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"A Little Superpower That I Know is There": Exploring the Meaning and Role of Prāṇāyāma in the Wellbeing of Adults in Mid-life

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the meaning and role of prāṇāyāma in mid-life adults, defined as between 30 and 50 years old. Wellbeing research has dominated the positive psychology field, with many studies citing U-shaped declines in middle age. Ways to intervene and enhance wellbeing have also piqued researcher interest, some looking to ancient eastern traditions for valuable learnings. Yoga is one such tradition readily considered for its ability to enhance wellbeing, however, within positive psychology, there is a dearth of research exploring its central element, prāṇāyāma (breath control or extension). With the breath intimately linked to human experience and research in other arenas evidencing its impact on the nervous system and emotions, its power should not be underestimated. Six participants (females) were interviewed using semi-structured techniques, which were subsequently transcribed. Data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Three master themes were identified: (1) the discovery phase, (2) unearthing the "Diamond in the centre," and (3) integration, each with three subordinate themes, and delineated the journey participants embarked in discovering prāṇāyāma. Conclusions: Results demonstrated low wellbeing experienced before discovering prāṇāyāma, the potential obstacles to overcome to start practicing and the importance of experiencing it to understand its benefits. Greatest benefits were achieved by committing to the practice. The experience of prāṇāyāma was also described, portraying its potential for flow, reduce negative emotions and produce positive emotions. Subsequent wider-reaching benefits of prāṇāyāma were evident with enhanced embodied self-awareness, resilience, and interpersonal relationships. The consequential meaning of prāṇāyāma to these participants was also highlighted. Potential for prāṇāyāma to be a positive psychology intervention (PPI) and future research are discussed.

KEYWORDS: prāṇāyāma, breathing, wellbeing, yoga, positive psychology interventions.

Inhale

The breath. Arguably, the only constant and most essential thing in life, without it, humans would not exist. Indeed, "If breathing stops, so does life" (Iyengar, 1981, p. 12). In terms of basic needs, humans can live for days without water and sleep, weeks without food, but only minutes without breathing. The breath is "intimately linked to all aspects of the human experience" (Saraswati, 2008, p. 373), influencing brain function (Zelano et al., 2016), reflecting emotional and physiological states (Ma et al., 2017; Philippot et al., 2002), with its process producing energy to fuel glands, muscles and mental activities (Saraswati, 2008). However, ever-accelerating technology-filled lifestyles facilitating bad posture which negatively affects respiration (Zafar et al., 2018) means, habitually, many do not use the lungs to their greatest potential. Indeed, evidence suggests the breath can play a key role in wellbeing (Zaccaro et al., 2018), but to what extent?

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An ancient eastern tradition imparting ways to use the lungs effectively and breathe well is yoga, which a growing body of literature suggests can be employed as a positive psychology intervention (PPI), defined as “treatment methods or intentional activities that aim to cultivate positive feelings, behaviours or cognitions” (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009, p. 468). Central in western positive psychology, wellbeing, despite lacking consensual definition as delineated below, is an accrescent buzzword and issue in modern society. Age is often cited as one variable influencing wellbeing, with lower levels more likely experienced in middle-age (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2008; Steptoe et al., 2015). As east meets west, the burgeoning empirical support for yoga’s ancient benefits often focuses on its holistic practice in its entirety (e.g. Ivtzan & Papantoniou, 2014; Ramirez-Duran et al., 2022). However, yoga is a multifaceted system, consisting of eight elements, with breathing techniques or *prāṇāyāma* considered central to its practice (Iyengar, 1981). Although studies have quantitatively evidenced the physiological benefits of prāṇāyāma (e.g. Novaes et al., 2020), and despite increasing interest in yoga as an intervention, research is lacking on the pure role of prāṇāyāma as a potential intervention enhancing wellbeing. Further, understanding the phenomenology of prāṇāyāma in wellbeing is even more sparse. Given the universal and instinctive ability to breathe, its accessibility and cost-free nature, prāṇāyāma holds potential as a worthwhile intervention on its own. With burgeoning focus on interventions, particularly with wellbeing levels dipping through mid-life, the need to explore the role of prāṇāyāma is evident. What does it mean in the wellbeing of adults in mid-life, defined here between the ages of 30 and 50? And, what role can it play within this age group? To elucidate answers, it is important to understand the practice of prāṇāyāma, its roots in yoga, wellbeing theories, their relationship with age and existing research into these concepts. The following sections contend why studying these phenomena from a qualitative, phenomenological perspective provides a valuable contribution to the positive psychology field.

Background: Holding the Breath

Prāṇāyāma Foundations

With prāṇāyāma an element of yoga, its foundation cannot be overlooked, the heart of which can be traced to 2500 BCE. In 400 BCE, Patañjali, often regarded as the father of modern yoga, systemised the practice in the *Yoga Sūtra of Patañjali* as *Ashtanga*, meaning eight limbs (Saraswati, 2006). A quote from the second sūtra, “Yogaschitta vrtti nirodhah” (Saraswati, 2006, p. 80), defines yoga as the practice and resulting state in which all mental and emotional fluctuations become still. The ancient sages propagated various physical and mental health benefits, and contemporary, largely quantitative, research provides empirical support for many, including improving physical health (Roland et al., 2011; Sivaramakrishnan et al., 2019), alleviating physical pain (Posadzki et al., 2011), stress and anxiety, among other psychiatric and health conditions (Field, 2016); it is even used in therapeutic interventions as yoga therapy (Kahya & Raspin, 2017). Most commonly practiced by individuals in the west in mid-life (Park et al., 2015), pertinent to the current study’s focus, yoga also receives attention in positive psychology for its potential as a holistic practice to enhance wellbeing, conceptually defined below (Ivtzan & Jegatheeswaran, 2015). However, according to Patañjali, yoga is multifaceted, consisting of eight limbs, *yama* (universal morality), *niyama* (personal observances), *āsana* (postures), *prāṇāyāma* (breath extension or control), *pratyahara* (withdrawal of the senses), *dhāraṇā* (concentration), *dhyāna* (meditation) and *samādhi* (oneness). Residing at fourth of the eight limbs, prāṇāyāma is considered central to the practice (Saraswati, 2006).

The word prāṇāyāma is Sanskrit, combining the words *prana* translated as life force or breath, and *yama* meaning extension or control. Prana is considered the basis of life, the energy permeating all universal existence and although prana is usually referred to as breath, it is just one of its bodily expressions (Iyengar, 1981). Prāṇāyāma are techniques controlling and directing this energy using the breath (Saraswati, 2008). Yoga philosophy deems prāṇāyāma eliminates toxins and distributes energy, stimulating and regulating the system, increasing oxygenation (Iyengar, 1981). Various techniques considered in both ancient scripts and modern research produce differing physical, mental and emotional outcomes (Brown & Gerbarg, 2005a, 2005b; Iyengar, 1981; Kanchibhotla et al., 2021), with practices typically involving internal breath retention before exhalation, holding after exhalation, and inhalation and exhalation through alternate nostrils (Saraswati, 2008). Arguably, without disentangling and investigating the numerous elements of yoga, in this case prāṇāyāma, the significance of each in relation to wellbeing cannot be specified.

Wellbeing and Age

Despite burgeoning research into wellbeing and attempts to define it (see Dodge et al., 2012; N. Marks & Shah, 2004), a single consensual definition of the concept is elusive. However, clarity ensues in two overarching paradigms, hedonic and eudaimonic, contributing multiple dimensions describing wellbeing. The hedonic paradigm focuses on attaining subjective wellbeing (SWB; Boniwell & Tunariu, 2019), an individual’s subjective assessment of feeling good and satisfied with life (Diener, 1984). Some deem this captures everything about wellbeing (Diener et al., 2002), however, critics argue there is more to life than feeling good, and such approach neglects more meaningful notions and achievements (Boniwell & Tunariu, 2019). Advocating this eudaimonic paradigm is Ryff's (1989) psychological wellbeing (PWB) theory, explicating six components; environmental mastery, positive relationships, self-acceptance, autonomy, purpose in life and personal growth. The paradigms are somewhat complementary in Seligman's (2011) PERMA theory, comprising positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishments, highlighting the complex nature of wellbeing and the many conceptualisations that exist.

Many of eudaimonia’s roots and PWB conceptualisation are founded within Aristotelian philosophy (Ryff & Singer, 2008); proposing happiness is living well, this ultimate goal achieved by engaging in virtuous activities (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./2019). Arguably, yoga philosophy parallels Aristotelian philosophy, what it means to live virtuously is echoed within the yamas and niyamas, first and second limbs of Ashtanga yoga (Macneill, 2012). Indeed, the existing connection between yoga and wellbeing warrants focus on prāṇāyāma. Despite debate around wellbeing, its multidimensionality is clear, suggesting it has multiple meanings to multiple individuals (Delle Fave et al., 2011), not easily accessible with quantitative enquiry. While these theories provide solid theoretical foundations for the concept of wellbeing, how does this translate in reality? Some concepts were born from philosophical theories (e.g. Ryff, 1989b), and while others derive from individual report (e.g. SWB; Diener, 1984), they are often measured by scales binding wellbeing to a predisposed question set created from certain ideologies (Delle Fave et al., 2011). Therefore, employing a qualitative approach to explore this question would provide valuable insights into these concepts.

Age is a variable attracting researchers attempting to identify wellbeing patterns across the lifespan. Within the SWB realm, although various patterns are evidenced, the bulk of research alludes to a U-shaped curve (Blanchflower, 2021; Blanchflower & Oswald, 2008; López Ulloa et al., 2013), particularly within rich English-speaking countries (Steptoe et al., 2015). Although critiqued for not considering generational prosperity or hardship preceding or following data snapshots, this indicates lower wellbeing levels experienced during middle-age (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2008). However, consensus on exact age range is lacking (López Ulloa et al., 2013), seemingly varying between ages 30 and 50. Some conclude lowest levels occur in mid-30s (Clark & Oswald, 1994), a later study proports between 40 and 50 (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2008), while Steptoe et al. (2015) analysis from The Gallup World Poll suggests 45 to 54. More recent analysis suggests an average age of 48.3 (Blanchflower, 2021). One difficulty of accurately determining the influence of age on wellbeing is that its meaning may change with age (Frey & Stutzer, 2002). Thus, obtaining an experiential perspective of its meaning for a particular age group would shed light on this phenomenon. Although no singular reason is specified, at this time of life potential factors influencing wellbeing such as marriage, divorce (Amato, 2000), dependent children (G. N. Marks & Fleming, 1999), job, financial and caring responsibilities are more prevalent (Lachman et al., 2015). Arguably, compared to other age groups, needs for wellbeing interventions are therefore higher. To fully understand wellbeing, which may differ depending on one's age (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2008; Ryff, 1989a), an opportunity to breathe some air into the theories exists, bringing them to life by exploring them experientially; with further value in understanding experience and meaning for individuals actively employing endeavours, such as breathing effectively, to intervene in their wellbeing.

