

Psychological Benefits of Martial arts Training

Why is it that so many people across the United States are joining martial arts schools and clubs? Part of the reason is the increasing popularity of the martial arts in the media, through shows like *The Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, and *Ultimate Fighting Championship*. Although some of these programs do not depict the martial arts in their true form and often distort the purpose of the martial arts, this is not of concern. The fact remains that the martial arts are more popular than ever in the United States. Oftentimes a person will start martial arts training and continue some type of martial arts training for the rest of his or her life. Why is this? It has been known for many years that the martial arts promote physical benefits such as increased strength, stamina, coordination, cardio-vascular endurance and basic overall physical health. So why is it, then, that a person may continue martial arts training for the rest of their life and not other popular sports like football, soccer, or baseball? The answer lies in the fact that the martial arts promote not only physical health but also psychological health.

The legitimacy of the martial arts as psychotherapy —not merely a set of fighting skills— is being established. To date, experimental research on the martial arts has lacked depth and is still only in the beginning stages of sophisticated investigation. Findings have thus far shown that martial artists' personalities, outlooks on life, behavior, and general psychological health reflect the positive psychological effects of martial arts training. In light of such findings, this research paper will explore the role of the martial arts in the process of psychotherapy and the mechanisms of increased psychological health.

Background

Traditionally, the Western world has negatively viewed the martial arts and the artists who participate in them. Media portrayal, usually in "kung fu" or "ninja" movies, often contains misrepresentations of both the form and intent of most martial art practice.

These movies portray a martial artist as an aggressive fighter, with an aura of male machismo buzzing all around him. The form itself is usually dramatically distorted in fighting sequences because such action is choreographed primarily for entertainment value. These movie portrayals of the martial arts not only misrepresent the purpose of the martial arts but reinforce society's view of the martial arts as aggressive fighting activities rather than the expressive disciplines that they can be. This misrepresentation of the purpose of the martial arts amounts to a disregard of the arts' spiritual and ethical bases. It depicts them merely as expedient ways for conflict resolution, invoked casually or even gratuitously. Moreover, the tendency towards sportification and professionalization of the martial arts furthers this negative image of the martial arts in Western culture and likewise pushes aside the expressive side of the arts.¹

In recent decades, however, and especially during the 1990s, the martial arts have come to be appreciated in Western societies for their capacity to promote both physical and mental health which result in enhanced mental relaxation, coordination of the mind and body, serenity, increased self-confidence, esteem, and mastery. This change in mentality has come about due to the increasing popularity in the media and the realization of the psychological and physical benefits of the martial arts. The disciplines teach the values of directness and honesty in communication, assertiveness, perseverance, humility, ability to empathize, gentleness, respect for others, responsibility, courage and self-improvement.² With such positive effects, the martial arts are now coming to be understood less as methods of aggression, and more as methods of

¹**Fuller, J.** (1988). martial arts and psychological health. *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, 61, 317-328.

²**Weiser, M., Kutz, I., Jacobson Kutz, S., Weiser D.** (1995). Psychotherapeutic effects of the martial arts. *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, 49, no. 1, 118-128.

self-defense, which in turn can be of therapeutic value.

Psychotherapeutic and Health benefits of martial arts

In recent years it has become apparent that the practice of martial arts is capable of enhancing the process of psychotherapy by providing active, physical routes for the discovery and expression of emotions. It has been well documented that many other physical activities other than martial arts can be both an alternative and a supplement to verbal psychotherapy.³ These activities include, among others: dance and art therapies, psychodrama, running, aerobics and meditation. Although the documented research on the martial arts as a parallel to psychotherapy is very limited, the studies that do exist concur that the martial arts are worthy of being added to the list of therapeutic activities and practices and to the list of supplements to psychotherapy.⁴ This rising interest in the psychology of the martial arts will benefit persons seeking mental help through psychotherapy and will benefit society as a whole.

