

FULL-LENGTH ARTICLES

Yoga Nidra as Participatory Praxis: Arts-Based Tools for Antiracist Healing and Social Transformation

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Keywords: yoga nidra, participatory, antiracist pedagogy, vulnerability, PAR, art-based, embodiment

<https://doi.org/10.35844/001c.164300>

Journal of Participatory Research Methods

Vol. 7, Issue 4, 2026

This article examines Yoga Nidra as an arts-based, meditative, and visual technique for engaged antiracist Participatory Action Research (PAR). Rooted in embodied and lyrical traditions originating in 3rd-century CE India, Yoga Nidra guides participants through intention-setting (Sankalpa), visualization, and deep self-inquiry. These practices cultivate conditions for both individual and collective critical reflection. Drawing on over 100 hours of participatory ethnography and nine interviews with practitioners, this study illustrates how Yoga Nidra can be integrated into PAR to surface and transform internalized racial biases and patterns associated with white supremacy culture. Findings indicate that white and white-adjacent participants often resisted conversations about race due to discomfort or fear of making mistakes. Within the supportive, nonjudgmental container of Yoga Nidra, however, many developed the vulnerability essential for authentic racial dialogue—what George Yancy (2016) describes as the willingness to remain “unsutured.” The deep rest and reflective states facilitated by the practice enabled participants to confront internalized biases with compassion rather than avoidance, reframing vulnerability as both a prerequisite and an outcome of racial dialogue. The article offers practical facilitation strategies, including sample Sankalpa statements, post-Nidra discussion prompts, and ethical guidelines for community dialogues on race. By integrating visualization, narrative recall, and engagement with antiracist literature, Yoga Nidra functions as a performative and participatory method that nurtures healing and liberatory commitments. Ultimately, this work contributes to democratizing research methods by advancing body-based, accessible, and transformative practices in antiracist pedagogy and engaged community research.

Introduction

Rationale for Arts-Based, Embodied Methods in Antiracist Pedagogy

Arts-based and embodied practices have increasingly been recognized within critical pedagogy for their capacity to foster reflection, deepen relationships, and create possibilities for transformation (Cole & Knowles, 2008; Leavy, 2015). Unlike approaches that rely primarily on discussion or intellectual critique, these methods invite participants to engage with inquiry through the body as well as the mind. By attending to sensory and

affective experience, arts-based practices can illuminate how racism operates not only through ideas and institutions but also through habits, emotions, and embodied ways of relating to others (Barad, 2007; hooks, 1994).

Within arts-based research, knowledge often emerges through imagination, sensory experience, visualization, and creative engagement with lived experience rather than through verbal analysis alone (Leavy, 2015). Although Yoga Nidra is not typically described as an arts-based method, it shares many of these epistemological commitments. Through guided imagery, visualization, sensory awareness, and reflective meaning-making, participants engage experiences that are imaginative, embodied, and interpretive in nature. In this sense, Yoga Nidra can be understood as an arts-based and embodied approach to inquiry insofar as it invites participants to generate knowledge through affective, sensory, and relational engagement with their lived experiences.

Conventional approaches to antiracist education frequently rely on rational critique and conceptual discussion. While these approaches are important, they can also evoke defensiveness, guilt, or paralysis among white and white-adjacent participants (DiAngelo, 2018; Matias, 2016). Such responses often interrupt the critical engagement necessary for meaningful transformation. Embodied and meditative practices offer a different entry point. By creating a supportive environment for reflection, participants can encounter difficult emotions without immediately retreating into avoidance. In Yoga Nidra, participants are invited to notice discomfort, remain present with it, and explore what might reveal about their assumptions and relationships.

Whereas many approaches to antiracist education focus on helping individuals identify bias, considerably less attention has been devoted to practices that support participants in remaining engaged with the discomfort such recognition can produce. Awareness alone does not necessarily lead to transformation. Individuals may recognize bias yet retreat into defensiveness, guilt, shame, or avoidance rather than sustained reflection and action. This study explores whether Yoga Nidra's emphasis on nonjudgmental awareness, embodied reflection, and vulnerability may help participants remain engaged with difficult insights long enough for critical self-examination and relational transformation to occur.

This capacity to remain present with discomfort may be particularly important within participatory and antiracist research. Participatory inquiry depends on people's willingness to engage in dialogue, examine their own assumptions, and remain open to perspectives that challenge their existing understandings. These processes become difficult when fear, guilt, or defensiveness dominate the interaction. Practices such as Yoga Nidra may help cultivate the trust and self-awareness needed for participants to engage more fully in collective inquiry while remaining accountable to one another.

Viewed in this way, arts-based and embodied approaches function as more than pedagogical techniques. They offer an ethical orientation to antiracist practice by treating vulnerability as a participatory capacity that supports dialogue, accountability, and collective reflection. This study therefore approaches vulnerability not as an individual psychological outcome but as a participatory capacity that enables dialogue, deepens accountability, and supports the reflection-action cycles central to Participatory Action Research.