Breathing as an Intervention

The breath can be both instinctive and conscious, traversing between autonomic and voluntary nervous systems. Considered the link between the body and mind, yoga contends movement of the breath influences movement of the mind; when one is steady, the other becomes steady and vice versa (Saraswati, 2006). Indeed the breath often reflects emotional and physiological states (Philippot et al., 2002); in times of stress or anxiety, breaths become frequent and shallow, while relaxation is accompanied by longer, slower, deeper breaths (Weymouth, 2007). These effects are also evidently bidirectional, for example, while Philippot et al. (2002) recognised emotions affect respiratory rates, their second study suggested breath patterns can account for 40% variance in fear, anger, joy and sadness, concluding changing breathing patterns can alter emotions. Breath quality is also influenced by body posture, in turn signalling particular emotional states to the mind (Peper, Harvey, Cuellar, & Membrila, 2020; Peper, Harvey, & Hamiel, 2019; Peper, Lin, Harvey, & Perez, 2017). With increasingly bad postures from ever-rising technology-filled lifestyles, how one breathes matters.

Although the process of breathing often resides outside awareness, interventions making it conscious offer benefits including reducing stress, anxiety and depression (Brown & Gerbarg, 2005b; Hopper et al., 2019), strengthening the diaphragm, making the lungs more efficient (Goyeche et al., 1980) and increasing oxygen levels (Bernardi et al., 1998). This becomes more pertinent with age as lung health begins declining from age 35 (Sharma & Goodwin, 2006), with wellbeing levels declining at a similar juncture (Clark & Oswald, 1994). The power of the breath, human ability to control it and, thus, breathing interventions have been of intrigue for millennia, having long been known and applied within eastern traditions, predating acknowledged western techniques. Through yoga, the Indian sages 5000 years ago provided insight into the mechanisms of the breath and its multitude of health benefits (Iyengar, 1981). It is only in recent history that such benefits of prāṇāyāma have been investigated by science, as delineated in the following research.

Prāṇāyāma Research

Studies examining the effects of prāṇāyāma exhibit many positive physiological and psychological outcomes in both clinical and non-clinical settings, predominantly through quantitative approaches. Novaes et al. (2020) found significant declines in negative affect and anxiety, with increasing positive affect following a bhastrika (bellows breath) prāṇāyāma program, noting these changes relate to control and connectivity of brain areas involved in attention, awareness and emotion. Although wellbeing was not Novaes et al. (2020) initial focus, results pertaining to affect changes are pertinent to the current study, paralleling elements of SWB. In another study, reductions in anxiety, depression and sleep issues, accompanied by better ability to cope with stress was mediated by increased use of yogic breathing (Tellhed et al., 2019). The effectiveness of prāṇāyāma in reducing stress has also been corroborated across multiple quantitative studies (e.g. Kumar & Venkatesh, 2021; Peterson et al., 2017; Sinha et al., 2013). A Sudarshan Kriya Yogic intervention, a sequence of specific breathing techniques, reduced both every day and post-traumatic stress, and depression (Brown & Gerbarg, 2005b). Further, the authors reviewed prāṇāyāma effectiveness in clinical settings, revealing that while different techniques offered varying outcomes, all prāṇāyāma induced relaxed, calm feelings; supporting its ability to decrease central nervous system activity, stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system and create a relaxation response (Benson et al., 1974; Sinha et al., 2013), further highlighting its benefits.

While outcomes are predominantly positive, negative aspects do exist with certain techniques carrying contraindications for individuals with particular conditions (e.g. pregnancy, high blood pressure, panic disorder) and can also induce adverse reactions (e.g. light-headedness, irritability) (Brown & Gerbarg, 2005a, 2005b), highlighting important considerations for research. However, as prāṇāyāma is demonstrably a potent tool for reducing negative symptoms, exploring its potential role in wellbeing provides deeper understanding of its capability. The power of breathing well, particularly using prāṇāyāma, seems clear, and although the aims of extant literature may not focus on wellbeing, the resulting transformation on states of mind indicates its potential to enhance it. How this phenomena manifests in lived experience, however, remains unclear.

Qualitative Research

Despite dominant quantitative focus in prāṇāyāma and yoga research, there are some, albeit few, exploring the concepts qualitatively. Acebedo (2013) phenomenologically explored the transformational experience of yoga, supporting its transformational multidimensional nature. Further, through interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), Kidd and Eatough (2017) identified four interrelated themes highlighting how men relate yoga practice to their self-esteem. Although rich insights are gleaned from these few studies, they lack focus on the meaning and experience of yoga's individual limbs. Indeed, Kidd and Eatough (2017) discuss this, highlighting that prāṇāyāma was broached by their participants, further referencing synonyms with Merleau-Ponty's (1945/2005) work. In doing so, the authors present an opportunity to focus on prāṇāyāma in future phenomenological studies. In awareness, one such study exists which explores the experience of individuals who used prāṇāyāma to reduce clinical depression (Benicewicz, 2015). However, this study does not capture the experience of non-clinical individuals, and questions remain of prāṇāyāma's meaning and role in wellbeing.

The Current Study: Exhale

Within the context of the many potential factors impacting wellbeing in mid-life, accompanied by rising digital lifestyles not conducive to effective breathing, the need for wellbeing interventions is arguably higher in this age group. Results of existing prāṇāyāma research highlight its potential as an intervention, on its own merit. Coupled with its cost-free, accessible nature and with half of all yoga practitioners between 30 and 50 years old (Birdee et al., 2008), prāṇāyāma should not be underestimated as a potential protective or producing factor in wellbeing for this age group. However, with limited research exploring the experience of prāṇāyāma from a phenomenological perspective, how it manifests is unknown. Therefore, drawing on gaps in the extant literature and taking a phenomenological approach, the current study sought to explore the meaning and role of prāṇāyāma in the wellbeing of mid-life adults, defined as between 30 and 50 years old.

Method

Methodological Paradigm

The study explored the experience and attributed meaning of prāṇāyāma in relation to the wellbeing of individuals who had identified a significant link between these two phenomena. Deeming these phenomena exist and could be revealed by accessing participants' experiences and perception of them, the study occupies a critical realist ontological position (Larkin et al., 2006). Furthermore, the research question's subjective and interpretative nature contends conclusions are permeable dependent on participants' and researcher's context at the time, thus occupying a contextualist epistemological position (Madill et al., 2000). Consistent with its epistemological position (Smith et al., 2009), interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was the methodological perspective chosen for this study. IPA was deemed an appropriate choice above other qualitative alternatives as it enables exploration of individuals' lived experience of something significant to them (Smith et al., 2009), here prāṇāyāma's role in wellbeing. Indeed, it provides opportunity to venture deeply within participants' experience, its initial idiographic objective, as opposed to thematic analysis which primarily pursues themes across the entire participant pool (Braun & Clarke, 2020).

Pragmatically, IPA was deemed an appropriate choice with the time and resource available, rendering more demanding methods such as grounded theory unsuitable (Smith et al., 2009). Further, the research question's intent was not simply to *describe* participants' experience; instead it sought understanding of their lived experience through how they perceived and discussed their experience of prāṇāyāma in relation to their wellbeing (phenomenology) and the interpretation of this (hermeneutics), both theories underpinning IPA (Willig, 2013). Lastly, IPA's foundations are based theoretically in phenomenology which acknowledges the role of the body in human experience (Carman, 1999). Indeed, parallels have been drawn between the approach and yoga, which have been extended to include Merleau-Ponty's (1945/2005) philosophy (Morley, 2001). Merleau-Ponty (1945/2005) postulated the significance of the body in determining human perception and knowledge of the world, arguing their interconnectedness (Smith et al., 2009). Indeed, prāṇāyāma by its nature is a practice utilising and influencing the body and mind (Iyengar, 1981), thus IPA was regarded a fitting choice, adhering to methodological integrity (Levitt et al., 2017).

Participants

The sample consisted of six females (five self-identified as White-British, one as Pakistani) between the ages of 30 and 50 years old (mean age, 40.5). All participants were University educated, three were employed, two self-employed and one unemployed at the time of the interviews. Five participants were married and one was cohabiting, four had between two and four children. Length of time practicing prāṇāyāma ranged between just over two years and approximately 25 years. Half practiced daily and half a few times per week, for between five and 20 minutes, plus all practiced 'as and when they needed it'. Prāṇāyāma techniques performed included *nadi shodhana* (alternate nostril breathing), *kapalabhati* (breath of fire), *nadi shodhana* with *kumbaka* (alternate nostril breathing with retention), *samavrtti* (equal inhalation and exhalation), *dirga* (three-part breath), *vishamavrtti* (extended exhalation) and *ujjayi breath* (ocean breath).

