

The Psychosocial Benefits Of Traditional Martial Arts Training:

What Most Instructors Know But Can't Articulate

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Abstract

The martial arts industry is currently undergoing unprecedented growth and according to Dale & Ford (2001), Sport & Recreation Queensland (2000, 2000a) and Australian Bureau of Statistics (2002, 2002a, 2002b) the participation rate is ever increasing. Is this a positive thing for the participants and society as a whole is the question posed by this article? A review of the literature has revealed overwhelming support for the positive aspects of traditional martial arts training and has reinforced the need for the traditional values and methodology to be maintained with the only negative results being from non-traditional schools.

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Most martial arts instructors who have been teaching for some time have at least one outstanding success story. The case studies where the student turned his or her life around and owed it all to their martial arts training. In my experience, these case studies represent the tip of the proverbial iceberg, as most of the psychosocial benefits of martial arts training are very subtle and not at all overt.

Traditionally martial arts instructors tend to primarily advertise the physical benefits of martial arts: fitness; coordination; self-defence skills; balance and so on. Some add self-esteem, self-confidence, and improved social skills to the list of benefits. This gives the impression that the only benefits are physical and that martial arts are 'rough'. This emphasis on the physical, combined with the movies and images of popular culture, has lead to a misconception of the realities of long term martial arts training and can create a perception in the uninitiated that martial arts promote violence and violent behaviour.

Indeed, according to the research of Bandura, Ross & Ross (1961) in their famous Bobo doll study, martial arts training should actually increase aggressive behaviour because it aggression is supposed to be learned through the imitation of violent behaviour. The theory of Bandura et al. seems to support the intuitive response to the perceived violence of martial arts training and this has lead to many martial arts instructors experiencing difficulty in having martial arts training accepted in schools as part of the curriculum.

The purpose of this article is to investigate if the theory of Bandura et al. (1961) is correct and that martial arts training promotes aggression or if the contrary is true and that it not only decreases violence and aggression but promotes other, albeit invisible, positive outcomes of good martial arts training by a professional (at least in attitude) martial arts teacher.

Traditional martial arts training is not to be confused with the competitive fighting skills that are glorified in popular culture and are increasingly taught in many eclectic martial arts schools. Traditional martial arts have Buddhist/Taoist philosophy and ethics, as well as specific training methods and goals. Traditional martial arts training is an effective way of

transmitting desirable values and, over time, indoctrinates students with the idea of respect, a sense of consequence, a sense of personal responsibility, and a sense of connection to the self through a strong mentor / student (i.e., the sempai / kohai in Japanese martial culture) relationship.

Overall, the philosophy is pacifistic (i.e., it abhors initiation of conflict and teaches minimisation of harm to any would-be assailant) as typified by the famous phrase by the 'father' of modern karate Funakoshi Gichin, "There is no first attack in Karate" ("Karate ni senti nashi"). Investigation of the underpinning code of traditional martial arts, known as bushido (literally, 'the way of the warrior'), indicates that the core principles and values are all to be considered positive. The author of the primary modern text on bushido, Nitobe (1905), cites the primary virtues as: rectitude; courage; benevolence; respect; honesty; honour; and loyalty. Many modern authors, such as Morgan (1992) have adapted and translated the original code into a modern context, even addressing such culturally sensitive issues as suicide (Morgan, 1992, pp. 177-195).

In addition to the obvious self defence benefits, the aim of traditional martial arts training according to Zivin et al. (2001) "is to develop a centred, calm, discriminating mind that is subsequently applied in all areas of life; the antithesis of a mind set for aggression, whether impulsive or not". It must be added that the aim for children participating in martial arts is often different to that of their parents but the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In the experience of the author, the parent's aim is usually to have their child develop a respectful attitude, physical skill, mental clarity, and an understanding of the body and of the physics of action, whilst the child is looking for something 'cool', fun and stimulating.

It should be noted that:

"These mental benefits are achieved partially through the challenging physical training, and partially through the incorporation of philosophy into the training. The specific philosophies differ considerably from style to style, and even school to school, but the basic principles they share include respect accorded to "seniors" (such as instructors and parents) as well as peers, consideration of the younger and weaker, perseverance at difficult tasks, and, most importantly perhaps, integrity of self and doing what is "right" (Vockell & Kwak, 1990, Abernathy, 1995, Wiley, 1995; as cited in Ripley, 2003).