Yoga Nidra and Its Relevance to Participatory Action Research

Yoga Nidra, rooted in the Upanishads and developed through Tantric and Vedantic traditions, involves guided sequences of body scanning, visualization, and intention-setting (*Sankalpa*), leading participants into a sleep-like yet conscious state of deep relaxation (Desai, 2019; Doniger, 1990; Saraswati, 2009). Within this liminal space, awareness expands beyond ordinary waking consciousness, allowing participants to attend to embodied patterns of thought, emotion, and behavior (Desai, 2017; Stanley, 2021). Through guided imagery and sensory awareness, Yoga Nidra engages participants in forms of inquiry that resonate with arts-based and participatory approaches to knowledge generation. Rather than positioning participants as passive recipients of information, the practice invites them to actively interpret experiences, emotions, and memories as sources of insight.

A central concept in Yoga Nidra is *Samskara*—subtle mental and emotional imprints that shape unconscious habits (Desai, 2017; Saraswati, 2009). Through repeated practice, *Sankalpas*, or concise intentions, are introduced into this reflective space and gradually influence how participants understand themselves and respond to the world around them (Desai, 2019; Stanley, 2021). This process of becoming aware of habitual patterns and intentionally working toward change aligns closely with the transformative aims of PAR (Kemmis et al., 2014; Reason & Bradbury, 2008). Like PAR, Yoga Nidra is not a singular intervention but an ongoing practice through which participants move between reflection and action, deepening critical consciousness over time.

Applied to antiracist pedagogy, Yoga Nidra offers a contemplative approach for engaging patterns associated with white supremacy culture (DiAngelo, 2018; Okun, 1999). Participants are encouraged to observe defensiveness, perfectionism, or the desire for certainty without immediately reacting to them. By creating space between awareness and response, the practice supports the development of compassion and accountability while reducing the impulse to retreat from discomfort (Matias, 2016; Yancy et al., 2016). These capacities are particularly important within antiracist participatory inquiry, where difficult conversations often evoke fear, guilt, or uncertainty. Rather than treating such responses as obstacles to overcome, Yoga Nidra invites participants to remain present with them and explore what they might reveal about privilege, power, and social relationships.

In this way, Yoga Nidra functions as both a meditative practice and an embodied research method. It complements PAR's commitments to reflexivity, co-learning, and liberation by offering a structured yet accessible approach to body-based inquiry and social transformation (Barad, 2007; Leavy, 2015). Through intention, rest, and reflection, Yoga Nidra invites participants to decenter whiteness, reimagine vulnerability as strength, and ground antiracist action in somatic awareness.

Aims and Contributions

This article contributes to the growing literature on participatory and arts-based methods by examining how Yoga Nidra can be adapted for antiracist Participatory Action Research (PAR). Drawing on more than 100 hours of participant observation and nine semi-structured interviews, the study explores how practitioners engaged Yoga Nidra alongside antiracist literature and how they interpreted the relationship between embodied practice and changes in their everyday lives. In doing so, the research moves beyond evaluating Yoga Nidra as a discrete intervention and instead considers how participants used reflection, dialogue, and embodied awareness to generate new understandings of race, privilege, and accountability.

The article makes five primary contributions. First, it provides a detailed facilitation framework for incorporating Yoga Nidra into participatory and antiracist inquiry. Second, it offers empirical insight into how participants navigated discomfort, vulnerability, and racial dialogue through embodied practice. Third, it identifies ethical and practical considerations for facilitators seeking to integrate contemplative methods into community-based research. Fourth, it advances a conceptual argument for understanding Yoga Nidra as an arts-based and embodied approach to participatory inquiry. Finally, it illustrates how participants translate reflection into action, including changes in family relationships, shifts in habitual patterns of judgment, and greater attention to structural forms of inequality.

Background

Yoga Nidra has long been described as both restorative and transformative. Through guided body scanning, visualization, and intention-setting (*Sankalpa*), practitioners are invited into a liminal state between wakefulness and sleep where habitual patterns and emotional imprints (*Samskaras*) can be observed and gently reworked (Desai, 2017; Doniger, 1990; Stanley, 2021). Because the practice relies on imagination, sensory awareness, and reflective engagement with experience, Yoga Nidra also aligns with arts-based traditions that view knowledge as emerging through embodied and relational encounters rather than through cognitive analysis alone.

In contemporary contexts, Yoga Nidra has expanded beyond its classical spiritual roots and is increasingly used to address psychological, social, and ethical dimensions of human experience. Scholars and practitioners have described the practice as a means of recognizing and loosening attachment to conditioned habits, including internalized biases and inherited assumptions

about oneself and others (Hagan, 2021; Stanley, 2021). Through this process, Yoga Nidra becomes more than a restorative practice. It offers participants an opportunity to examine how broader social narratives shape everyday perceptions, relationships, and ways of being in the world. This potential has led some scholars to connect contemplative practice with antiracist and decolonial forms of learning that emphasize awareness, accountability, and transformation (Hagan, 2021; Okun, 1999).

A growing body of interdisciplinary scholarship suggests that mindfulness, yoga, and other contemplative practices can support both personal healing and social transformation (Blackwell, 2023; Hagan, 2021). Researchers have linked these practices to increased empathy, greater emotional regulation, and enhanced capacity for critical self-reflection—qualities that are particularly relevant within antiracist education (hooks, 1994; Matias, 2016). Neuroscientific studies similarly suggest that contemplative practices may influence neural processes associated with perspective-taking and responses to stress, potentially reducing the fear-based reactions that often accompany difficult conversations about race (Dowdle, 2013; Lazar et al., 2005).

