' positionality. Theodora Wildcroft's *Post-lineage Yoga* [55] is an exception because it is entirely based on her own participation in the yoga groups she studies and discusses.

Most of the literature, in fact, seems to deal with the double role of the scholar-practitioner using the same strategy, which, if not handled carefully, can endanger the reliability of research: this strategy seems to conceal the double role of the researcher, undermining—if not totally dismissing—a discussion of her active membership in the communities or lineages explored. This is, of course, a widespread practice in several areas of academic production and is by no means an exclusive trait of yoga studies or the social scientific study of religion. Kenneth Liberman [56] (p. 110) masterfully exemplifies one of the main reasons why scholars may be prone to downplay their involvement in the communities they study when he mentions the immeasurable distance that exists between devotion to a guru and scholarly research:

“Devotion to a guru is unseemly for the critical traditions of postmodern culture, which has inherited a philosophical orientation that offers more scope for the abstracted exploration of ideas that are kept entirely divorced from any motives that involve personal evolution. An interest in personal evolution is taken to be subjective bias, if not homely, and must be kept separate from intellectual inquiry”. [56] (p. 110)

Nonetheless, I posit that in order to find full legitimacy within academia, it is not necessary to entirely avoid discussions of one’s role in the field. On the contrary, there is a lot to gain from such reflexive analyses. In fact, without a proper reflexive account of one’s positioning in the field, the researcher may—deliberately or not—fall into the trap of becoming a spokesperson for the institutional views of the communities she is exploring, providing a rather biased image and downplaying contradictions and power dynamics, and thus failing altogether to embrace her critical commitments as a researcher. Here, the scholar qua practitioner is inextricably enmeshed in the worldviews, ideologies and practices of the community she studies. As a consequence, she risks presenting to her audience something quite distinct from the actual everyday life or social world of the community; she is more likely to build her scholarly account on her emotional and/or ideological involvement with the community she is studying. This would equate to a reproduction of the polished “institutional” perspective of those segments of a given group that have the power and the authority to speak for the community as a whole. As Joseph Alter [57] (p. 38) puts it:

“It is rather disingenuous to “take the natives point of view” to gather ethnographic data, knowing full well that an intellectual history of ideas renders ethnographic truth rather suspect. This is not a problem that is necessarily unique to the study of yoga and is one that anthropologists have struggled with over the years, but as yoga involves embodied practice, rigorous self-discipline, and structured training of the mind—not to mention conviction about efficacy and value—the ethical problem of questioning truth claims while trying to understand how and why they are made is one that is especially charged with passion and politics and fraught with parsimonious claims to intellectual property rights”.

Scholars in the fields of yoga studies and the social scientific study of religion rarely provide “disingenuous” analyses, although their specific positioning and participation within the communities and lineages they study is seldom elaborated upon. A complete erasure of all the ambivalences and complexities that scholars face in relation to their positioning in the field is an impossible task, and perhaps not even a desirable one. However, to ignore, conceal or avoid discussions about one’s role in the field is a quite different thing than being open about it and attempt to use this role or positioning to build up a scholarly account, and to problematize and critically balance it with honest self-reflexive practice and well-grounded epistemological and theoretical commitments. In fact, when studying something as visceral and self-transformative as spiritual and/or religious practices, it is especially important that the scholar–practitioner is able to break from the illusion of that field; that is, to step back from her own alignment with the positions taken by the social actors themselves.

3.3. Scholar–Practitioners and Embodied Research

Embodiment is one of the keys through which ethnographic research pursues the imperative of “being there” [58]), although explicit discussions of the role of the researcher’s body, both as generator of ethnographic material and as interpretative tool, have only begun in the past few decades [42,44,59] Building on calls for a “sensuous scholarship” [59]a “sensing culture” [60]and a “sociology of the senses” [61], Pink [42] advocates for a multi-sensory approach to ethnography according to which not only sight, but also taste, smell, touch and sound are fully integrated into the interpretative and descriptive effort of the ethnographer. Here, the explicit invitation to rely on the multi-sensorial dimensions of

experience, perception, knowledge and practice elides the hiatus between ethnographers and practitioners [42] (, p. 1), allowing the former to fully experience and embody the worldview of the latter.

In relation to the field of religious studies, Nabhan-Warren [62] (p. 378) argues for phenomenologically oriented religious studies ethnographies where

“ethnographers must look to their bodies as well as their interlocutors’ bodies as sources of knowledge. . .the ethnographer is grounded in her body, and her body is entwined with her interlocutors’ bodies and, by extension, their lifeworlds. Moreover, the body can be a vehicle for complicating, at times even transcending, emic (insider) and etic (outsider) boundaries”. [62] (p. 378)

Similarly, Soliman, Johnson and Song [63] (p. 852) underline how religious experience is, contrary to a Cartesian view that posits it as primarily pertaining to the psychological realm, “grounded in an integrated and dynamic sensorimotor complex”, and thus inherently embodied, or, as McGuire [64] (p. 283) poignantly argues, “[o]ur research strategies need to take into account that believers (and nonbelievers) are not merely disembodied spirits, but that they experience a material world in and through their bodies”. One prominent avenue by which this can be recognized is to acknowledge and start from the embodied experience of fieldwork and the participation in religious and spiritual practices undertaken by the scholar herself. This is even more important for ethnographers who, by means of their scholarly trade, are hardly completely detached from—or merely observers of—the practices that they study.