Aligning with IPA's idiographic commitment, this is an ideal sample size enabling greater depth of analysis and interpretation of individual experience, while cognisant of practical analytical implications (Smith et al., 2009). Smaller sample sizes allow for more depth of meaning and understanding of the individual's lived experience, and for participants' voices to be heard loudly in unexplored research areas (Smith et al., 2009). The prominent inclusion criteria specified participants must be between 30 and 50 years old, based in the United Kingdom, regularly practiced prāṇāyāma, had done so for more than one month, and identified a significant link between their prāṇāyāma practice and their overall wellbeing. As prāṇāyāma is often practiced with other elements of yoga, the importance that participants identified its connection to their wellbeing as an individual practice was communicated. Two exclusion criteria were included to ensure a relative homogeneous sample in line with IPA's sampling commitment (Smith et al., 2009). Firstly, yoga teachers were omitted as their experience may have been dissimilar to regular yoga practitioners, secondly, those who had practiced prāṇāyāma for less than one month, as extant prāṇāyāma interventions often use this as a minimum time period for outcome measurement (e.g. Novaes et al., 2020; Roos, 2016)

Procedure

The study received ethical approval through University of East London and using a purposive sampling method, was subsequently advertised in yoga communities and social media forums. Interested individuals were sent participation invitations which included information about the study, along with consent forms detailing their right to withdraw and the handling of their data, which they were asked to sign should they decide to take part. Semi-structured interviews were arranged with each participant and conducted via video call lasting between 45 and 80 minutes. Interviews were guided by a small number of open questions intended to elicit detailed, rich descriptions of participants' meaning and experience of the subject and ensure the interview was participant-led, adhering to the inductive basis of this study's approach (Smith et al., 2009). Following interview completion, participants were debriefed and provided letters with information reminding them about data handling, researchers' contact details and support group information.

Reflexivity

Cognisant of held assumptions, experiences and opinions on the research topic, noteworthy as the main researcher is a qualified yoga teacher, considerations were made to ensure interviews were data-led without imposing the researcher's views (Smith et al., 2009). Indeed, in order to perceive participants' lived world beneath the objective world, as postulated by Merleau-Ponty (1945/2005), bracketing these beliefs and assumptions was key. This included keeping a reflexive diary which was utilised before data collection, immediately following interviews and during data analysis phases to capture both preconceived and novel thoughts (Smith et al., 2009).

Data Analysis

IPA was employed for data analysis, leaning on hermeneutics, idiography and phenomenology, and approached from a relativist-driven perspective, inductive and data-led (Eatough & Smith, 2017; Smith et al., 2009). Following IPA's idiographic commitment, transcripts were analysed one-by-one before examining the group (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Interviews were automatically transcribed using video recording software, and transcripts checked for accuracy and anonymised. Recordings were listened to alongside transcripts and read several times for familiarisation and data immersion. Transcripts were then cleaned to IPA standards, following line-by-line analysis noting linguistic, descriptive and conceptual elements (Smith et al., 2009). Accurate reflection of participants' accounts was ensured by working closely with original transcripts, moving between them and the notes, this cyclical process continuing throughout analysis (Willig, 2013). Emerging themes were subsequently sought and further analysed for differences, nuance and convergence, labelling clusters of similar concepts (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Themes were then analysed for patterns and grouped accordingly. This systematic method was repeated for each transcript until all had been coded whereby connections were sought between them. As part of a reflective session with the second author, these were subsequently developed into master and subordinate themes which best captured participants' experiences. Indeed, consistent with IPA's theoretical underpinnings, analysis endured a double hermeneutic process; initially participants made sense of their experiences of prāṇāyāma's role in their wellbeing, exploring what it meant to them during interview, subsequently the researcher's interpretation endeavoured to discern their attributed meaning (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Thus, ultimately creating a third account consisting of both participant and researcher as close to the original as possible, interpreting it within a wider context (Larkin et al., 2006; Nizza et al., 2021). Data analysis continued throughout the writing of the results, further deepening, developing and strengthening the themes identified and their interpretation, demonstrating IPA excellence (Nizza et al., 2021).

Results and Discussion

Analysis yielded three master themes, each accompanied by three subordinate themes (Table 1) illustrating the role of prāṇāyāma in participants' wellbeing as an experiential journey. All participants depicted their lives before prāṇāyāma, voicing an overarching journey of discovering the practice, which enabled them to connect to themselves, leverage their autonomy, and subsequently integrate prāṇāyāma into their lives and ultimately their self's. This discovery leading them to regard the practice as now integral to their lived experience and their wellbeing. The stages of the journey are portrayed in the three master themes: (1) the discovery phase, (2) unearthing the "Diamond in the centre," and (3) integration. This journey appeared as sequential in nature and flowed between master themes through subordinates. Discussion of these themes alongside transcription extracts[2] is presented in the subsequent section. In summary, these participants depicted a journey wholly of the self, discovery of it, connection to it and the autonomic leveraging of it, of which prāṇāyāma played an integral facilitative role.

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[2] **Transcription notation used in quoted extracts**

(..)	short pause
…	significant pause
[*fast*]	explanatory material added by researcher

Table 1
Master and Subordinate Themes with Prevalence

Master Theme	Subordinate Theme	Prevalence
1. The Discovery Phase	1.1 Life before prāṇāyāma: "A caged animal"	(7/7)
	1.2 Taking your first breath: “They think it’s a bit new-agey”	(7/7)
	1.3 With experience comes knowledge: “It’s just breathing”	(7/7)
2. Unearthing the "Diamond in the Centre"	2.1 Commit to the practice: "You only see the benefit if you do it regularly"	(7/7)
	2.2 Experiencing the "Diamond in the centre"	(7/7)
	2.3 Embodied self-awareness: "I’m more in touch with my body"	(6/7)
3. Integration	3.1 Prāṇāyāma a superpower: “Demonstrating to myself my own sense of power”	(7/7)
	3.2 Interpersonal relationships: “It affects everyone around me”	(7/7)
	3.3 The meaning of the breath: “It has been life changing”	(7/7)

The Discovery Phase

All participants’ accounts highlighted an initial discovery phase in their experiential journey of prāṇāyāma. This theme conveyed participants’ lived experience before prāṇāyāma, and the various obstacles and subsequent experiential knowledge construed necessary in discovering the practice. Lily captured an essence of this theme when she says “I don’t like the word journey, but it has been a journey. [laughs] And it started, either way, I would say it was, I was, I was almost really small and really closed off.” The discovery phase signifies the beginnings in a journey of personal growth and self-discovery.

Life Before Prāṇāyāma: “A Caged Animal”

Difficulties experienced in life before prāṇāyāma were pertinent to each individual as they expressed their world view before discovering the practice. All described being at the mercy of emotions and moods (e.g. stress, anxiety, depression, uncontrollable reactions, anger), captured by Juniper who let herself “get pulled into things and just, got very angry”. Most highlighted these feelings in relation to life period or age-related situations (e.g. having their first child, menopause, family, caring and job responsibilities). Indeed, for Rosie, increasing responsibilities were part of getting older, as “you get older you've got more things to worry about, more responsibilities” which she felt she had “no control over.” Lily and Ruby echoed this sentiment in relation to their experienced life stages (e.g. having children), which were accompanied with identity loss and feeling “out of control” (Ruby). Both struggled with their sense of self when assuming parenthood and employment responsibilities, “being the employee, the team member, the mum. Uhm, and everything else that put me as a third person and not put me as myself” (Lily). For Ruby, this identity loss was prompted by the birth of her first child:

> *I used to be when when I had my first child I was at home a lot obviously, on maternity leave. (..) And (..) I remember then the feeling like I like I was a caged animal from, from when she was about…nine weeks old until about I think 12 weeks old. (..) My life was turned upside down I didn't go to work my identity was, out with the window, [fast] and I had a baby to look after and I felt caged and, everything was, felt out of control at the time I didn't have any (..) anything to fall back on it was just trying to get used to a new normal that I hadn't fully prepared myself for.*

Ruby's repetitive use of "caged" further signified her lack of control during this period of her life, desperate to be freed and regain her wild animal self - her identity - which previously provided safety and autonomy. The speed at which she described her situation conveys the overwhelm experienced at this time. She also revealed an essence of fear and anxiety from feeling out of control as she expresses having nothing "to fall back on", no safety net of sorts or resource to provide aid, freedom and autonomy. Ruby continued on, highlighting the memory of her inability to release her emotions or "having" something within herself to help with her situation:

> *I just remember at the time use...not using, but trying to, talk through all of that, those feelings and those emotions, but not really knowing quite how to and the only outlet I had was my husband. (..) And so he's, he's come home on those evenings and I've just (..) I dunno, I just, react to all these frustrations that I was feeling, but not having any outlet, any proper outlet and not having anything, within myself, to, use to take all that anxiety or frustration or whatever those feelings were out, and I think that [slow] when you, are trying to (..) uhm, use external sources to solve problems [fast] that's nowhere near as effective as having something, that you can do yourself, that is healthy.* (Ruby)

There was a sense of frustration at her own inability to help herself, at "not really knowing quite how to", pertaining to a sense of incompetence; further compounding her feelings of helplessness and lack of autonomy. Moreover, in these former lives, both women referenced being "on that treadmill of life" (Lily) and in a "constant cycle of not having a break" (Ruby). Thus, feeling out of control was not isolated to certain situations, they were continual and unrelenting during these periods.

These findings illuminate the low levels of wellbeing experienced in participants' lives before prāṇāyāma, seemingly spanning both hedonic and eudaimonic paradigms emerging in descriptions paralleling components of both SWB (Diener, 1984) and PWB (Ryff, 1989b). Indeed, analysis revealed evidence of negative affect and a dissatisfaction with life, key components of SWB (Diener, 1984), in their accounts of negative emotions such as anger, stress and anxiety, and struggles with the continual motion of life, their unrelenting feeling out of control. Furthermore, participants' inability to control such negative emotions suggests low levels of self-regulation (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004), linked to low PWB (e.g. Gagnon et al., 2016; Singh & Sharma, 2018). The lack of control, accompanied by their sensed powerlessness to change their situations also revealed absent environmental mastery, autonomy and competence, indicating low levels of PWB and basic psychological need satisfaction, well-documented dimensions influencing wellbeing in the literature (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryff, 1989b).

While participants overall referenced experiencing low wellbeing before prāṇāyāma was a regular feature in their lives, it was not clear that their wellbeing had declined due to their mid-life stage. Some participants described wellbeing decline related to mid-life events (e.g. having their first child), however notably, not all, as some participants had not experienced such events, and others referenced experiencing low wellbeing before the mid-life stage. Therefore, the findings provide only partial support for the evidenced U-shaped wellbeing decline (e.g Blanchflower, 2021; Blanchflower & Oswald, 2008). However, sharing experiences of their difficult periods and low wellbeing highlighted an inability to help themselves during those times, implying a need for crutch, such as prāṇāyāma, to improve their wellbeing and lives. Therefore, despite partially supporting mid-life wellbeing decline, this analysis provides the initial impression of prāṇāyāma's potential to enhance wellbeing in general.