Although this scholarship has documented the therapeutic, educational, and liberatory potential of contemplative practices, far less attention has been given to their role within participatory inquiry. Existing research has largely focused on individual wellbeing or personal transformation rather than on how embodied practices may contribute to collaborative knowledge generation. The present study addresses this gap by examining how participants engaged Yoga Nidra, antiracist literature, and dialogue as interconnected processes of reflection and interpretation. In doing so, it explores Yoga Nidra's potential contribution not only to personal transformation but also to the participatory forms of meaning-making and reflection-action cycles that underpin antiracist Participatory Action Research.

Theoretical Framework

This project is grounded in George Yancy's (2016) call for white and white-adjacent participants to remain unsutured—that is, willing to stay with discomfort rather than seeking the closure offered by defensiveness, certainty, or innocence. For Yancy, meaningful racial dialogue requires a willingness to encounter oneself differently and to remain open to the ethical demands that emerge through that encounter. Following Yancy (2016), vulnerability is understood not merely as a psychological disposition but as an embodied condition. Remaining unsutured requires individuals to stay present with discomfort as it manifests physically, emotionally, and relationally rather than seeking immediate resolution or escape.

Bonilla-Silva (2022) argues that racial inequality is often reproduced through everyday assumptions, behaviors, and social practices that individuals may not consciously recognize. From this perspective, antiracist work requires more than the acquisition of knowledge; it requires opportunities for critical self-examination and the development of capacities for recognizing how

personal actions remain entangled with broader systems of inequality. This orientation resonates with Paulo Freire's (1970/2005) concept of praxis, which positions transformation as an ongoing movement between reflection and action. Together, these perspectives frame antiracist learning as a process that requires both critical self-examination and a willingness to act differently in the world.

This understanding of transformation is further informed by feminist and decolonial scholarship, which challenges the notion that knowledge is objective, detached, or politically neutral (Chennault, 2021; Cofield & Doan, 2021). Instead, knowledge is understood as emerging through relationships, lived experience, and encounters with others. From this perspective, vulnerability is not an obstacle to inquiry but a condition that makes ethical engagement possible. Participatory research depends upon this willingness to remain open—to question assumptions, reconsider inherited understandings, and engage perspectives that may disrupt one's existing worldview. Vulnerability therefore becomes more than an emotional state; it functions as a participatory capacity that supports dialogue, accountability, and collective learning.

Within this framework, Yoga Nidra operates as both a contemplative practice and a methodological intervention. Through guided reflection, visualization, and intention-setting, participants are invited to notice habitual patterns of thought and observe their responses to discomfort without immediately reacting to them. In this sense, Yoga Nidra creates a space in which Yancy's notion of remaining unsutured can be practiced rather than merely discussed. At the same time, the reflective processes embedded within the practice parallel Freire's understanding of praxis by encouraging participants to connect insight with action.

This theoretical framework anchors the study's examination of how participants engaged Yoga Nidra, antiracist literature, and reflective dialogue. By focusing on vulnerability, embodiment, and praxis, the framework provides a lens for understanding how participants interpreted experiences of discomfort, bias, accountability, and social responsibility throughout the study.

Methodology and Research Design

Research Design

This project combined more than 100 hours of participatory observation with nine semi-structured interviews. Participatory observations were conducted by the researcher during a Yoga Nidra instructor training at the Southwest Institute for Healing Arts (SWIHA) in Tempe, Arizona. Interview participants were recruited by word of mouth from both the SWIHA certification program and broader Yoga Nidra networks. Rather than seeking generalizable claims, the study explored how practitioners understood the relationship between embodied practice, antiracist learning, and everyday experiences of race, identity, and social responsibility.

The study unfolded across several phases. Participants first completed approximately 20 hours of Yoga Nidra training before recruitment. Following recruitment, all participants received Okun's (1999) *White Supremacy Culture* and were invited to engage the text alongside their ongoing Yoga Nidra practice. Over the course of the training program, participants encountered antiracist concepts and opportunities for structured reflection that later informed interview conversations. Rather than treating Yoga Nidra as a discrete intervention whose effects could be separated from other influences, the study explored how participants made sense of Yoga Nidra, antiracist literature, and lived experience as interconnected processes of reflection, interpretation, and action.

The study does not claim to represent a fully developed PAR initiative. Although participants were not involved in designing the original study, they were not positioned solely as research subjects. Interviews were structured to encourage participants to interpret their experiences, identify patterns they considered meaningful, and reflect on how their perspectives had changed throughout the process. In this way, participants contributed not only data but also interpretive insights that informed the study's findings and methodological conclusions.

Participants and Positionality

Participants represented a range of racial and cultural backgrounds, including Black, South Asian, Arab/White, Hispanic, White Latin@, and White identities. The interview sample also included participants of different genders and levels of experience with Yoga Nidra. Three participants were enrolled in the Yoga Nidra instructor certification program at the time of the study, one participant was the lead instructor of that program; three were practicing Yoga Nidra instructors who had previously completed instructor training and were recruited through referrals from Participant 2, and two were regular Yoga Nidra practitioners who incorporated the practice into their personal lives.