Literature on the martial arts has only existed for about 15 years and very recently, in the last four years or so, has proliferated. Consequently, "Martial Arts and Psychology" has become an accepted Medical Subject Heading (MESH) term.⁵ The psychological literature, which is still relatively limited, approaches the martial arts as an independent and supplemental form of therapy for both normal and mentally disturbed persons, and examines the therapeutic effects of the physical training and discipline. It also points out that the processes of martial art training are similar to those of verbal psychotherapy, which this paper will discuss in more depth later. There are many mental health benefits of martial art training and practice. These include: increased self-esteem and confidence, and better management of feelings of vulnerability and aggression. Training in the martial arts benefits healthy people as well as those who are mentally disturbed.⁶

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

⁶**Gieser, J., Brown, P.** (1988). Judo principles and practices: Applications to problem solving strategies in psychotherapy. *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, 42, 437-447.

Many believe that one of the psychological and therapeutic benefits of martial arts training is the positive influence of physical exercise, a fundamental part of the martial arts. It has been found that physical fitness alone can enhance sleep, energy level, mood, mental performance, and concentration, while decreasing tension, stress, anxiety, depression, and hostility. A workout of running, weight lifting, and aerobics is capable of reducing mood disturbances, tension, depression, anger and confusion.⁷ Unfortunately, a single session of martial arts is usually not capable of producing the same effect. While physical fitness may be an immediate central mechanism by which some of the beneficial psychological effects of the martial arts occur, there is an additional and enhancing effect which manifests slowly over time. This supplementary and enhancing effect to the psychological benefits seems to come from the confrontation of the self with others, which is inherent in the martial arts.⁸ The mastering of the martial arts is a complex and long-term process which may not produce an immediate benefit—and may in fact increase anxiety before it shows its benefits. As such, those who have practiced the martial arts longer show higher self-esteem and self-confidence than beginners.⁹

Similarities between the Martial Artist and the Psychotherapist: Martial Arts as Psychotherapy

There are many similarities between the psychotherapist and the martial artist. Both achieves an important expression of his identity through a crafts which constantly requires him to return to the study of basic principles and technique. Historically, the learning of the martial arts was an all-encompassing discipline. It was taught as an entire way of life in which the master instructor served as a guide, a mentor, and a therapist for the student.¹⁰

⁷**Folkins, C.H., Sime, W.E.** (1981). Physical fitness training and mental health. *American Psychologist*, 36, 373-389.

⁸**Spear, R.K.** (1989). Military physical and psychological conditioning: Comparison of four physical training systems. *Journal of the International Council for Health, Physical Education and Recreation*, 25, 30-32.

⁹**Richman, C.L., Rehberg, H.** (1986). The development of self-esteem through martial arts. *International Journal for Sports Psychology*, 17, 787-794.

¹⁰Fuller

In Zen-oriented martial arts, the method of teaching parallels the methods of psychotherapy. The Zen instructor does not answer students' questions directly, but returns the questions to the students and encourages them to seek the answer within

themselves.¹¹ This process is very similar to the psychotherapist who will not tell clients what their interpersonal problems are but help them to expose the problem themselves through verbal psychotherapy. Once the problems are exposed to the clients, the psychotherapist will encourage the clients to search for the answer to the problems within themselves. The process of martial art training, as in psychotherapy, may be frustrating and painful, but will provide an opportunity for interpersonal growth. Zen-oriented martial arts is just one example of a martial art that parallels psychotherapy. In fact, the vast majority of martial arts can be used as supplements to verbal psychotherapy.

Similar Goals:

Martial arts and verbal psychotherapy both shed light onto one's character, as well as into the existential forces at work in the world and universe; the aim of both disciplines is personal growth toward a new and stronger way of being with one's self as well as the world around them. Martial arts practice can expose problems which otherwise may not be noticed during ordinary life. Once observed, these problems can be worked on with martial arts as a supplement to verbal psychotherapy. Since the experiences and contexts of martial arts training are very different from ordinary life, difficulties in relating to one's body, in regulating interpersonal distance, in dealing with issues of vulnerability, and in coping with fear and aggression will be more readily detected.¹² The interpersonal problems that manifest themselves can then be examined more easily through the verbal psychotherapeutic method. In addition, the trained psychotherapist can make a formal alliance, with the patients' knowledge and permission, with the psychologically aware martial arts instructor in which they can collaborate their observations of the patients' interpersonal growth progress.

Similar Techniques

¹¹Weiser

¹²Ibid.