Taking Your First Breath: "They Think it's a Bit New-Agey"

In discovering prāṇāyāma, certain obstacles, both practical (e.g. time) and psychological (e.g. mindset), deemed pertinent to overcome by all in order to adopt and begin practicing prāṇāyāma effectively. These included needing to "want to do it" (Poppy), be "in the mindset" (Lena), in the "right place" (Lily) and having "the time and space" (Ruby) to do so, which were often expressed as potential negative elements of the practice. Here, Poppy encapsulated this sentiment:

> *I just think you have to want to do it. And take the time to do it. I suppose you need time, and not everybody has that time. You know, people lead busy lives. It's not always, possible just to have take that time to focus on yourself and focus on your breathing. It's a lux…in some ways it's a luxury.*

Her use of the word "luxury" and frequent use of "time" emphasised the significance to her of making the time to focus on breathing. This appeared paradoxical as she felt she needed to actively prioritise herself in order to focus on something that occurs naturally, breathing. While time was a practical obstacle to overcome, it had psychological repercussions by generating an essence of privilege around her ability to practice, driving additional feelings of gratitude and meaning towards prāṇāyāma and the time she carves out for herself.

A need to be "in the mindset" (Lena) was voiced by everyone, with Lena describing prāṇāyāma as something that "doesn't like land with everybody." Indeed, the requirement for open mindedness was seemingly influenced by how most deemed others perceived prāṇāyāma, with frequent references to it having a "new-agey label" (Poppy), such that it creates "a block" (Rosie) for practitioners, preventing them from giving "it a try" to "understand how amazing it is!" (Rosie). This perception manifested so strongly for Ruby that she felt she could only practice on her own. Here, she described her self-consciousness about "doing it in front of people," alongside an interaction with her husband when discussing the practice:

> *Maybe I'm more comfortable maybe…maybe I don't want to talk about it with people or have them question what I'm doing. I don't know. I have tried talking about it with my husband, he said, 'What? You're practicing, breathing? Breathing? Like the breathing that you do every second? Like every day?' Ya you know. 'Did you have to think about that?' [laughs] And he doesn't get it he doesn't get it and I don't, have any aspiration for him to get it 'cause it doesn't matter whether he gets it or not.* (Ruby)

Disclosing her husband’s mockery expressed justification for her perceived need to practice alone, while the apathy she shared towards this created a sense of personal possession; prāṇāyāma was something she did for herself, despite others’ perceptions. This presented a juxtaposition between self-consciousness and the need for privacy, alongside a sense of mineness surrounding the practice. However, her repeated use of the word “maybe” suggests she was not entirely sure why she did not share prāṇāyāma with others, and she was ultimately attempting to understand it herself.

The various practical and psychological obstacles described by all highlight the implications and internal struggles experienced in order to engage in and commit to the practice, emphasising the conscious decisions and efforts made to integrate prāṇāyāma into their busy lives. Indeed, the conditions highlighted as necessary in order to practice prāṇāyāma parallel certain conditions such as readiness and personal preference postulated for adherence to and effectiveness of a PPI (Bolier et al., 2013; Pawelski, 2020). Introducing Merleau-Ponty (1945/2005) here aids understanding of the personal nature of the practice, aligning to his assertions that experience is inherently personal to the body-subject (Smith et al., 2009).

The ability to overcome the obstacles delineated satisfied their psychological need for competence (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and created a sense of accomplishment and meaning around prāṇāyāma, two elements of Seligman’s (2011) PERMA model of wellbeing. While these novel findings illuminate the beginnings of prāṇāyāma’s role in satisfying psychological needs and its potential to enhance wellbeing, they also highlight prospective negative aspects and considerations required of the practice, not often captured in extant prāṇāyāma literature; highlighting the unique benefits of employing a qualitative approach. Notably however, this study is unlikely to have captured an exhaustive list of considerations and adverse implications of the practice. The considerations it has captured, however, may become potential barriers to the practice and, alongside the specified contraindications (e.g. avoiding bhastrika if pregnant, high blood pressure) noted in yoga texts (see Iyengar, 1981), require consideration should prāṇāyāma be employed as an intervention.

With Experience Comes Knowledge: “It’s Just Breathing”

Having satisfied certain conditions and overcome the practice’s potential obstacles, the consequential experience of prāṇāyāma created a new world of experiential knowledge; an understanding of its process, physiology, benefits and scope only really known and understood once it had been experienced. Here, Ruby expressed her need for experience in cementing her understanding of the practice, “I think if you don’t experience it, you just you can’t understand what the benefits are, you can’t understand what it feels like, you can’t understand…how it changes the way that you react.”

Her repetitive use of the word “understand” highlighted, in fact, her prior extreme lack of understanding, which she had been required to overcome. She had only been able to overcome this by personally feeling and experiencing the sensations and potent benefits of the practice herself; this had been a truly experiential process for Ruby. With her acquired knowledge, she conveyed a sense that it was a secret known only by its insiders, those in the know.

The experiential element was significant for all, not only enabling them to adopt prāṇāyāma but to ensure commitment and integrate it into their lives, as evidenced in later themes. Prāṇāyāma is practical, thus, as expressed by Juniper, learning didactically is insufficient:

> *And I think I've really understood that you can, control your reactions, but you need to know, it's not enough to read the Instagram quotes, you need to know how? And you need, tools to help you do it. Uhm, I, I, I find for myself and, and so this for me, is one of those…*

Knowledge was fundamental for Juniper, expressed in her repeating phrase "need to know." In a similar vein to Ruby, she implied prāṇāyāma had a secretive element and it was the experience that provided the key to the secret door. Juniper recognised prāṇāyāma's role as a tool to help her control her actions, highlighting necessity for experiential understanding alongside the "know how" and "tools" to master the practice, suggesting these elements come as a package.

This experiential understanding also provided participants with a sense of personal accomplishment. The experiential journey produced greater awareness and knowledge of not only prāṇāyāma, but also participants' own abilities and competence in mastering their physiology and emotions. Achieving this mastery appeared to generate realisations of its simplicity, as highlighted by Juniper who continues saying:

> *…like that learning how to breathe…how to breathe correctly sounds really, obvious doesn't it? But you know like learning and understanding how that can help you, to be (..) to do the, to do the bit that you can control. (..) Uhm, has been quite a revelation to me? Uhm, not least because it seems so obvious once you kind [laughs] of figure it out.*

Here Juniper conveyed both the complexity and simplicity of the practice. While she simplified the idea of "learning how to breathe," for her, the process of understanding seemed to have been very involved and profound. Yet in her laughter she ridiculed herself for not "figuring it out" sooner. Its simplicity is heard in echo by Rosie who says, "I just find it amazing 'cause it's just, it's just, breathing. Like, it's not complicated! It's just you know, as simple as breathing and knowing how to breathe properly."

There was an interesting juxtaposition here as reducing "knowing how to breathe properly" to something "simple" was expressed against a backdrop of the myriad of obstacles highlighted in the previous theme (1.2). She reiterated its simplicity by her repetitive use of "just," and conveyed a sense of awe around the concept.

An experiential understanding of the practice and its associated effects were fundamental to participants' journeys. While prāṇāyāma was reduced to its absolute terms of "just breathing," it seemed the process had been significantly more involved. This juxtaposition conveyed the competency reached to express this, offering further support to prāṇāyāma's ability to satisfy competency needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000), highlighted in the previous themes. This competence encompassed not only the practice, also their physiology and emotions. Indeed, participants' mastery of the practice emerged, leaning on various wellbeing theories (e.g. Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryff, 1989b; Seligman, 2011), providing additional endorsement for prāṇāyāma's positive impact on wellbeing. While extant research suggests yoga, in particular āsana, generates a sense of accomplishment (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2018), prāṇāyāma's ability to solely satisfy competence needs and generate a sense of accomplishment and mastery cultivating wellbeing, as revealed here, is a novel finding. Competence and accomplishment can be achieved in two ways. Firstly, through learning the technical skills required for each prāṇāyāma technique; techniques are plentiful, varying in complexity (Iyengar, 1981), therefore when one is mastered others can be learned to maintain a sense of accomplishment. Secondly, a greater understanding of the mechanisms involved was gained through experiencing the practice, enabling continual monitoring of effects and increasingly achieving mastery of oneself. Furthermore, these findings initially illuminated the significance of the body's role in perceiving the world, aligning to Merleau-Ponty's (1945/2005) perspective. Indeed, prāṇāyāma is a mechanism through which one can explicitly perceive the world, mastering it enables a change in perception, elaborated and evolved further in later themes.

Unearthing the "Diamond in the Centre"

All voiced that prāṇāyāma enabled access and connection to a place of inner calm, strength and stability, captured here by Juniper, "We are at the heart of ourselves, we are, calm and we are, unchanging and we are, happy? And on top of it all, is all this madness…" Vividly portraying the notion:

> *Like a diamond in the centre. And, all of this other stuff that kind of goes, you know, like gets…sort of attacks it, but at the end of it, in prāṇāyāma, I kind of imagine that I can smooth all of that off. And at the centre will always there will always be this thing will still be shining. You know, this thing will still be there and it will still be the same.* (Juniper)

Subordinate themes emerged describing the commitment needed to connect to this "diamond," how it feels to experience the connection including subsequent reduction and production of a plethora of emotions and embodied self-awareness. Connection to the "diamond in the centre" was an integral reason for maintaining their practice, the experience creating motivation to continue.

Commit to the Practice: "You Only See the Benefit if You Do it Regularly"

Everyone's commitment to their prāṇāyāma practice, delineated by the dedication, frequency and length of time spent during sessions and since they started practicing, influenced their journeys and its role in their wellbeing. These factors impacted ability to and subsequent experience of connecting to the "diamond in the centre," expressed by Lily who said, "well I think to get the full benefit of it, it has to be, it has to be regular," and also Ruby, "I think you only see the benefit if you do it regularly." Frequent practice was voiced as a motivating factor for Juniper who said, "I've really been, kind of enjoying that, and the more I do it, the more it happens", and for Poppy who realised the importance of prāṇāyāma in her life:

> *And I've realised the importance now so the frequency, I want the frequency there. I want it there. I'm not just doing because I'm going to yoga and practice it with my āsanas...it you know. So yeah. It's a choice, and it's and I do it more frequently.* (Poppy)

While Poppy voiced her motivations to practice, she was also illustrating how prāṇāyāma had become its own separate activity, highlighting its significance. She appeared to be making a promise to herself to commit to a routine; prāṇāyāma's offerings left her wanting more and frequency was the key to satisfying that.