An important feature of the study was that several participants occupied multiple roles throughout the research process. Those enrolled in the certification program experienced Yoga Nidra as both practitioners and developing facilitators. Although they had not yet completed certification, they both received and facilitated Yoga Nidra sessions as part of their training. These overlapping roles provided participants with perspectives as learners, practitioners, emerging facilitators, and contributors to the inquiry, enriching both the findings and the facilitation framework developed through the study.

As the researcher, I identify as mixed-race, with Mizrahi Jewish and European heritage, and am typically read as white. My experiences as an adopted child raised within an Anabaptist community shaped my understanding of belonging, exclusion, and the complexities of identity formation. Consistent with feminist and participatory methodologies the researcher retained a reflexive awareness of their biases, worldviews,

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Interview Number	Self-Identified Race	Gender Identity	Years of Practice
1	South Asian / American	Female	30+
2	Hispanic	Male	Beginner
3	Arab / White - Mixed race	Female	Beginner
4	White	Female	1
5	Black/ African American	Male	3
6	White	Male	3
7	White (Latin@)	Female	3
8	Black/ African American	Female	5
9	White	Female	Beginner

judgments, and beliefs while recording observations and data (Bulmer, 1982). In this sense, the study sought to approach vulnerability as a shared methodological commitment rather than a demand placed exclusively upon participants.

Questions of identity and social location were explored throughout interviews and observations. Participants reflected on how race, family histories, cultural backgrounds, and lived experiences informed their engagement with Yoga Nidra, antiracist literature, and racial dialogue. These reflections became an important source of insight, shaping both the interpretation of findings and the collective meaning-making that emerged through the research process.

Data Collection and Ethical Considerations

Field notes documented classroom environments, facilitation practices, and participant / researcher experiences throughout the training program. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in participant-selected settings, including Zoom, cafés, and restaurants. Prior to the interviews, participants received a list of 30 possible questions and were invited to select 15 for discussion. This approach draws on Nagar's (2014) concept of "speaking with" as well as Huot's (2023) emphasis on trust, reciprocity, and participant ownership in research. By allowing interviewees to determine which questions would guide the conversation, the study sought to reduce extractive dynamics and create greater opportunities for collaborative knowledge generation. The question-selection process also provided insight into how participants navigated vulnerability over time.

Because participants selected their own interview questions, interviews were shaped by the topics participants felt prepared to discuss at the time of conversation. This structure supported participant choice while also creating opportunities to observe how participants engaged vulnerability, disclosure, and antiracist reflection across the research process.

The interviews therefore functioned as more than a mechanism for data collection. They became spaces in which participants interpreted their experiences and explored connections between embodied practice, antiracist

learning, and everyday life. Conversations frequently moved beyond description as interviewees reflected on family relationships, experiences of privilege and marginalization, and moments that had altered how they understood themselves and others. In this way, participants contributed interpretive insights alongside experiential accounts.

Ethics of care, consent, choice, and reciprocity guided the research process. Each participant received Okun's (1999) *White Supremacy Culture* prior to the interview. The text served as both a conceptual framework and a reflective tool, helping participants identify patterns that emerged during Yoga Nidra practice and connect personal experiences to broader social structures. Rather than approaching antiracist education as an abstract intellectual exercise, participants engaged these ideas through ongoing reflection on their own lives and relationships.

The combination of contemplative practice and antiracist literature created a shared foundation for dialogue throughout the study. Participants were encouraged to consider how patterns described in the readings appeared in their own experiences and how those patterns shaped interactions with others. Through these reflections, many developed new understandings of privilege, accountability, and social responsibility that informed both the findings and the methodological contributions of the project.

Data Analysis

Given the embodied and affective nature of the research, a tactile approach to thematic analysis was employed. Rather than relying solely on digital coding, interview transcripts were printed, cut into sentence strips, and physically arranged on large surfaces. This process allowed for iterative spatial sorting that echoed the non-linear and embodied qualities of Yoga Nidra itself. Analysis unfolded not only through reading and coding but also through movement, touch, and repeated engagement with the data.

Field notes and interview transcripts were read multiple times to identify recurring patterns related to vulnerability, discomfort, defensiveness, accountability, compassion, relational change, and antiracist learning. Initial codes were generated inductively from participant language and observational data, with particular attention to how participants described connections between Yoga Nidra practice, engagement with antiracist literature, and shifts in their everyday lives.

Following initial coding, excerpts were physically sorted and regrouped to identify relationships across interviews and observation notes. Through repeated comparison, themes emerged concerning (a) Yoga Nidra as a supportive container for vulnerability, (b) vulnerability as a prerequisite for racial dialogue, (c) transformation through Sankalpa, visualization, and narrative recall, and (d) the movement from embodied reflection toward relational and social action.

Participant interpretations were treated as an important component of the analytic process. Interviews were analyzed not only for what participants experienced but also for how they made sense of those experiences. Particular

attention was given to the ways participants connected Yoga Nidra, antiracist literature, personal histories, and changing patterns of behavior. These participant-generated interpretations informed both thematic development and the facilitation framework presented in this article.

To enhance trustworthiness and align with participatory research principles, preliminary themes and interpretations were shared with participants for feedback and verification. Participants were invited to clarify, challenge, or expand upon the emerging findings, and their responses informed subsequent revisions to the analysis. In addition, two participants reviewed manuscript drafts and provided feedback on representation, interpretation, and the presentation of participant experiences. This process extended participant involvement beyond data generation and into the interpretation and dissemination of findings.