Martial arts and verbal psychotherapy employ analogous techniques as well. For example, the martial arts teach the technique of "extending" an opponent's movement or momentum slightly after it has reached its natural end. This is akin to the psychotherapists' technique of encouraging the client to intentionally "exaggerate" his symptoms, e.g. encouraging one to feel angrier or more depressed. This exaggeration of the symptoms throws the client off balance, helping him shift his energy in another direction. The martial artists' attitude of constant yet not forced concentration is seen as parallel to the psychotherapists' constant yet free-floating attention on the client and his problems. Yet another similarity between the techniques the two employ is the martial artists' tension management in a confrontational situation through the paradox of doing nothing, of actively waiting, and the parallel to the psychotherapists' attitude of actively waiting for, but not forcing the client's response.¹³

Similar Experiences:

The experiences of martial arts training and that of psychotherapy are alike in that both include exposure to insights into the self through timing, such as the correct timing of a sparring block, or an interpretation of the psychotherapist. Likewise, the experiences of both teach the importance of space, both physical as in the martial arts, or psychological as in psychotherapy. As physical or psychological space grow closer, strategies for coping with increasing levels of vulnerability and intimacy must change. Students of the martial arts and psychotherapy clients must learn to understand and deal with their own resistance and that of others, to manage both evasion and confrontation, and to cope with aggression and vulnerability.¹⁴

Similar Settings:

The parallel of the martial arts and psychotherapy is furthered when you consider the place where martial arts are taught: the *dojang* or *dojo* (depending on where a specific martial art

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

originated, in this case Korea and Japan, respectively). The dojang can be a

school, home, gym, or just about any place where a group can practice. This place is separated from the outside world of "ordinary life" by wearing the traditional uniform of the particular martial art: *do-bok* or *gi* (again, depending on where a specific martial art originated). This uniform represents the fact that material wealth, achievements, and titles are left outside, as these cannot help in the struggle against one's self and others.¹⁵ As in psychotherapy, the room in which the therapist and client meet is meant to be separate from the "outside world" so that the therapist and client can discuss topics that would not ordinarily be discussed outside. In psychotherapy, the purpose is for the client and the psychotherapist to work on problems in the private setting that usually originate in the outside world. At times, problems that were previously unknown to the client may manifest themselves. As with psychotherapy, the problems that arise for martial artists in the *dojang* are usually similar and related to problems they have in the outside world. In both disciplines, character flaws are exposed, people learn about themselves, they learn how to resolve their problems, face their problems, and then endeavor to change themselves.

Martial arts as an independent form of therapy

Though there are many parallels between the goals and methods of both martial arts training and psychotherapy, the martial arts achieve these goals through the physical route, as opposed to the verbal route of psychotherapy. Although martial arts training can be used as a supplement for verbal psychotherapy, it can also independently provide psychological benefits. Psychological benefits through the physicality of the martial arts can be attributed to the physical basis of all experience, especially during infancy and toddlerhood. Intellectual development theorist Jean Piaget has shown that cognitive and emotional development during infancy is primarily in the sensory-motor, or physical, mode. The sensory-motor period, as Piaget called it, takes place between birth and about two years old. During this stage, the infant learns primarily through the

¹⁵Ibid.

visual, tactile and kinesthetic sensory pathways, which later are integrated into higher cognitions.¹⁶ The physical mode

¹⁶**Ginsburg, R., Oppen, S.** (1988) Piaget's Theory of Intellectual Development, 3rd ed. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

of experience is present throughout life, and the capability of "transmodal perception" enables physical learning to be automatically translated to cognitive and emotional spheres.¹⁷

Because this transmodal perception exists throughout life, the physical learning through the nonverbal exercises of martial arts can directly improve psychological health. It helps to integrate the mind and body and teaches the martial artist, while still striving for improvement, to relax, focus, communicate, persevere, and to be self-aware and self-accepting. Additionally, it emphasises to minimize fear and anger in order to maximize focus and concentration.¹⁸ Proper practice of the martial arts, as in successful psychotherapy, heightens feelings of harmony and control, and thus enhances feelings of self-esteem and confidence.