Lily described how motivation to practice regularly was prompted by the speed of accessing the "diamond in the centre", "because I've been practicing for quite a while, I can like I can connect to that inner peace quite quickly." Additionally, by spending more time practicing prāṇāyāma, connecting to that inner world for longer generates greater benefits, as described by Ruby:

> *But if you're really concentrating I think, think three [deep breaths] does it [to feel a benefit] I think you could do it for longer than that like I say up to 20 minutes. Then that's where I think you do, see enhanced benefit that's [slow] where you…really (..) can calm down and…I've said I've said gr, grounded about three times so far, but that's when you ground.* (Ruby)

Ruby's use of "ground" likened the experience of a longer prāṇāyāma practice to coming down to earth, implying that without it she floats uncontrollably in the air. Her slower speech describing the calming effect this had reinforces the experience.

This analysis illuminated the importance of frequency and commitment to reap prāṇāyāma's benefits, indeed the frequency facilitating further practice. This highlighted the presence of intrinsic motivation, a well-documented element related to enhanced wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2000). A defining characteristic of intrinsic motivation is needs satisfaction, illustrated here by references to autonomy and competence which appear to have facilitated interest in the activity (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Moreover, a later theme (3.2) highlighted satisfaction of relatedness, further substantiating the present study's findings that prāṇāyāma can satisfy basic psychological needs, enhancing wellbeing. Indeed, analysis suggested prāṇāyāma may be an intrinsically motivated activity as it was naturally interesting (captured in 1.2), satisfied basic needs, and had an internal perceived locus of causality, as captured in the third theme (3.1) (see Deci & Ryan, 2000). This bodes well for prāṇāyāma's potential employment as a PPI, greater motivation enabled easier adherence to the practice and enhanced results (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). The rewards received from committing to prāṇāyāma in the ways described altered the experience and meaning of it for all. Prāṇāyāma evolved to hold greater meaning as it generated greater benefits; the practice itself becoming its own motivating factor to continue. This demonstrated the initial creation of prāṇāyāma's meaning for these participants, another element influencing wellbeing (Seligman, 2011), elaborated in the final theme (3.3).

Experiencing the "Diamond in the Centre"

A common theme emerged illustrating how it feels to practice prāṇāyāma, which appeared integral to participants' wellbeing and the reason they continued practicing. The practice itself was likened to being in a state of flow, feeling complete immersion and absorption in it in the moment:

> *Your breathing is so (..) focused you're so you know it's so consistent and so focused that you (..) you really kind of lose yourself, in a good way, you know you really, become (..) entirely absorbed in what in what you're doing in that moment. And your mind rests.* (Juniper)

Juniper elaborated on the significance of "losing yourself" by saying "So, losing yourself with a small 'S', and becoming aware of yourself with a capital 'S'." Juniper's strong descriptions illustrated the power of prāṇāyāma to mindfully engage her in the present moment, enabling a flow state such that she temporarily loses her sense of self. She becomes part of something else, at one with the practice. It is the complete surrender to the absorption that creates the resting mind. Indeed, her description was so intense, an actual embodied sense of relief was experienced as she reached the end, and the "mind rests." Losing one's self bore a creation of self and self-awareness, the essence of this was captured in the following theme (2.3). Ruby shared a similar experience of prāṇāyāma:

> *It is, uhm on the shoreline at the sea, under the water. So, you're in, the waves, it feels like that it feels like you're, in the waves you are part of nature and it's cyclical it's moving in and out. But you have to be in it not watching it…*

Here, Ruby's metaphor of being in the shallows of the sea was a particularly vivid depiction of her experience of prāṇāyāma. For Ruby, prāṇāyāma was incredibly immersive, which was especially important to her, implied by her reiteration "you have to be in it not watching it." Furthermore, she portrayed a sense of circular motion, likened to the waves and paralleling the flow of breathing. Her reference to "shoreline" highlighted the shallowness of the water she was in, inferring an element of safety required, so as not to go too deep. This suggested a potential underlying fear of losing herself in the practice, a concept Juniper explicitly alluded to. Indeed, similar to Juniper, Ruby intimated becoming one with something, nature, implying a desire for universal connectedness which prāṇāyāma provided for her.

While other participants did not disclose similarly explicit accounts of experiencing flow, they did reference flow conditions and frustrations when these were not met. This was illustrated by Lena describing needing her body's feedback:

> *If I can hear my body if my body is like louder or if like the sensations in my body, are more noticeable, then I can disconnect from my thoughts. And I can concentrate, and like be more curious. I know you might be curious, but like if it's like there's nothing going on if I can't feel anything, then uhm, I have a hard time doing that.* (Lena)

For Lena, the sound of her body indicated its presence, she could feel her own existence which offered her comfort. This sense of reassurance permitted her to detach from her thoughts, comfortable in the knowledge she would still exist without them and provided her confidence to surrender to herself and explore her being.

In general, the experience of prāṇāyāma felt like energy transformation, alongside a flow state or generated by it, differing dependent on the type practiced. There were portrayals of "an awakeness, an alertness" (Lena), while practicing kapalabhati, whereas nadi shodhana was described as feeling "just so, so calming" (Juniper). Indeed, calmness was an overwhelming common sentiment among everyone, which most highlighted created space to gain perspective and "think more clearly" (Ruby). Consequential effect of gained perspective was captured in the final master theme. Emotions were also frequently accessed during the experience, enabling the release of negative ones (e.g. stress, anxiety) and production of positive ones (e.g. joy, contentment), as depicted by Poppy, "I do get quite emotional, but I do sometimes feel a sense of joy. I also sometimes feel, I can sometimes feel a bit sad as well, but not in a bad way."

Here, Poppy captured the mix of emotions she can feel while practicing prāṇāyāma; her repeated use of "sometimes" illustrating the varied nature of her experience, portraying even the potential "sad" ones in a positive light. Releasing emotions is an important contributory reason for practicing, as Rosie highlighted, "it's about releasing emotions that I'm not able to, access." Prāṇāyāma grants Rosie competence to access her emotions, something she felt unable to do herself. While this was regarded as a positive experience by all, some also highlighted overwhelm initially felt by the emotional energy, and the "daunting" experience of an "empty mind" (Poppy).

Support for existing prāṇāyāma studies (e.g. Brown & Gerbarg, 2005b; Novaes et al., 2020; Peterson et al., 2017) were predominantly found within this theme, with physiological and psychological effects of prāṇāyāma captured in participants' accounts; particularly the production of positive affect, reduction of negative affect and processing of emotions, as reported in Novaes et al. (2020). Indeed, the present study's findings substantiate claims that the breath can influence emotions (Philippot et al., 2002). Furthermore, participants reported experiencing different effects dependent on the type of technique practiced, corroborating postulations from existing physiological studies (e.g. Brown & Gerbarg, 2005a) and yoga philosophy (Iyengar, 1981). Prāṇāyāma's ability to induce calm was particularly prevalent among participants, supporting existing findings of prāṇāyāma's calming effect on the nervous system (Benson et al., 1974; Sinha et al., 2013). However, the abundance of calm could likely be due to more energising prāṇāyāma (e.g. kapalabhati) only practiced frequently by one participant. Additionally, participants' descriptions of enhanced cognition (e.g. clearer thinking) supports similar outcomes captured in increased scores on general wellbeing measures by Peterson et al. (2017). Although the present study's findings predominantly paint a positive picture of prāṇāyāma's experience, there were references to potential negative effects such as fear of having an empty mind and knowing how to deal with surfacing emotions, providing additional considerations elaborated on in theme 1.2. These are presented as key considerations for awareness when embarking on the practice. While the present study provides support for extant literature, it also proposes novel findings delineating the positive impact of prāṇāyāma's experience on wellbeing, as subsequently discussed.

Overall, these strong descriptions highlighted how prāṇāyāma can engender a flow state and provide escape from the "madness," a freedom to access, experience and ultimately control a shift in energy, release negative emotions and cultivate positive ones. Analysis suggested this is the heart of the practice, revealing prāṇāyāma's ability to enhance both hedonic (e.g. Diener, 1984) and eudaimonic (e.g. Seligman, 2011) constructs of wellbeing by reducing negative emotions, producing positive emotions and engagement. One way prāṇāyāma produced positive emotions was through the described experiences of absorption, akin to the concept of flow, defined as "the intense experiential involvement in moment-to-moment activity" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009, p. 394). Further flow conditions were described by participants including immediate physiological feedback, increased sense of control, challenge of learning the practice and prāṇāyāma's autotelic nature (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). Thus, it is contended that prāṇāyāma is a source of flow. Attaining this level of conscious is deemed to remove negative thought, thus, these moments of flow create positive emotions (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). While flow is postulated to enhance positive emotion, by its very nature flow also increases engagement, two contributing factors of wellbeing (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009; Seligman, 2011). This increase of positive emotion is evidenced by Fredrickson (2001) to expand mindset and build psychological resources; the ripple effect of accessing these elements are highlighted in following themes.

Embodied Self-Awareness: "I'm More in Touch with My Body"

The experience of connecting to the inner self appeared to generate a heightened sense of embodied self-awareness both while practicing and in everyday life. Participants described being more "in tune" with their bodies, its health, their physiological experiences and what they may be needing at any given moment. Here, Rosie described her new connection with her body, "It's like it's amazing how in tune I'm with my body now compared to years ago you know, I can, literally like feel, the tension." A similar sentiment was shared by Lena:

> *I can feel because of the, the different practices I'm, more in touch with my body so I notice when I'm, like my physical body's not regulated. So that's big 'cause I don't think everybody has that so this is like, helps me connect with my body and then being able to like use breathing 'cause I know that, like by breathing you can kind of down regulate so I can, like take this and apply it to the kinds of different situations that are stressful.*

Lena highlighted how the practice generates a greater connection with her body, enabling her to know when it has changed state as well as what to do to control it. Her use of the word “big” indicated this is important to her as she deemed other people did not possess this knowledge or ability. Echoing similar sentiments implied in theme 1.3, the knowledge she has acquired through prāṇāyāma created an air of superiority, access to information only practitioners know. Furthermore, her increased ability to regulate her physiology created confidence to use her knowledge and ability in other areas of her life where she might need it.