The tactile process of arranging, grouping, and regrouping excerpts extended the study's commitment to embodiment into the analytic phase. In this way, analysis became both an interpretive and embodied practice, consistent with the methodological commitments of the project.

Findings

Yoga Nidra as a Supportive Container

The physical posture of Yoga Nidra—lying supine, eyes closed, in a room of strangers—creates an inherently vulnerable state. Participants must cultivate trust before surrendering to the practice. Responses ranged widely: some reported difficulty sleeping or distressing dreams, while others experienced deep rest, emotional release, or feelings of reconnection with self and others. Participant-Instructors framed these experiences as processes of release: “It is coming up to go.” This framing mirrors antiracist work, where discomfort signals transformation rather than failure. Participants were encouraged to differentiate between pain as harm and pain as growth and to remain present through breath and intention.

Across participants representing White, Black, South Asian, Hispanic, Arab/White, and White Latin@ identities, recurring themes emerged describing Yoga Nidra as providing a nonjudgmental container in which difficult thoughts and emotions could be observed rather than avoided. One participant explained that Yoga Nidra “offers safe space and creates a space of ‘I’m okay’ and gives people the allowance to reflect.” Another participant simply described Yoga Nidra as “a safe space,” while a third reflected that the practice enabled participants to “let down their guard” and connect more honestly with themselves and others.

Several participants noted that the practice enabled them to remain with discomfort longer than they ordinarily would in everyday conversations about race. Others described becoming more aware of bodily responses such as tension, anxiety, or defensiveness and learning to approach these sensations

with curiosity rather than avoidance. In this sense, Yoga Nidra functioned as both a contemplative practice and a supportive environment for engaging vulnerability.

Vulnerability as Prerequisite for Racial Dialogue

The vulnerability cultivated during Yoga Nidra sessions translated directly into participants' capacities for racial dialogue. Those who learned to remain present with physical and emotional discomfort during meditation were better able to reflect on whiteness, privilege, and bias. One participant described realizing that the tightening in her chest during racial conversations was not harm but unexamined fear—a signal to lean in, not retreat. Vulnerability thus became both method and outcome, reframing racial dialogue as a practice of staying open rather than being right.

Participants frequently linked this process to the practice of disidentification taught within Yoga Nidra. As one participant explained, the practice helps participants recognize that “we are not those thoughts and things that we have adopted,” creating distance between awareness and habitual patterns. Another participant reflected that Yoga Nidra allowed her to become “the observer of my own thoughts,” while another described gaining “awareness and understanding of your actions and the outcome.”

Vulnerability also shaped participants' willingness to engage with the study itself. When the focus of the research on race, privilege, and antiracist reflection was first introduced, visible signs of discomfort emerged among some participants. As recorded in field notes, several individuals appeared physically uncomfortable, and some who had previously engaged regularly with the researcher became noticeably more distant. These reactions mirrored participants' later descriptions of anxiety about “getting it wrong,” fear of judgment, and uncertainty about discussing race. Participants 4 and 9 initially avoided participation after the study was introduced. Both later explained that conversations about race evoked fears associated with vulnerability and self-disclosure. One reported physically distancing herself from the researcher after learning the study's focus, while another repeatedly postponed interviews despite expressing interest. Both participants later described re-engaging with the project through continued Yoga Nidra practice. One explained that the vulnerability experienced during Yoga Nidra sessions, coupled with experiences of emotional support and nonjudgment, reduced her fear of participation and encouraged her to recommit to the study. These accounts suggest that the barriers participants faced were not merely logistical but were closely tied to the same dynamics of defensiveness, discomfort, and fear that emerged throughout the findings.

The participatory structure of the interviews provided additional evidence of this shift. Several white and white-adjacent participants reflected during their interview that they initially selected questions that felt safer and less revealing when first presented with the interview guide and antiracist readings. As their engagement with Yoga Nidra and antiracist literature deepened, many revisited the interview guide and chose questions that invited

more direct engagement with privilege, defensiveness, discomfort, and personal accountability. One participant explicitly noted that she intentionally selected questions that felt “a little uncomfortable.” Participants themselves identified these changes as evidence of a growing willingness to remain vulnerable rather than seek certainty or self-protection. These reflections closely mirror Yancy’s (2016) notion of remaining unsutured.

Transformation Through Sankalpa, Visualization, and Narrative Recall

Participants used Yoga Nidra tools—Sankalpa (intention-setting), visualization, and post-session narrative recall—to address internalized habits aligned with white supremacy culture. Across interviews, participants described how intention-setting and embodied reflection allowed them to interrupt habitual reactions and cultivate new responses. One participant described this process as “creating a shift in one’s being,” arguing that Yoga Nidra allows change to emerge from deeper levels of awareness rather than from externally imposed rules or expectations.

Other participants frequently connected embodied reflection to concrete changes in their everyday lives. One participant, a white mother of mixed-race children, described recognizing how feelings of guilt and defensiveness at times limited her ability to fully hear and support her children’s racialized experiences. Through Sankalpa crafting and ongoing engagement with antiracist literature, she intentionally cultivated a commitment to listening without retreating into self-protection. She reported that this shift changed how she approached conversations with her children and strengthened her willingness to remain present during difficult discussions about race.