Management of aggression

Explanations for psychological and therapeutic benefits achieved through the practice of the martial arts focus on physical activity and group experience. Additionally, they place emphasis on values such as respect, humility, responsibility, perseverance, honor, and the positive role of the instructor as a role model. These values and attitudes, shown through the positive leadership of the instructor, can then be generalized into many arenas of life.¹⁹ For example, the management of aggression is a prime example of martial arts learning that is applicable in many areas of life. In martial arts training, the emphasis is on defensive, rather than aggressive, use of techniques. One must learn the containment of aggression and the mastery over one's feelings, especially fear, so that a potential attack is faced without contamination of thoughts or emotions. This mastery over one's emotions and aggression can then be applied to all aspects of life, from being able to cope with attacks other than physical, ranging from the early primal fears raised by parents, to current life difficulties and embarrassing situations.²⁰

¹⁷**Stern, D.** (1985). The interpersonal world of the infant. New York: Basic Books

¹⁸Weiser

¹⁹**Columbus, P.J., Rice, D.L.** (1991). Psychological research of martial arts: An addendum to Fuller's review. *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, 64, 127-135.

²⁰Weiser

Traditional martial arts wisdom holds that training reduces aggressiveness. This is contrary to social-psychological theory, which predicts increased aggression as a result of newly acquired aggressive repertoire, as well as disinhibition and reinforcement of aggression through competition. But research has shown there to be a negative correlation between skill level (belt rank) and aggressiveness, which is consistent with traditional martial arts philosophy.²¹ The reason for this change seems to be mediated by an increase in any of four intervening variables: self-control, self-assertiveness, self-esteem, or self-confidence. Therefore, as a martial artist gains more skill and progresses up the belt ranks, the artist will have more control over these four variables which will lead to decreased aggressiveness and an increase in self-improvement and gentleness, and an ability to empathize. It has also been found that internal martial arts, such as traditional hapkido, aikido, and tai chi, which teach more internal control, stress inoculation, meditation, and healing techniques, have been reported to have lower rates of aggressiveness than modern competition martial arts such as karate, taekwondo and jiu-jitsu.²²

Martial arts as a novel cure for juvenile delinquency

Juvenile delinquency, as a social problem in the United States, has been receiving much attention recently. Adolescence is an extremely turbulent and emotionally challenging time during the development of an individual. National crime statistics show that people under the age of 18 years are disproportionately involved in criminal activities such as grand theft, violence, use and sale of drugs, and vandalism.²³ Juvenile delinquent behavior includes the entire spectrum of criminal activity and occurs among youths of all socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. It is also estimated that more than half of the adolescents in America are involved in some type of

²¹Nosanchuk, T.A., MacNeil, M.L. (1989). Examination of the effects of traditional and modern martial art training on aggressiveness. *Aggressive Behavior*, 15, 153-159.

²²Fuller

²³Trulson, M. (1986). martial arts training: A novel "cure" for juvenile delinquents. *Human Relations*, 39, 1131-1140.

drug abuse.²⁴ Many psychologists believe that juvenile delinquency is a period in which the adolescent exhibits a lack of respect for the rights of others and their property, the unwillingness to obey authority figures, and a strong desire

²⁴Ibid.

to spend one's time according to one's wishes alone. This period is specifically marked by increased aggression, low self-esteem, poor management of emotions, and, oftentimes, bouts of depression.²⁵

Due to the fact that this phenomenon is frequently referred to psychologists, juvenile delinquency has been formally operationalized by a characteristic personality profile on the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI). The MMPI measures the personality of adolescents using three scales: psychopathic deviation, schizophrenic, and hypomania.²⁶ In order to receive a diagnosis of juvenile delinquency, an adolescent must score unusually high on all three of these scales. "Psychopathic deviation" scale refers to the disregard of rules and regulations set forth by authority figures and society. The "schizophrenic" scale refers to a lack of social grace and negative or unusual behavior. (For further explanation, the psychological disorder, schizophrenia, is understood to occur when there is a split between the rational self and the emotional self.) Lastly, "hypomania" refers to expansive behavior, behavior that is not within the normal accepted bounds of custom.