Greater consideration and awareness of participants’ heart rate, blood pressure and lung health were also voiced, with Lily using her knowledge and practice of prāṇāyāma to help control her asthma:

> *I’m, wheezy at night where I wake up and, I’m on the cusp of being wheezy I suppose is where I would describe it. Previously I would have just taken my inhaler. But now I don’t take my inhaler, I just focus on, kind of that deeper inhale and exhale. And eventually that tightness in my…the bronchospasm, it might take 5 or 10 minutes it’s not as instant as inhaler, but it goes away.*

Here Lily was describing a change in her behaviour as a result of prāṇāyāma, and a way to control her asthmatic symptoms for herself. Indeed, this new level of embodied self-awareness was significant for everyone as it enabled greater control and autonomy over themselves, consequently generating confidence and competence in managing their own physiological states. Their enhanced abilities offered wide-reaching benefits, cultivating confidence to use the skills and knowledge learnt through prāṇāyāma, applying it to other situations they require help in.

Embodiment has foundations in Merleau-Ponty's (1945/2005) body-subject perspective, illustrating the interconnectedness between body and mind. Embodiment can be defined as a present awareness of sensations experienced from within the body (Fogel, 2013), which is argued to recognise the importance of these lived-body experiences, including feelings and physiological states (Blood, 2005). The present findings highlight participants’ experience of embodiment, illustrating positive connections to their bodies (Piran, 2016). Indeed, the analysis revealed participants’ experience of embodiment paralleled three dimensions postulated by Piran (2016), body-self connection, self-attunement and subjective immersion, positively experiencing each. Thus, it is argued that prāṇāyāma provides a way to positively connect with one’s body, offering an enhanced level of comfort within the body. Additionally, the practice provides time and ability to focus towards the inner self, which can facilitate a shift in perspective to inhabiting one’s body from the inside; thus possessing greater awareness and being directed by one’s internal cues, consequently engaging in self-care (Piran, 2016). Indeed, self-care can enhance wellbeing (Moses et al., 2016), further contributing evidence to the role prāṇāyāma plays in wellbeing. Furthermore, prāṇāyāma may be considered a way to practice attuned care of the body, a protective factor enhancing the embodiment dimensions (Piran, 2017). This study provides qualitative evidence in support of notions merely discussed by Piran and Neumark-Sztainer (2020) regarding the potential contributions of yoga to positive embodiment, and contends prāṇāyāma’s distinct capacity as a protective factor on its own virtue.

While enhanced body awareness has been associated with yoga practice (e.g. Kidd & Eatough, 2017; Rivest-Gadbois & Boudrias, 2019) the findings presented here focused on prāṇāyāma, a single element of yoga, are novel. Cognisant participants also practice āsana which may have contributed to their sense of embodied self-awareness, the ability to identify and use it specifically for respiration, as delineated in participants’ accounts, is significant and testament to prāṇāyāma’s unique role in yoga. This is particularly pertinent as lung health declines from the age of 35 (Sharma & Goodwin, 2006). This increased awareness enabled greater autonomy over themselves, illuminating prāṇāyāma's ability to satisfy autonomy and competence needs, evidenced to increase wellbeing (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Overall, this theme illuminated the interconnectedness of mind and body by proposing prāṇāyāma as a way to access this connection, presenting parallels with Merleau-Ponty (1945/2005). It demonstrated prāṇāyāma's role, a bodily experience, in providing a bridge between participants' internal and external worlds (Morley, 2001). Indeed, the simplicity of breathing was brought into focus through prāṇāyāma, carrying with it increased focus and awareness of the body (Morley, 2001).

Integration

Thus far, the journey of connecting to the sanctuary of the inner self has created a shift in participants' lived experience, personal growth. The delineated experience of prāṇāyāma created such a positive impression on these individuals they integrated the practice into their lives and ultimately their sense of selves. It had become part of who they are such that in Rosie's case, "It just feels like it's just something that happens naturally now. Like I don't have to consciously, do them as well. It's just, it's just my body knows it needs it so I just do it". This final theme portrayed the rewards participants reap as a result of their commitment to and the integration of the practice into their lives.

Prāṇāyāma a Superpower: "Demonstrating to Myself My Own Sense of Power"

Every individual described an enhanced base level of calm and inner strength resulting from their commitment to prāṇāyāma, as well as comfort from the knowledge they could access their "diamond in the centre" at any time. The enhanced base level was frequently described as a general sense of calm, control and ability to, as Rosie conveyed, "handle whatever…whatever life throws at me like, bring it on." For everyone, prāṇāyāma helped them function at a calmer, more rational, less reactionary level in their daily lives. They were frequently able to choose not to get "embroiled" (Juniper) in situations and identify what they "can't control" (Juniper). Throughout all accounts, participants viewed prāṇāyāma as a tool or resource they could call on in any situation. Ruby captured the essence of this theme by saying, "It feels like a little (..) superpower that I know is there…"

Indeed, Juniper specifically highlighted prāṇāyāma's versatility, comparing its effectiveness to meditation but superior as "you can do things with your breathing at any time" (Juniper). Calling on this resource enabled them to "return to the bit in the middle, that's calm. And to sort of go back in there, underneath you know it's like, getting in under all these layers of madness and just finding that calm centre" (Juniper).

Juniper's description here conveyed a sense of comfort around the practice. Her use of "underneath" and "getting in under" could be likened to language used to describe getting into a comfortable bed. For Juniper, prāṇāyāma felt like a way to go back inside to a place of calm, under the covers, protected and away from the "madness" of the outside world.

While the tool, or "comfort blanket" (Poppy), a phrase paralleling Juniper's portrayal, served as a "superpower" to deploy in extraordinary situations, the knowledge of its existence also appeared conducive to building their inner strength or resilience; an increasing "sense of control…over myself and over my emotions" (Rosie) which is "empowering" (Lily). Here, Ruby portrayed what this empowerment means to her:

> *Well practicing is a control…is the choice I make, that I am in charge of. I choose that, for me. (..) So it's kind of demonstrating to myself (..) Oh, this is gonna sound really sort of I don't know how this is gonna sound, my own sense of, it's demonstrating my own sense of power.*

This strong description illuminated the significance of her choice to practice prāṇāyāma; it was something very personal that she chose for herself to prove how powerful she was. There was a real sense of her recognising her own volition, autonomy and capability here. In describing her image of prāṇāyāma, Ruby portrayed her perception of how the superpower functions:

> *…the image has to be under the waves and not looking at them because when you…if the image was under (..) you can see all the movement and everything else is going around because (..) your breath, and, or my breath and my (..) use of it (..) grounds me to where I am it grounds me better to my home and to the people that I come into contact with.*

For Ruby her ability to deploy her "superpower" and connect with herself in that moment enabled her to detach and become an observer of the external world, while remaining stable and secure in herself. Indeed, she viewed prāṇāyāma as an anchor, holding her steady in rough seas. Manifestation of this anchorage in other areas of their lives was captured in the following theme. Overall, analysis revealed how accessing the "diamond in the centre" carved space for each individual to take control of their emotions, cultivating feelings of autonomy and competence over themselves, generating a sense of resilience. This theme also evidenced the experience of prāṇāyāma in altering an individual's world-view to one of safety and autonomy, offering further alignment to Merleau-Ponty's (1945/2005) perspective of the body being the key proponent in shaping the world-view.

The transformation in participants' ability to manage their emotions and choose how they react to situations, illustrated an increase in PWB resulting from the practice, particularly in areas of personal growth (Ryff, 1989b) and further highlighted prāṇāyāma's ability to satisfy autonomy and competence (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Participants' accounts also illuminated increased resilience. While resilience is a complex field with varying definitions, this analysis suggested participants' resilience increased in ways encapsulated by Pooley and Cohen's (2010) classification of exhibiting resourcefulness in the face of challenges. Indeed, suggesting that participants' resilience was regarded as an increased capacity to face adversity (Harms et al., 2018).

The enhanced levels of resilience experienced by participants paralleled evidence that increased positive emotion over time builds personal resources to draw upon in times of crisis or stress (Fredrickson, 2001). While there is evidence suggesting strong links between resilience and wellbeing, it is not a clear picture (Harms et al., 2018); indeed, research suggests a bidirectional link between these two concepts, with both wellbeing enhancing resilience and resilience enhancing wellbeing (Harms et al., 2018). While this study's findings could provide support for both, they align to Dodge et al. (2012) equilibrium theory by suggesting that prāṇāyāma creates additional resource to add to the pool, maintaining a sense of balance against challenges faced. The significant novel finding here was that while prāṇāyāma built personal resources including embodied self-awareness, meaning, control and so on, participants regarded prāṇāyāma itself as a personal resource. Indeed, prāṇāyāma can be considered an individual protective factor (Harms et al., 2018) and arguably utilised as a resilience intervention.

The significance of this finding is twofold in its ability to create resilience; firstly, that prāṇāyāma could be utilised as a protective factor in preparation for a potential decline in mid-life, and secondly employed during that decline to build resilience and call on as a resource (Chmitorz et al., 2018; IJntema et al., 2019). Furthermore, prāṇāyāma's delineated versality was a notable benefit, enabling flexibility in frequency and dosage (Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013), thus enhancing its value as a resource or potential intervention.

Interpersonal Relationships: "It Affects Everyone Around Me"

Developing the narrative discussed in the previous theme, while the "superpower" empowered all individuals on a personal level, it also played a significant role in improving their interactions with others. There was a strong sense that developing an ability to control themselves in the first instance, subsequently enabled them to engage with others on a different level, a more controlled place, captured here by Poppy who said, "I've always loved being with other people and connecting with other people, but I think (..) and it's just a different level. I guess it's just from a calmer, persona. And very open (..) and more empathic."