Across participants, Sankalpa, visualization, and narrative reflection became tools for recognizing previously unquestioned assumptions and experimenting with new ways of relating to others.

Reflection to Action: From Personal Awareness to Structural Understanding

Participants described translating insights gained through Yoga Nidra and antiracist reflection into changes in how they interpreted relationships, social situations, and systems of inequality. These accounts suggest that embodied awareness functioned as a catalyst for action and new forms of understanding.

One participant reflected on a long-standing learned habit of judging others, which she traced to lessons learned in childhood around perfection. While engaging in Yoga Nidra alongside antiracist reading and reflection, she became increasingly attentive to these habitual thought patterns. During a public event she attended, she noticed herself silently judging a disabled man for attending a gathering that was clearly not designed with his mobility needs in mind. She described this moment as a significant shift in awareness. Rather than locating responsibility within the individual, she began examining how environments and institutions shape opportunities for participation and belonging.

Table 2. Emergent Themes and Illustrative Examples

Theme	Illustrative Example
Yoga Nidra as a Supportive Container	Participants described Yoga Nidra as a "safe space" that allowed them to remain with discomfort rather than avoid it.
Vulnerability as a Prerequisite for Racial Dialogue	Participants re-selected interview questions that required greater engagement with privilege, discomfort, and accountability
Transformation through Sankalpa, Visualization, and Narrative Recall	A participant changed how she engaged conversations about race with her mixed-race children
Reflection to Action	A participant shifted from judging individuals to recognizing structural inequities and barriers.

Several participants also described broader shifts in emotional regulation, empathy, and relational awareness. One participant explained that meditation had helped her move away from anger and reactivity, noting that she now preferred to “take breaths” and remain calm when faced with difficult situations. Another participant reflected that Yoga Nidra had helped her become capable of engaging “really uncomfortable conversations” that she previously avoided.

Across interviews, participants described moving from fear, guilt, defensiveness, and judgment toward compassion, accountability, and a greater awareness of structural inequities. These accounts suggest that Yoga Nidra supported not only personal insight but also the reflection-action cycles through which participants translated embodied awareness into relational and social change.

Discussion

This study suggests that vulnerability is not simply a byproduct of antiracist engagement but a condition that makes meaningful dialogue possible. Participants’ experiences support Yancy’s (2016) call for remaining unsutured: resisting the impulse toward certainty, innocence, or defensiveness in favor of sustained engagement with discomfort. Through Yoga Nidra, participants practiced forms of vulnerability that later informed how they approached conversations about race, privilege, and bias. The practice reflects Freire’s (1970/2005) conception of praxis by linking reflection to changes in perception, relationship, and action. Participants did not merely recount experiences; they actively interpreted them, connecting embodied practice, antiracist literature, and everyday life in ways that generated new understandings of themselves and their social worlds.

Beyond vulnerability, the findings contribute to conversations about participatory and arts-based inquiry. Through visualization, guided imagery, reflective dialogue, and participant-led facilitation experiences, Yoga Nidra created opportunities for participants to engage in embodied forms of inquiry that extended beyond verbal discussion alone. Knowledge emerged not only through conversation but also through sensory experience, reflection, and collective interpretation. These processes align with feminist and decolonial

approaches that understand knowledge as relational, situated, and co-constructed rather than detached and objective (Chennault, 2021; Cofield & Doan, 2021; Huot et al., 2023; Nagar, 2014).

Participants' self-descriptions of defensiveness, fear, and uncertainty point toward another possibility that can limit engagement in collaborative inquiry. By creating space to observe these reactions without immediately acting upon them, the practice appeared to support the self-awareness, relational openness, and critical reflexivity necessary for participatory work. Rather than eliminating discomfort, Yoga Nidra encouraged participants to remain engaged with it, strengthening capacities that are foundational to the reflection-action cycles central to PAR.

The embodied commitments of the study also extended into the analytic process. The tactile sorting and reorganization of interview excerpts challenged assumptions of detached objectivity by treating interpretation as a material and relational practice. Participant involvement in reviewing themes, verifying interpretations, and providing feedback on manuscript drafts further complicated traditional distinctions between researcher and researched. Knowledge production emerged through ongoing dialogue rather than through analysis conducted solely by the researcher.

The movement from reflection to action was particularly evident in participants' everyday lives. Participants described carrying embodied insights into family relationships, difficult conversations, and interpretations of structural inequality. These examples suggest that the significance of Yoga Nidra lies not only in cultivating self-awareness but also in supporting new ways of interpreting relationships, responsibilities, and social conditions.

As an accessible and low-cost practice, Yoga Nidra holds potential for expanding participatory and antiracist research methodologies. At the same time, the findings should be interpreted within the context of the study. Although participants engaged in collaborative meaning-making, interpretation, member checking, and participant-led facilitation, the project took place within a Yoga Nidra training program rather than a community-based action campaign. The study therefore does not claim to represent a fully developed PAR initiative. Instead, it illustrates how embodied contemplative practices may support participatory inquiry and cultivate capacities that enable more collaborative forms of research and action. Future studies should explore how communities adapt, co-facilitate, and mobilize Yoga Nidra within fully collaborative PAR partnerships.