There is a positive correlation between length of time practicing or belt rank and self-confidence (Duthie, Hope & Barker, 1978; Konzak & Bourdeau, 1984), independence, self-reliance (Konzak & Bourdeau, 1984; Kurian, Verdi, Caterino & Kulhavy, 1994), and self-esteem (Richman & Rehberg, 1986). Simply put, the longer someone trains, the more benefit they gain from the training. Daniels & Thornton (1992) found that martial arts practices cultivate decreases in hostility, Brown et al. (1995) found it decreased feelings of anger, whilst Madden (1990; 1995) found a reduction of feelings of vulnerability to attack. Pyecha (1970) found that martial arts practice also lead to more easygoing and warm-hearted individuals, Spear (1989) noted increases in self-confidence, Finkenberg (1990) noted increases in self-esteem, whilst Brown et al. (1995) noted increases in both self-esteem and self-control.

This has led to the use of martial arts training to engage and teach youth and achieve positive outcomes and these programs have been well documented. The literature review by Binder (1999) provides a review of empirical evidence that supports anecdotal reports about the positive psychosocial consequences of martial arts practice. Traditional martial

arts provide exactly the experience that will engage young people who are at clear risk for delinquent acts or impulsive violence, and even start them on positive life paths (Cannold, 1982; Fuller, 1988; Penrod, 1983; Wesler, Kutz, Kutz & Weisner, 1995; Zivin et al., 2001). Twemlow & Sacco (1998) reported that martial arts training "can be an extraordinarily helpful, ego-building form of psychotherapy" and noted that this was particularly true for "control of aggressive impulses". Trulson (1986) reported that data suggest that training in the traditional martial arts is effective in reducing juvenile delinquent tendencies.

Furthermore, researchers have presented descriptive, cross-sectional data showing lower scores on hostility and aggression and/or higher scores on self-esteem and positive outlook for traditional martial arts students when compared to students of non-traditional martial arts or other sports. These positive characteristics increased with greater length of traditional martial arts training (Daniels & Thornton, 1990; Kurian, Verdi, Caterino & Kulhavy, 1994; Lamarre & Nosanchuk, 1999; Nosanchuk, 1981; Trulson, 1986). Further investigation demonstrated that the improvements were not due to natural attrition of more aggressive students (Nosanchuk & MacNeil, 1989).

It should be noted that Nosanchuk & MacNeil, found aggression actually increased with greater length of training in a non-traditional school, as did Trulson (1986). This is likely to be due to the overemphasis of the self-defence, competitive and violent aspects of the training and a de-emphasis of the ethical framework. This would support the learned aggression model of Bandura et al. (1961). It must also be noted that to date, no studies found increased aggression or hostility to correlate with length of traditional training.

Reynes & Lorant (2001) investigated the possibility that martial arts attracted more aggressive people. They found that children attracted to martial arts training were not more aggressive than other 8 year old children in their study of judo but in a follow up study one year later they not find any reduction of aggression either (Reynes & Lorant, 2002).

In reference to the reduction of aggressive tendencies Grabert (1996) went so far as to say "the strong emphasis on mastering techniques in karate, repetition in training and the delaying of participation in competition involving combat are considered to be devices towards achieving this goal". King & Williams (1997) found "a goodness of fit between martial arts and task orientation" (goal setting). This is not surprising given the structured approach to goal setting engendered by the belt ranking system within martial arts.

Nosanchuk & MacNeil (1989) examined the aggressive tendencies of participants at 7 schools offering karate, tae kwon do, or jujitsu. At each school, they evaluated the relative importance of meditation in the class, the amount of respect the students showed towards the sensei, the dojo, and each other, the level of contact allowed to vital areas of the body, and the relative importance of kata. Based on this evaluation, they classified 4 of the schools as 'traditional' (more meditation, respect and kata, less contact to vital areas) and 3 of them as "modern". At the commencement of the study beginning students in both traditional and modern schools had similar scores for aggression. It was noted that the more advanced students in the traditional schools showed lower scores for aggression than beginning students. At the end of the study there was no change in the scores of the students at the schools with the 'modern' emphasis. Both Trulson (1986) and Regets (1990) obtained similar results. In contrast, Egan (1993) found that both traditional and modern styles of training led to improvements in general mental health. However, the traditional martial arts students showed significant increases in scores for self-acceptance which were not reported for the students with a modern emphasis in training. Most

research supports the hypothesis that it is the training environment and style of instruction influencing these differences.