This sentiment was heard in echo from everyone, enabling Juniper to be a "better person" and Ruby to be "kinder to my family." Their loved ones were frequently referenced in this regard, highlighting prāṇāyāma's significance in their lives, as was captured and elaborated in the following theme (3.3). There was a common recognition of how their feelings and emotions influenced their behaviour and communication with others, revealed here by Rosie and Lily:

> *It's a tool that I can use to improve, you know, my life and, it affects everyone around me as well. [laughs] 'Cause when I'm agitated and anxious then it affects you know my, my children and, after I've done the exercise, I kind of feel calmer, so for me it's a tool to kind of just bring peace to myself and to the whole household.* (Rosie)

Rosie portrayed prāṇāyāma's wide-reaching power in enhancing her life and those around her. She laughed at the thought of this, portraying her amazement of her enormous proclamation. Lily described how:

> *Before I was using prāṇāyāma I would clam up. And be emotional and quiet often end up tearful and then not able to express my thoughts or feelings or opinions to him [partner]. But since I've been using prāṇāyāma, I just, find that I have a bit more space to be able to say, to him [omitted].* (Lily)

She also noted that "It's changed our, it's changed the communication in our relationship in a in a better way, definitely." In both extracts, Lily conveyed how prāṇāyāma has helped her communicate with her partner. Along with her use of "clam up", Lily portrayed a real sense of tight closure of herself and her emotions, unable to express herself she felt powerless. Prāṇāyāma gave her the space she needed to be able to express her emotions, portraying and cultivating a sense of empowerment in doing so.

Analysis revealed all participants perceived prāṇāyāma's role as helping to regulate their emotions, in turn, positively impacting relationships with loved ones. Thus, in addition to its intrapersonal boons, prāṇāyāma also provided interpersonal benefits. In this sense, prāṇāyāma satisfied another basic need, relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and its effects enhanced wellbeing through relationship dimensions delineated in PERMA (Seligman, 2011) and PWB (Ryff, 1989b).

Additionally, creating better relationships with others is a well-documented predictor of SWB (e.g. Froh et al., 2007), further cementing prāṇāyāma's significant role in wellbeing of these individuals in mid-life. Furthermore, while better relationships evidently enhances wellbeing, they are also postulated to increase probability of survival (Holt-Lunstad, 2018; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010), further highlighting pranayama's significance. Moreover, the finding that prāṇāyāma positively influenced relationships was amplified by the discovery that prāṇāyāma had a ripple effect on the wellbeing of those around them, highlighting its wide-reaching impact. This is particularly significant in light of research suggesting middle-aged individuals play integral roles in the lives of others, connecting and spanning young and old generations (Lachman et al., 2015). Corroborating with Lachman et al. (2015), these results demonstrate focusing on the wellbeing of those in mid-life can have an extensive impact. Finally, research suggests relationships can also derive a sense of meaning in life (Emmons, 2003; Fegg et al., 2007), something participants also attained from practicing prāṇāyāma, captured in the following theme.

The Meaning of the Breath: "It Has Been Life Changing"

An overwhelming sense of prāṇāyāma's meaning emerged from all participants. Each readily shared its significance within their lives, with most using emotive language in their portrayals, compounding its sense of importance. Lena described being "obsessed with" and "passionate" about the practice, such that it is "a critical" part of her day and "all I could ask for." Rosie, Lily and Juniper similarly shared passionate sentiments including how they are "amazed at its power" (Juniper) and "It's amazing! A bit of a revelation" (Lily). Among the perspectives was how "life changing" the practice had been for these individuals, captured here in Rosie's gratitude, "I think it has been life changing and that you know, I dread to think if I'd never found that teacher in that class, you know, where I'd be right now."

Rosie's expression of "dread" strongly captured an accompanied fear around what may have been had she not discovered prāṇāyāma; it had changed the course of and ultimately saved her life. Indeed, prāṇāyāma's meaning was so powerful for everyone that it was frequently voiced as something they would always do:

> *I don't think it's something that I will stop doing I don't think I'll ever stop doing it because I've (..) awoken? Awoken to it enough over, as enough of a length of time, to mean that (..) I think I'd realise and I think I would understand what a problem was if I stopped doing it. I don't think it's an option to stop doing it.* (Ruby)

Ruby illustrated here how prāṇāyāma was something she could never stop practicing, as though she had no choice. Her pause and initial positioning of the word "awoken" as a question, suggested her uncertainty about what she meant and how it had made her feel. However, in confirming her word choice to herself, its use illuminated the meaning of her practice; suggesting prāṇāyāma awakened her from her previous existence, one that was asleep, lacking in consciousness. This notion was supported by a frequently expressed strong desire not to "go back to how I used to be" (Poppy), returning to a life before prāṇāyāma. Ruby continued on, further emphasising this notion:

> *I don't think I'd want to. I think if I ended up in a situation like I was a couple of years ago, just constantly, moving from one place to another throughout the day and then starting over. I don't think I could (..) [fast] I don't think I could do it. I wouldn't let myself do it, and I wouldn't let myself be in a situation to do that.* (Ruby)

Here, Ruby reflected to time before prāṇāyāma to further iterate how much prāṇāyāma meant to her. Her frequent use of the word "think" highlighted the cognitive nature of this appraisal, suggesting she had given a lot of thought to it and was resolute that she would not go back. Additionally, her change from "could" to "would" towards the end of this extract revealed her transformation; the increased confidence and additional control she now felt she could exert to not allow similar situations.

Analysis of these strong sentiments revealed prāṇāyāma's meaning to these individuals. To them, prāṇāyāma has been life changing such that they cannot consider being without it. While this finding is analogous to existing quantitative (Ivtzan & Papantoniou, 2014; Ramirez-Duran et al., 2022) and qualitative (Kidd & Eatough, 2017) yoga studies, corroborating claims of increased meaning derived from longer practice, it offers novel contributions of the significance of this standalone practice. Indeed, meaning is an integral pillar in Seligman's (2011) wellbeing theory and the way prāṇāyāma was experienced by these participants, pursued for its own sake, aligned to elements defined as constituting to meaning. Meaning appears an important proponent to wellbeing with links drawn between the two constructs in other studies (e.g. Cohen & Cairns, 2012; Steger, 2012, 2018). Meaning is also argued as congruent to a purposeful life (Emmons, 2003; Ryff & Singer, 1998), therefore highlighting links to PWB (Ryff, 1989b).

Debate exists around meaning across the lifespan, some scholars postulating meaning becomes more important with age (e.g. Settersten, 2002), while others (e.g. Staudinger, 2001) contend it is created continually throughout life, with constitution of what is meaningful likely changing as people age. Furthermore, individuals' world view is deemed to change with age, moving from a materialistic outside view to an introspective one (Tornstam, 1997, 2005, 2011). In light of these theories, prāṇāyāma may be more meaningful for individuals in mid-life due to its introspective and solitary nature, however this requires further clarification through research with other age groups. While extant research highlights a link between yoga and increased meaning in life and wellbeing (Ivtzan & Papantoniou, 2014), the ability for prāṇāyāma to cultivate these concepts on its own is a novel finding.

The analysis suggested prāṇāyāma is a way to cultivate meaning in people's lives and as a meaningful activity, like others in the positive psychology field (e.g. Steger et al., 2014), offers further potential to be utilised as a PPI. However, it is important to contextualise the meaning expressed by these participants, individuals who have naturally experienced the journey to prāṇāyāma as delineated. Indeed, corroborating with Kidd and Eatough (2017), it is questionable whether the same significance would be experienced by those employing prāṇāyāma as an intervention.

Additionally, the resulting resilience derived from practicing prāṇāyāma, captured in theme 3.1, together with these findings highlight a compelling argument regarding prāṇāyāma's role in meaning and resilience. With research suggesting meaning may serve as a process underlying resilience, enabling better recovery from negative life events (Musich et al., 2021; Schaefer et al., 2013), prāṇāyāma may be a worthwhile practice to employ for greater reasons than currently documented.

Conclusion

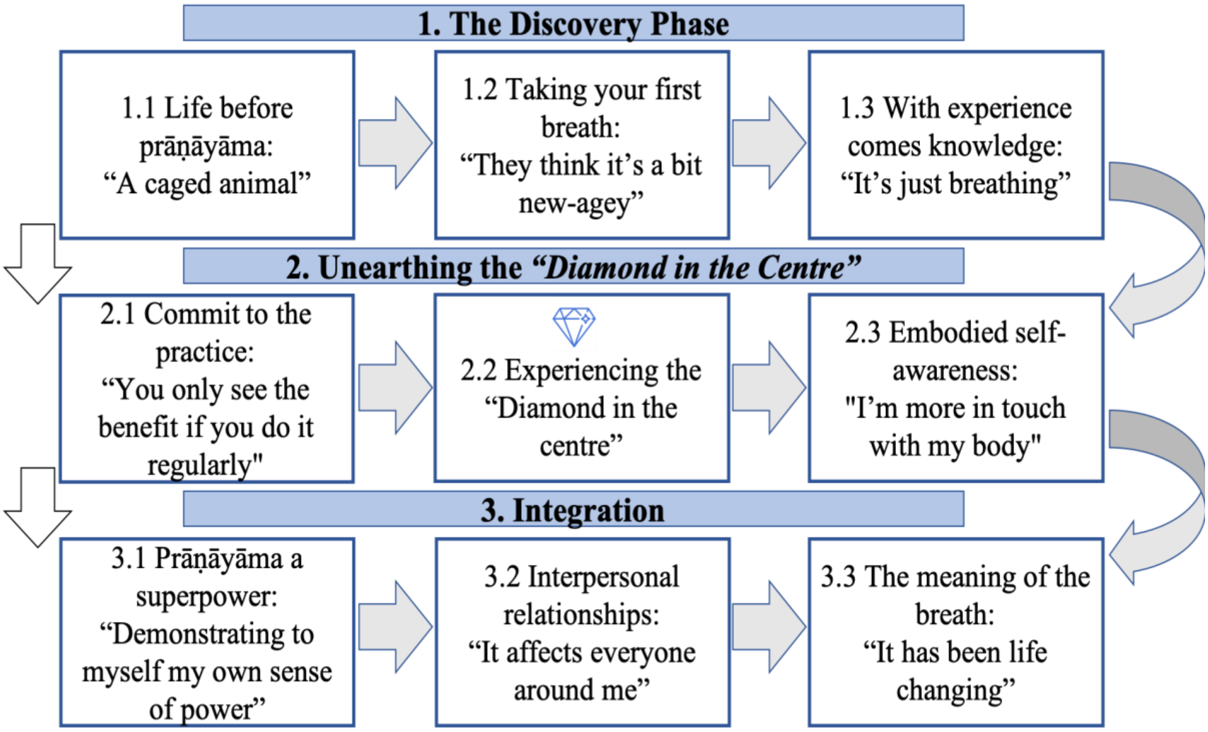
This study aimed to explore the meaning and role of prāṇāyāma in the wellbeing of adults in mid-life. More specifically, it aimed to explore whether the breath, particularly prāṇāyāma, can play a key role in wellbeing and its potential to be employed as a PPI. As evidenced and discussed extensively in the results and discussion section, the study found prāṇāyāma played a significant role in enhancing this age group's wellbeing. Additionally, through understanding the phenomenology of prāṇāyāma, this study discovered the journey embarked upon in reaching this perception, illustrated in Figure 1. Low wellbeing levels were experienced in participants' lives before discovering prāṇāyāma, resonant with existing evidence of a decline in mid-life (e.g. Blanchflower, 2021; Blanchflower & Oswald, 2008), with low levels of SWB (Diener, 1984), PWB (Ryff, 1989b), self-regulation (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004) and basic psychological need satisfaction (Deci & Ryan, 2000) particularly prevalent at this time.