Practical Applications: A Participatory Yoga Nidra Framework for Antiracist Inquiry

Yoga Nidra can serve as both a contemplative practice and a structured arts-based approach to embodied reflection, offering participants opportunities to engage vulnerability, reflexivity, and antiracist commitments. Its value lies in creating a supportive environment in which discomfort can be approached

as a source of insight rather than something to be avoided. By cultivating curiosity, presence, and reflection, the practice creates conditions that support dialogue, relationship-building, and participatory inquiry.

The facilitation framework presented below emerged from participatory observations, interviews, collaborative interpretation, and ongoing engagement with Yoga Nidra practitioners. Rather than representing a fixed protocol, it reflects insights generated through participants' experiences of integrating Yoga Nidra practice, antiracist literature, and reflective dialogue. Many of the recommendations included here grew directly from participant accounts of what supported, challenged, or deepened their engagement with vulnerability, accountability, and racial dialogue.

Consistent with participatory research principles, the framework is intended as a flexible guide rather than a prescriptive sequence. Facilitators are encouraged to adapt Sankalpas, reflection prompts, visualizations, and discussion activities in collaboration with participants and community partners. Such adaptations create opportunities for community members to shape the inquiry process, contribute local knowledge, and align the practice with shared goals and concerns. In this way, Yoga Nidra functions not only as a contemplative exercise but also as a participatory process through which reflection, dialogue, and action can be collectively negotiated.

The framework should therefore be understood as both a practical guide and an invitation for further experimentation. Although the examples presented here emerged from antiracist inquiry, the broader approach may be adopted to support other forms of participatory, community-based, and justice-oriented research.

Preparing the Container

What follows is a sketch of how a Yoga Nidra session may proceed, representing an illustrative example for the reader. The facilitation begins with cultivating trust and orienting participants to the practice. Facilitators may introduce Yoga Nidra's origins and structure while highlighting its potential to support self-awareness, relational insight, and critical engagement with internalized biases. Participants should be reminded that encountering tension, defensiveness, uncertainty, or strong emotional reactions is a natural part of examining deeply held assumptions and social conditioning.

Facilitators are encouraged to model reflexivity by sharing relevant positionalities and experiences with the practice. Such transparency can help establish a tone of ethical engagement and signal that the space is intended for exploration rather than performance. Establishing this container frames Yoga Nidra not as a test or a perfect execution but as a practice of curiosity.

Intention-Setting (Sankalpa)

At the heart of Yoga Nidra is the practice of crafting a Sankalpa, or intention-setting. Participants are invited to craft short, positive, present-tense statements that reflect both personal growth and relational or antiracist commitments. These intentions act as anchors throughout the session and beyond, guiding reflection and embodied engagement.

Sample intentions might include:

- “I am at peace amid chaos.”
- “I am here to transform the lives of others.”
- “I am a conduit of compassion and justice.”

Participants are encouraged to adapt these examples or create intentions that feel authentic to them. Sankalpas may be understood as seeds planted in the mind and body—small commitments that, through attention and repetition, can guide reflection and action in subtle but powerful ways.

Guided Yoga Nidra Practice

The guided session is generally in four phases: breath awareness, body scanning, visualization, and Sankalpa integration. Throughout, facilitators maintain a descriptive, invitational tone, allowing participants to notice sensations, emotions, and thoughts without judgment.

Introduction and Orientation (5 minutes)

Participants lie comfortably, eyes closed, arms and legs relaxed. Facilitators may begin with an orientation such as:

“Yoga Nidra is a guided meditative practice that invites us to explore awareness, notice habitual patterns, and cultivate intentional reflection. Today, we’re using it to consider internalized patterns of bias and privilege and to translate that insight into engagement and action. You may notice discomfort—that’s natural, and it signals you’re encountering something meaningful.”

The goal here is curiosity rather than correctness, helping participants feel safe to observe what arises.

Breath Awareness (5 minutes)

Attention is directed toward the natural rhythm of the breath:

“Notice the flow of air as it enters and leaves your body. Feel it in your chest, your belly, your back. Let your breath anchor you in this moment.”

Some participants find gentle counting helpful:

“Inhale silently ‘1-2-3,’ pause, exhale ‘1-2-3.’ Notice how the rhythm of your breath naturally calms your body and mind.”

Breath awareness grounds participants in the body, creating a foundation for noticing emotional and cognitive patterns without becoming overwhelmed.

Body Scan (10 minutes)

“Bring awareness to your right hand... notice sensations, warmth, or tension. Slowly move your attention up the arm, into the shoulder. Repeat on the left. Continue through the torso, hips, legs, feet, neck, and head.”

Grounding prompts may be incorporated throughout the body scan, such as:

“Notice the points of contact with the floor. Feel the support beneath you. With each exhale, release tension, you are ready to let go.”

This anchoring in physical awareness primes participants to notice emotional responses and habitual thought patterns during the visualization phase.

Visualization (10–12 minutes)

Facilitators may introduce disidentification metaphors that help participants observe thoughts and emotions without becoming identified with them:

“Imagine standing on a high cliff, looking out over the ocean. Thoughts, feelings, and habits drift by like ships on the water or clouds in the sky. You are the observer, separate from them. Notice them, but don’t follow them.”

For antiracist reflection:

“If defensiveness, shame, or bias arise, watch them as passing waves. Recognize patterns without letting them define you.”