Many treatments have been tried to alleviate the symptoms of juvenile delinquency, but unfortunately none have proven effective. Noticing that juvenile delinquent tendencies seem to be alleviated following traditional martial arts training, Michael Trulson, M.D., designed an experiment to examine whether or not such training would help resolve the problems experienced by juvenile delinquents. Although there have been several accounts of martial arts training seemingly alleviating symptoms of juvenile delinquency, no systematic scientific investigation has ever been conducted before Trulson's experiment.

For the experiment, Trulson used 34 high school students, all males, between the ages of 13-17

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid.

years who were referred by their parents to the head instructor of taekwondo clubs in several different states. All 34 subjects had met the criteria to be categorized as juvenile

delinquents and were also classified according to the MMPI as having aggressive personalities. These subjects were matched as closely as possible for age, score on the personality inventories, and socio-economic background, and then assigned to one of three groups: Group I received traditional taekwondo training, Group II received non-traditional martial art training, in which only fighting and sparring techniques were taught, and Group III received no martial art training but performed other physical activities with the instructor. The purpose of Group III was to serve as a control group for normal maturation and the influence of the instructor during non-martial art activities. All the students were taught by the same instructor and were not told the purpose of the study, only that if they did not complete the six-month course of training that they would be turned over to the juvenile authorities.

Students in Group I received traditional taekwondo training. A typical training session began with a period of meditation, designed to focus their attention on their practice, as well as to reflect on the position, goals, and aspirations in life. This was followed by calisthenics, stretching, and a brief lecture on taekwondo philosophy. This philosophy is an important part of traditional taekwondo training, teaching the students the importance of physical fitness, patience, perserverance, and honor; it emphasized respect for others, personal responsibility, and building self-esteem and self-confidence. This was followed by basic taekwondo techniques, free-sparring, and self-defense techniques, and ending with another period of meditation. Group II students practiced a non-traditional, more modern version of taekwondo in which the students were taught only free-sparring self-defense techniques in addition to calisthenics and stretching. Group III students participated in many other athletic activities with the instructor, except the martial arts, including football, basketball, and jogging.

The results of the study were decisive. Upon completion of the study, Group I students displayed normal MMPI scores for juvenile delinquency, and displayed scores for aggressiveness that were surprisingly below the norm for adolescents at that age. Other psychological changes included less anxiety, increased self-esteem, increased social adroitness, and an increase in value conformity. Group II students, however, had an almost complete opposite result to Group I. They showed even a greater tendency toward juvenile delinquency and soared in aggressiveness. They also had more overall anxiety, decreased social adroitness, and a decrease in value orthodoxy. Group III students showed no notable differences in any of the personality measures, with the exception of an increase in self-esteem which is typical of normal physical activity.²⁷

This data demonstrates that training in traditional taekwondo is very effective in dealing with the problems of juvenile delinquents. Because this study dealt only with training in taekwondo, it is not known for certain if such training in other martial arts would produce the same effects in adolescents. However, it is hypothesized that training in the traditional forms of other martial arts may replicate these findings. There are many reasons why the students in Group I had such a positive change in their personalities. Among these are the instructor's role as an authority figure and positive role model, and the positive effects of exercise, which is true of almost all types of physical exercise. But the most important reason that the members of Group I had a positive change in their personalities seems to be that the traditional practice sessions integrated into their training the psychological and philosophical conditioning that would be expected to lead to positive personality traits.

Conclusion

Historically recognized by Western thought to be only a set of fighting skills, the martial arts have come to be seen as beneficial to both physical and mental health. The martial arts enhance self-esteem, self-confidence, mental relaxation, coordination of the

²⁷Ibid.

mind and body, and promote better management of both feelings of vulnerability and aggression. Thus, the martial arts are now thought to be a legitimate form of therapy for both healthy and chronically mentally ill patients. As proposed in this paper, the martial arts can be a supplemental form of psychotherapy, since they foster and expose feelings through the physical modality, which can then be observed and analyzed in the modality of verbal psychotherapy. Martial arts also serve as an independent form of psychotherapy, due to the fact that training in the martial arts almost directly parallels the process of verbal psychotherapy. This paper also showed that a traditional form of taekwondo was able to alleviate problems associated with teenage juvenile delinquents. The topics of the martial arts as beneficial to psychological health, as discussed in this paper, may be the reason for the increased popularity of the martial arts in the United States.

Endnotes