However, these individuals were able to transform their experience through engaging in prāṇāyāma, bringing further evidence to support the notion that the breath plays a major role in wellbeing (Zaccaro et al., 2018), and its potential as a wellbeing intervention. The study highlighted potential obstacles around assuming prāṇāyāma, the importance of experiencing it to fully understand it and its simplicity, and the commitment required to gain real benefits of the practice. Further, it delineated how it feels to practice prāṇāyāma and the subsequent benefits to not only wellbeing, but embodied self-awareness, improved emotional regulation, resilience and social interaction. Finally, it illuminated how prāṇāyāma cultivates meaning in life.

Ultimately, this study unearthed the influential and meaningful role that prāṇāyāma could play in the lives of this age group. Additionally, it delineated how the journey will likely unfold for individuals commencing this practice to enhance their wellbeing, something that is lacking in extant literature. Thus, this study provides a valuable addition to the limited research exploring the experience of prāṇāyāma from a phenomenological perspective, enabling understanding into how it manifests, which until now, was unknown. Together, these insights contribute to the positive psychology field and satisfies the original gap found in the literature by providing evidence of the pure role and significant influence of prāṇāyāma, an ancient, cost-free, versatile and universally-accessible technique, in enhancing wellbeing and other phenomena positively; substantiating its potential to be adopted as a PPI and a worthwhile intervention on its own. This potential is further discussed and concluded in detail in the following section.

Figure 1

Illustration of the Journey to Prāṇāyāma


1. The Discovery Phase
1.1 Life before prāṇāyāma: "A caged animal"
1.2 Taking your first breath: "They think it's a bit new-agey"
1.3 With experience comes knowledge: "It's just breathing"
2. Unearthing the *"Diamond in the Centre"*
2.1 Commit to the practice: "You only see the benefit if you do it regularly"
2.2 Experiencing the "Diamond in the centre"
2.3 Embodied self-awareness: "I'm more in touch with my body"
3. Integration
3.1 Prāṇāyāma a superpower: "Demonstrating to myself my own sense of power"
3.2 Interpersonal relationships: "It affects everyone around me"
3.3 The meaning of the breath: "It has been life changing"

Note. This is a representation of the Journey to Prāṇāyāma as indicated by the study's findings.

Prāṇāyāma as a PPI/PPA

Engaging in prāṇāyāma enabled individuals to gain fundamental psychological skills (e.g. emotional regulation, resilience) and much like PPIs in the positive psychology arena, positively impacted their wellbeing. As delineated, prāṇāyāma reduced negative emotions (e.g. stress, anxiety), satisfied basic needs, and produced positive emotions (e.g. calm, contentment, joy), thoughts and behaviours; this aligns neatly to the optimal conditions postulated in Lyubomirsky and Layous' (2013) positive-activity fit model, supporting the argument that prāṇāyāma would be an effective PPI. Further, the findings suggested that while wellbeing benefits were immediate, longer commitment unlocked the greatest rewards, indicating prāṇāyāma would be appropriate to integrate into one's life as a positive psychology activity (PPA). Long term PPI effects are mediated by continued practice, immediate benefit and preference (Proyer et al., 2015), these themes emerged in the present study arguing prāṇāyāma's potential to produce long term benefits as a PPI.

Further, findings in theme 1.2 provided awareness of considerations for potential practitioners and support notions of individual preference, readiness and previous experience in determining PPI effectiveness (Bolier et al., 2013). However, it also highlighted the accessibility of the practice which needs to be considered and addressed for the practice to become a PPI/PPA. Moreover, while participants viewed prāṇāyāma as a significant role in their wellbeing, they also practiced yoga, therefore the potential impact of yoga's already documented benefits must be considered in light of these findings. However, like wellbeing, yoga is multidimensional, and while extant studies suggest yoga positively impacts wellbeing, they lack specificity of which elements of yoga enhance which elements of wellbeing.

A strength of the present study was that it addressed this shortcoming, providing evidence suggesting one specific element of yoga, integral to the practice and indeed to all human experience, satisfies psychological needs and wellbeing dimensions delineated. In doing so, it also highlighted a specific element and provided details of outcomes and how these were achieved, satisfying Pawelski's (2020) Elements Model, important for creation of new PPIs and their effective administration. Indeed, utilising prāṇāyāma as a PPI/PPA may be effective in resisting the wellbeing decline in mid-life by satisfying basic needs and increasing positive emotion, engagement, accomplishment, cultivating meaning, personal growth and enhancing relationships. As an intervention, it is supported by physiological evidence proposing its impact on the body and mind in influencing wellbeing (Sinha et al., 2013).

Assessing Validity

In assessing qualitative research quality, there are a recognised set of principles for this study to refer, in place of conventional quantitative standards (Yardley, 2015, 2017); *sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence,* and *impact and importance*. In adhering to Yardley's (2015, 2017) *sensitivity to context* and *commitment and rigour* criteria, the participant-researcher relationship was a crucial consideration from conception through to write up. Indeed, by recognising the researcher's role as an active one, influencing the degree of admission into the participant's experience (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012), building rapport and participant trust was integral throughout the process; enabling open and free question responses and minimising uneven power dynamics (Smith et al., 2009; Willig, 2013). Indeed, all participant contact was conducted consistently in the spirit of these principles.

Use of a reflexive diary throughout the research process demonstrates further adherence to these criteria. *Transparency and coherence* were observed by providing a comprehensive account of the study's procedure and supplying transcript extracts and accompanying detailed interpretation within the results. *Impact and importance* are demonstrated in the study's subject matter, the breath; its significance and universality, the findings and proposal of its use as a universal, cost-free PPI/PPA to enhance wellbeing. Nizza et al. (2021) provide recent additional contribution to this area postulating four qualities of IPA excellence: *constructing a compelling, unfolding narrative; developing a vigorous experiential and/or existential account; close analytic reading of participants' words; attending to convergence and divergence*. These were demonstrated by the theme arrangement delineating the unfolding journey of discovering prāṇāyāma; the analysis of carefully selected extracts highlighting the experiential significance of prāṇāyāma and the existential themes raised; rigorous interpretation of participants' chosen language; and the demonstrated significant similarities between participants, while also highlighting their idiographic accounts.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

While this study argues a case for the use of prāṇāyāma as a PPI/PPA, and provides experiential alignment to extant findings of quantitative physiological intervention studies (Novaes et al., 2020; Sinha et al., 2013), context of current findings is key. These were everyday experiences of prāṇāyāma which may be contextually different to the experience of undertaking prāṇāyāma as an intervention. Therefore, conducting a phenomenological-based prāṇāyāma intervention to understand whether everyday experiences delineated here converge or diverge would be valuable future research. Following this, a logical step would be to conduct a quantitative study assessing its effectiveness as a PPI in a larger participant pool, taking these findings into consideration. This would provide empirical evidence of prāṇāyāma's effect, a rigorous inclusion parameter required for intervention classification (Parks & Biswas-Diener, 2013). Additionally, men are often unrepresented in yoga research (Kidd & Eatough, 2017) and as respondents of the current study were all female, not unusual as yoga is female-dominated (Park et al., 2015), future exploration of the experience from various genders would be worthwhile. Finally, considering prāṇāyāma's influence on cognition and enhancing embodied self-awareness, a potential opportunity for future research exists, exploring its use in coaching to enhance the coaching process.

Prāṇāyāma enhances wellbeing and unlocks specific resources to help individuals navigate and prepare for life events generating stress or challenge, offering the ability to remain calm in these scenarios. It teaches that humans already possess what is needed inside, the breath, which can be used as a tool anywhere and anytime to access and connect to a part of oneself that is able to remain calm regardless of the external world. Merleau-Ponty's (1964) metaphor of breathing captured in "We speak of 'inspiration,' and the word should be taken literally. There really is inspiration and expiration of Being, respiration in Being…" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p.167), denoting the relationship between the individual and the world, neatly encapsulates the experience of prāṇāyāma (Morley, 2001).

Through prāṇāyāma, this new perspective of the world engenders hope and confidence by enabling individuals to tune into themselves and access a place inside where everything becomes possible. Prāṇāyāma empowers practitioners to become their own experts of their own wellbeing and provides the tool to do this. In doing so, creates an identity, purpose and meaning enabling them to influence how they conduct themselves with others. If committed to, prāṇāyāma becomes part of one's self, not simply a skill that has been learnt.

Disclosure of potential conflicts of interest

On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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Notes on Contribution

Fern Beauchamp is a positive psychology practitioner, coach and researcher, with an MSc in Applied Positive Psychology and Coaching Psychology from the University of East London. Her main areas of interest are wellbeing, yoga principles, breathing techniques and the potential to harness the powers that reside within to live a consciously happier, more fulfilled and satisfied life. Other areas of interest include mindfulness, yoga as a holistic practice, embodiment, nature, ecological wellbeing, meaning and purpose.

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