Integration of Intention (3–5 minutes)

Participants are encouraged to silently revisit their Sankalpa here, imagining it as a seed growing in fertile soil, subtly influencing their awareness and actions.

Participants are invited to mentally repeat their Sankalpa three times, allowing the intention to settle into awareness:

“Let your intention settle deeply, guiding your awareness and actions beyond this session.”

Closing Reflection and Emergence (5 minutes)

Participants gradually reorient to the room, moving fingers, toes, shoulders, and head, and slowly opening their eyes. The shift is gentle, designed to carry mindfulness and awareness into the external environment.

Post-Nidra Reflection and Dialogue (10–15 minutes)

After the practice, participants are invited to reflect and share insights. Sample prompts:

- What sensations or emotions arose during your practice?

- How did your Sankalpa shape your experience?
- Did you notice habitual thought patterns, assumptions, or biases?
- How might these insights inform your engagement with others or your antiracist commitments?

In participatory contexts, these conversations may also function as collective interpretation sessions. Participants can identify recurring themes, challenge assumptions, generate shared understandings, and explore how insights emerging from the practice might inform future actions, community initiatives, or ongoing inquiry. Reflection is framed as an iterative process, reinforcing that discomfort, ambiguity, or incomplete insights are expected components of learning and transformation. Journaling, group discussion, or pair-sharing can all support integration.

Ethical and Facilitative Considerations

Because Yoga Nidra invites participants into states of somatic vulnerability while also engaging in difficult conversations about race, privilege, and oppression, ethical facilitation is essential. Participation must remain voluntary, with clear attention to consent, personal boundaries, and participants' ability to step back from activities when needed. Facilitators should acknowledge the emotional intensity that may emerge during both the meditative practice and subsequent dialogue, providing grounding strategies and ongoing support throughout the process.

Maintaining confidentiality and trust holds particular importance when participants are invited to share personal experiences related to race, identity, and social positioning. Facilitators are encouraged to model reflexivity by acknowledging their own positionalities and ongoing engagement with questions of privilege, bias, and accountability. Such transparency helps establish an environment in which participants can engage in difficult topics without feeling pressured to perform certainty or correctness.

Attention should also be given to group dynamics and opportunities for equitable participation. Whenever possible, participants should be involved in shaping discussion norms, community agreements, reflection processes, and facilitation practices. Inviting participants to help structure these elements reinforces the participatory commitments of the framework and creates additional opportunities for shared ownership of the inquiry process.

Embodied Restoration and Reflection

Yoga Nidra's deep relaxation practices are associated with states of physiological and psychological restoration that may support reflection, emotional regulation, and relational engagement. Participants in this study frequently described increased self-awareness, greater curiosity toward their own reactions, deeper compassion for themselves and others, and an enhanced capacity to remain present during difficult conversations. These

accounts suggest that contemplative practices may help create conditions that support both personal reflection and sustained engagement with social justice work.

Additionally, Lazar et al. (2005) found that sustained mindfulness practice is associated with structural changes in brain regions linked to attention, emotional regulation, perspective-taking, and self-awareness. This research further suggests that mindfulness practices are associated with changes in areas involved in empathy, reflective thinking, and emotional processing, while also reducing activation of stress-related responses. Although neurological change cannot be directly inferred from the present study, this body of research provides one possible framework for understanding the increased capacity for reflection, vulnerability, perspective-taking, and relational accountability described by participants.

Taken together, these stages create a flexible yet ethically grounded framework through which Yoga Nidra can support contemplative inquiry, antiracist dialogue, and participatory reflection-action processes.

Conclusion

This article explored Yoga Nidra as an arts-based, embodied approach to antiracist Participatory Action Research. Drawing on participatory observation, interviews, and collaborative interpretation, the findings suggest that Yoga Nidra can support participants in examining internalized assumptions and developing greater capacity for vulnerability, reflection, and relational accountability. Participants described not only changes in self-awareness but also shifts in relationships, everyday interactions, and understandings of structural inequality, illustrating how embodied reflection can contribute to broader processes of social learning and transformation.

The study also contributes to ongoing conversations about participatory and arts-based methodologies. By integrating visualization, guided imagery, reflective dialogue, and contemplative practice, Yoga Nidra expands possibilities for how knowledge can be generated, interpreted, and shared. Participants were not positioned solely as subjects of research but as contributors to meaning-making, interpretation, and the development of methodological insights.

At the same time, the study was conducted within a Yoga Nidra training context rather than a fully collaborative community-based PAR initiative. The findings should therefore be understood as illustrating how embodied contemplative practices may support participatory inquiry. The study does not claim to represent a fully developed PAR initiative. Future research should explore how communities adapt, co-facilitate, and mobilize Yoga Nidra within collaborative partnerships.

More broadly, as with arts-based methodologies, this study and its participants do not purport there is anything mandatory about Yoga Nidra as an ingredient of antiracist journeys, but rather points toward further research as a vehicle conducive to well-tolerated and eventually, healthy experiences of discomfort, making it especially suitable to meaningful engagement with

challenging literature and self-driven change. Yoga Nidra functions not only as a method of inquiry but also as a practice that cultivates the conditions under which participatory inquiry becomes possible.

Submitted: October 16, 2025 EDT. Accepted: June 22, 2026 EDT. Published: July 27, 2026 EDT.



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