From yoga studies, too, we have witnessed recent calls for more self-reflexive, sensuous and embodied approaches [22,55,65–68] based on the premise that “the effects of the practice are most often *felt* rather than measured (even if a yoga practitioner has defined goals, such as relieving back pain or releasing stress)” [68](p. 475, emphasis in original). This underlines the importance of reflexively accounting for the cognitive, embodied and somaesthetic dimensions of yoga practice not only through the mediation of observation, interviews and the study of texts, but also through direct engagement and the first-hand accounts of practitioners [67]. “Scholar–practitioners are thus in a unique position” [69] (p. 328) to bridge the long-lasting divide between specialized and lay knowledge and channel the latter into even more theoretically and methodologically accountable expressions of the former.

Discussing the researchers’ positioning and participation, therefore, may contribute, according to Singleton’s and Byrne’s [6] (p. 3) suggestion, to the bridging of the divide between scholarly and lay theorizing:

“However, are the two approaches [scholarly and lay theorizing] incommensurable, as partisans from both sides would have us believe? Is an academic approach to contemporary yoga necessarily either antagonistic or irrelevant to its practice? And is the contemporary practice of yoga worthy of the censure and suspicion with which it has often been greeted by “serious” scholarship? In fact, is it really necessary or desirable at all to perpetuate such polarities between academic and nonacademic, intellectual and experiential approaches to yoga? And what do we really mean by stating such divisions?”.

Unfortunately, because they lack an overt reflexive practice, most contemporary scholars, both in yoga studies and in the social scientific study of religion, perpetuate this division rather than contributing to open a dialogue among different approaches to knowing.

By way of concluding, I contend that relying on a multi-sensory, participatory and embodied approach to ethnographic research may not only provide crucial insights into the social organization of specific religious and spiritual groups and their practices, but, thanks to its focus on practicing what it studies and experiencing it first-hand, embodied research may bring to the forefront important insights into the role of the body, the materiality of the field and the affective dimension of spiritual and religious life. Most importantly, it may also force researchers to provide clear accounts of their positioning in relation to what they

study, and in this way contribute to both honest scholarship and to the opening up of a dialogue between scholarly and lay theorizing.

These reflections also have an important bearing on the ethical considerations that unavoidably accompany any research process in which social actors are involved as active contributors, whether through ethnographic methods, biographical interviews or more casual conversations. Ethical reflections, especially those regarding consent, visibility, anonymity and the delicate balance between the researcher's duty of critical scrutiny and the social actor's right to be represented in a manner that matches their self-understanding and their social world involve particularly sensitive issues. Unfortunately, there are no ultimate answers concerning how to navigate these complexities, but only good practices. Let us start from a reflexive engagement with our objects of study, the *conditio sine qua non* of the ethnographic trade.

4. Concluding Remarks

In this article, I have argued that the positions of scholar and practitioner are, at least in some cases, incommensurable, while the scholar–practitioner may foster a unique way of knowing based on reflexivity as a living engagement and on the linkages between theory and practice from which there is much to be gained. As Smith and Nestor correctly argue:

“scholars traditionally separate “doing” from “studying,” the actor from the researcher. Our work demonstrates that this division is shortsighted: the new scholar–practitioner must do and be both, concurrently addressing problems of practice in real time and making important contributions to both practice and theory”. [70] (p. 46)

While I agree with their insight, I contend that the scholar–practitioner's ambivalent positioning at the intersection between theory and practice might be functional, fruitful and long-lasting only if based on serious self-reflexive work and a critical appreciation of her object of study. Here, the “creation and use of theory–practice linkages. . .[is] a form of expert practice in and of itself” [71] (p. 202). More specifically, considering the experiential, religious and self-transformative character of the practices fostered by the yoga groups and spiritual and religious communities traditionally studied in the disciplines of yoga studies, religious studies and the sociology of religion, the employment of a reflexive, situated and embodied methodology is not only pertinent, but recommended [72]. As Palmisano argues, in fact, “bodily engagement. . .furnishes the researcher with a privileged perspective from which to examine religious experiences, especially when they become extraordinary experiences resulting from initiatic knowledge” [73] (p. 105). However, for this first-hand, embodied and initiatic knowledge to serve the purposes of critical scholarship, it is important that scholar–practitioners do not accept what they are learning in the field as practitioners at face value. On the contrary, such a situated phenomenological entry point into spiritual experiences—when coupled with the necessary methodological and theoretical tools discussed in this article—may further help to unpack the manners in which adherents to religious and spiritual groups experience their lifeworlds through their engagement within specific disciplinary devices, or *dispositifs* of veridiction, that contribute to the creation of the desired type of religious and spiritual subjectivity fostered by these groups [35]. This is particularly important when studying communities or groups in which criminal behaviors such as sexual abuse are often normalized, minimized and/or accepted if committed by the charismatic spiritual leader, or reframed as the inability of a practitioner to appreciate their substantially pedagogical intent [31,74,75].

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