

Martial arts: learning how NOT to fight

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Introduction

The effects of martial arts training have long been the subject of discussion by both scientists and laymen. On the one hand opponents tend to paint martial artists as violent people, always looking for the next fight. Advocates, on the other hand, may represent martial arts masters as enlightened people, at peace with themselves and the universe. Surely, the truth is neither one of these extremes. Personal experience from the first author and anecdotal evidence led to the belief that beneficial effects of martial arts training are at the very least possible and under certain circumstances even probable. Combining this with evidence from previous experimental research culminated in the present study.

Research aims

This study investigated the effects of a short martial arts training course in a group of institutionalised adolescents with severe emotional and behavioural disorders. Both qualitative and quantitative measures were used to search for differences in variables like aggression, self-esteem, trait-anxiety, self-control and social skills. Martial arts' training was hypothesized to have a beneficial impact on all of these.

Methods

During his internship as clinical psychologist the first author worked in a Flemish institute for adolescents with severe emotional and behavioural problems. In this institute the first author taught Taekwondo (TKD, a Korean martial art) to the 12 children (8 boys, 4 girls) in the living unit he was assigned to. A parallel living unit served as control group, and got the same training the second year of the authors' internship. Training sessions were given in groups of 4 students to maximize individual attention, one hour a week over a period of four months. In total 12 sessions were held. All classes took place in the gymnastics hall of the institute, situated in sight of the living units.

At the time of this study the first author and martial arts teacher for this project, had practised TKD for 14 years and had been teaching children and youth for 7 years. Before the start of the program a session was held in which basic behavioural rules to promote a safe environment to practice were presented by the teacher. The first part consisted of guidelines for the participants (when somebody is speaking the others listen; during training physical contact is only allowed after explicit instruction by the teacher; techniques can only be used as a last resort for self-defence and inside the institute and the school other options must be used; ...). The second part consisted of the commitment of the teacher (do his best to help the students learn as much as possible; provide a safe environment for practice; ...). A strong emphasis was placed on traditional aspects (e.g. bowing to each other before and after every exercise; self-control; respect; learning basic Korean words; ...) and on the behaviour of the teacher as a model for the expected social interaction.

For the quantitative analyses data were collected pre- and post-intervention using three questionnaires: the Buss-Durkee Hostility Inventory (BDHI; Buss & Durkee, 1957; translated by Lange & Hoogendoorn, 1996) was used to measure aggression, the Self-Description Questionnaire II (Marsh, 1990; translated by Vander Steene, n.d.) for self-esteem, and the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory for Children (Spielberger, Edwards, Lushene, Montuori, & Platzek, 1973; translated by Bakker, van Wieringen, van der Ploeg, & Spielberger, 1989) for trait anxiety.

For the qualitative analyses data were collected using four different methods: a training evaluation questionnaire (TEQ), developed by the first author, eliciting information about the personal experiences of the participants was given at the end of the program; an observation log kept by the first author / teacher; open interviews with the participants during and after the program; open interviews with the educators during and after the program. The interviews were repeated regularly until 6 months after completion of the program

Results and discussion

No quantitative effects were found on anxiety, aggression or self-esteem as measured by the psychological questionnaires. This, however, may be an artefact of the limitations of the study, rather than an indication that martial arts have no positive effects. First, the questionnaires were too difficult for some participants. Second, analysis of the scores on the social desirability subscale of the BDHI indicated the only significant difference: a drop for the experimental group and a rise for the control group over the time of the study. This may indicate that the pre-intervention scores of the experimental group are too high, thereby lowering the possibility of finding results. Third, the questionnaires all measured stable traits. While it seems unlikely that an intervention limited to 12 hours

would have a strong impact on personality traits, it may have an impact on that person's coping.

Qualitative results based on the answers on the 11 returned TEQ's, were indeed decidedly positive and seem to support this assumption. Six participants definitely wanted to start training in a regular martial arts school after the end of the course in the institute, three would consider it. This is quite a high percentage, considering these adolescents are reluctant to seek out unfamiliar social situations. Three reasons were mentioned: four pupils said the training had been fun or interesting; two stated that "I can keep practicing" and "I want to learn a lot more"; and one said he enjoyed the possibility to express his energy. When asked for their personal opinion on reasons for studying martial arts, eight students mentioned self-defence as a main reason. One boy even specified "to defend yourself without hurting someone-else". Other arguments were: "for your character", "for better concentration", "it is fun", and "to use your energy". A final question asked for their personal learning experiences. Three stated "not much", but one went on and stated "not much just to control myself so a lot actually". This aspect of increased self-control was also mentioned by three other students: again "to control myself", but also "to have patience", and "to behave better". Other answers were "self-defence", "poomsae" (= kata), and "a lot of interesting things".

Information gathered during the interviews with the adolescents provided additional support for their perception of increased self-control and patience. After an incident in school, for example, one boy was eager to tell "[this other kid] wanted to fight and kept pushing me, but because of the training I kept my fists down". One girl also mentioned she was a lot more patient with one of the teachers with whom she had always had a difficult contact.

Interviews with the educators confirmed the observation log of the first author in that at 1 year follow-up no martial arts techniques had ever been used in fights between the adolescents, not in the living unit and not in school. There were no indications that the adolescents had become more violent or aggressive during or after the training course. After the course the educators actually allowed two adolescents to start training in a regular martial arts school.

Many tentative explanations have been given to explain the benign effects of martial arts training, both for normal and for clinical populations: the possibility of catharsis (Rothpearl, 1980), the traditional philosophy (Trulson, 1986; Twemlow & Sacco, 1998); socialisation (Jackson, 1978; Vilhjalmsson & Thorlindsson, 1996); and more. While they may play some part, there is little indication that they were the active components in this study: possibilities for catharsis were limited to secure a safe practice environment; the traditional philosophy was never discussed; the group was limited to the living unit of the participants and offered therefore no new environment to ease a different socialisation-process.

The social learning theory, on the other hand, offers a much sturdier if controversial explanation.

Controversial indeed, as the social learning theory has often been used by opponents to advocate against martial arts. However, one should consider carefully what is actually being taught in most martial art classes. Fighting techniques are part of it, but much more important is the self-control needed to execute them perfectly and safely, the respect for each other and the equipment, Aggression as demonstrated in the baby-doll experiment would never be tolerated. As the martial arts instructor the first author placed a strong emphasize on this role as a positive model of social interaction, on providing a safe environment by reacting consistently to signs of aggressive behaviour, and on demanding respectful behaviour of the students towards each other. In martial arts training it is not aggression that is modelled; fighting techniques are only the instrument used to model self-control and respect. In a very real sense it is a philosophy not discussed but lived.

Conclusions

While it is clear that the social learning theory is a viable and valuable explanation, it also provides a clear warning: much is dependent upon the personal aspirations and methods of the instructor. This is as true for martial arts, as it is for other sports (and indeed even for applied psychologists). Further research will have to explore the potential of martial arts training as a way of learning not to fight, in comparison with other activities and while taking into account the teaching style and philosophy of the instructor. But the potential is definitely there.

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