One of the most cited studies in the area of aggression and martial arts was conducted by Trulson (1986). At the end of the six month study, the students in the "traditional tae kwon do" group showed a decrease in aggressiveness and anxiety and an increase in self-esteem. In contrast, the modern tae kwon do group showed an increased tendency towards delinquency and an increase in aggressiveness. Students in the exercise group showed an increase in self-esteem, but no other significant changes.

Columbus & Rice (1998) conducted a phenomenological analysis of the reasons people trained in martial arts and found a number of themes where positive results were reported. These included experiences of self, others, feelings and emotions, situation outcomes and adaptive functioning. Bouchard, Focht and Murphey (2000) linked martial arts to improvements in the pain threshold and the use of martial arts training in pain management.

Biddulph (2003) posits that the modern lifestyle has caused increased pressure on families, and that this increased pressure is often manifested in behavioural issues for boys. According to Biddulph, this modern lifestyle has led to a decrease in contact with fathers and the attendant male role models and mentors. The statistics on divorce (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002c, 2004) and single parent families (Rich, 2000; Gold Coast City Council, 2004) appear to heavily support this position. Rich also found that decreased socioeconomic status brought about by divorce and single parent lifestyle also led to educational disadvantage and increase risk of unemployment and juvenile crime. Figures from the Queensland Police Service (2005) would seem to support this evidence. Biddulph (2003) clearly supports the practice of martial arts explicitly (p. 144) and implicitly with his position on positive male role models and mentors, which can be found in any good, traditional martial arts school. Lakes & Hoyt (2004) found that martial arts training for children led to a significant improvement in cognitive self-regulation and classroom conduct with boys showing greater improvement than girls. This would tend to support Biddulph's assertion.

Martial arts training as therapy for children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD) has also been investigated. Ripley (2003) found that "martial arts training may help AD/HD children improve their overall behaviour and lead to better school performance (i.e., higher grades) whilst Morand (2004) concluded that martial arts training increased the percentage of homework completion, academic performance, and percentage of classroom preparation and decreased the number of classroom rules broken and times inappropriately leaving the seat for children with AD/HD. Both studies lend empirical support to martial arts as a positive intervention for children with AD/HD and when taken in context with Trulson (1986), Regets (1990), Biddulph (2003), and Lakes & Hoyt (2004), then martial arts training in a traditional environment seems to have overwhelmingly positive psychosocial benefits for the practitioner, and by inference, the family and community at large.

It must be noted however that Winkle & Ozmun (2003) identified considerable barriers to implementing martial arts programs in school curriculum's, no matter how desirable this may be. These barriers include a lack of suitably qualified instructors. One of the challenges facing a martial arts instructor in having their programs approved for addition to (or within) a school's curriculum is often the question of 'qualifications' or 'accreditation'. In the Australian context there is a challenge to sort out the confusion about things like: does

the instructor have to have a certain certificate or a certified NCAS level or belong to a particular martial arts association.

In reality there are no concrete rules about who can do what. Instructors are usually able to teach wherever they can negotiate a better deal. Qualifications, accreditations and memberships can be of some assistance where there is a set policy in place about who can teach students. In many cases the minimum requirement is a first aid certificate, a 'working with children' check and some sort of qualification (i.e., either a Certificate from a Nationally Recognised course, an NCAS Level 1 or 2 or similar).

The qualifications delivered by the International College of Martial Arts help instructors to meet these needs and also teaches them about safer coaching, advanced coaching, anatomy & physiology, risk management, business skills, marketing and the national training system. The whole program can then be tied to the secondary education guidelines and can even be co-delivered in schools as a combination of martial arts, for positive physical, social and psychological outcomes, and VET (Vocational Education & Training) for positive employment skills.

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