By Damien Martin

Abstract
The martial arts industry is currently undergoing unprecedented growth and there is strong evidence that the participation rate is ever increasing. This article considers whether this is a positive thing for the participants and society as a whole. 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.

The Positive Benefits of Traditional Martial Arts Training:
What Does Martial Arts Training Achieve for the Individual?

Most martial arts instructors who have been teaching for some time have at least one outstanding success story and popular culture abounds with such stories and 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 an 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.

According to the research of Bandura, Ross & Ross (1961) in their famous Bobo doll study, martial arts training should actually increase aggressive behaviour because 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. Indeed in some cases the teaching methodology has been found to increase aggression (Reynes & Lorant, 2002; Endresen & Olweus, 2005) and this further exacerbates the difficulties.

The difficulty in identifying the positive benefits of martial arts training lies within the inherent difficulty in defining such a diverse range of practices (Buckler, Castle & Peter (2009); Vertonghen & Theeboom (2010); Vertonghen & Theeboom (2012); Vertonghen, Theeboom, & Pieter (2014)).

This article seeks to review prior attempts by social researchers to define and categorise the martial arts, and further investigate whether martial arts training practice promotes aggression or if the contrary is true and that practice not only decreases violence and aggression but promotes other, albeit invisible, positive psychosocial outcomes.
DEFINITIONS
Before we can proceed in investigating the potential benefits of martial arts, we need to define three broadly applied terms often found in the literature: (1) martial arts, (2) combat sports and (3) traditional.

1. Martial Arts
The term ‘martial art’ can mean many things to many different people and the definition can therefore be problematic as it not only tends to be synonymous with the Asian fighting traditions in the popular mind, thus ignoring the rich tradition of arts in the West. Such a generic term further fails to define the purpose of the practice of the art or sport. Furthermore, what are termed ‘martial arts’ in popular vernacular tend to actually be combat sports or modern derivatives of the original warlike practices. Much of the literature on ‘martial arts’ is fraught with non-practitioner definition errors, a fact which has been identified by a number of authors (Vertonghen & Theeboom, 2010; Vertonghen & Theeboom, 2012; Vertonghen, Theeboom, & Pieter, 2014) and continues to cloud research results.

Buckler, Castle & Peter, (2009) discussed a number of classification systems for defining martial arts however a firm and satisfactory definition remains elusive and varies between cultures (i.e. Japanese vs European) and contexts (i.e. military vs civilian application). There are literally hundreds of different activities referred to as ‘martial arts’ and the reasons people participate in them are as diverse as the arts themselves.

In the context of this paper ‘martial art’ will encapsulate the physical practice of martial arts, regardless of origin, whether practiced for self defence or self development including the modern combat sports. Effectively, this includes anything which uses fighting principles and/or methodologies for the development of physical and mental skills to develop and individual as a person, and/or as a fighter.

2. Combat Sports
A combat sport is broadly defined as a competitive contact sport with (usually) one-on-one combat. Depending on the particular sports rules, the winner is determined by one or more of the following methods: scoring more points than the opponent; rendering the opponent helpless; by submission; or by disabling the opponent. Boxing, Kickboxing, amateur wrestling, Fencing, Arnis, Judo, Brazilian Jujitsu, mixed martial arts, and Muay Thai are examples of combat sports.

Judo, Fencing, Wrestling and Tae Kwon Do are combat sports which are included in the Olympic Games.

Many combat sports have derived from martial arts and share many common core values.

3. ‘Traditional’
The term ‘traditional’ can be even more vague in the literature. In the context of this article it will mean an art or school that has a history of effective application in the field it was designed for; has a strong curriculum and pedagogical system; has a hierarchical structure and an underpinning philosophy.

Traditional martial arts from Asia are often accompanied by Buddhist/Taoist philosophy and ethics, as well as specific training methods and goals, whilst European martial arts (i.e. fencing etc) tend not to have such dogma attached. 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 of traditional martial arts 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”).

In addition to the obvious self defence benefits inherent with martial practices, 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).

**THE POSITIVE PSYCHOSOCIAL BENEFITS OF MARTIAL ARTS**

It seems self-evident that for any behavioural or physiological changes to manifest themselves it is necessary for the student to habitually attend to their training for a period of time; therefore it is no surprise that a number of researchers found that there is a positive correlation between length of time practicing, and associated attainment of belt rank, and increases in 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 apparent benefits they gain from the training.

**Self Esteem & Confidence**


Legg (2013) reported martial arts training was effective in teaching children of parents with mental illness to self-manage behaviours and emotions and be better able to focus/concentrate on daily life. It is evident that involvement in interesting social and leisure activities provided opportunities to improve self-esteem.
Reduced Aggression

It has long been held by martial arts practitioners that training in martial arts decreases aggression and hostility yet this is contraindicated by the learned aggression model of Bandura et al (1961). The preponderance of social research on this question supports the notion that martial arts practice reduces aggression.

A number of researchers have found that martial arts practices cultivate decreases in hostility and decreased feelings of anger (i.e. Daniels & Thornton, 1992; Brown et al., 1995). Furthermore, a number of 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. Not surprisingly, these positive characteristics increased with greater length of training in traditional martial arts (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).

Kuśnierz, Wojciech & Litwiniuk (2014) postulated that combat sports and martial arts training enabled participants to diffuse emotions and relieve tension, which resulted in decreased level of aggression. They also found a link between aggressiveness levels being affected by the specificity of the training and instructor qualifications.

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 compatible with 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 a number of schools offering karate, tae kwon do, or jujitsu. At each school, they evaluated a number of indicators of a ‘traditional’ martial arts school including 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 schools as ‘traditional’ (more meditation, respect and kata, less contact to vital areas) and or "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 but no change in the scores of the students at the schools with the ‘modern’ emphasis. In effect the traditional training reduced aggression whereas the modern training did not.

Both Trulson (1986) and Regets (1990) obtained similar results; however in contrast, Egan (1993) found that both traditional and modern styles of training led to improvements in general mental health. 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 a control group doing just exercise showed an increase in self-esteem, but no other significant changes.

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.

Researchers Reynes & Lorant have conducted numerous studies looking at martial arts training and aggression levels. In 2001 they found that martial arts do not attract more aggressive children than other activities. In 2002 they found that judo training does not reduce aggressiveness in young boys however this could be due to the emphasis on competition in modern Judo. In 2004 they had mixed results when they found that Judo practice reduced anger scores whilst karate practiced had no effect. These mixed results are likely due more to methodological issues within the studies as identified by Vertonghen, Theeboom, & Pieter (2014).

Engaging At Risk Youth
The use of martial arts training and programs to engage and teach youth and achieve positive outcomes has 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 suggests that training in the traditional martial arts is effective in reducing juvenile delinquent tendencies.

Vertonghen & Theeboom (2010) created a table that listed the authors of the research they looked at, the target group, the type of martial art the group participated in, the personality trait that was observed, and whether the effect was positive or negative. Each group of youth participants showed positive effects in their traits due to participation in martial arts.

Engaging Children with ASD
The author has considerable experience in training children and youth diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and has found that with some modification and consideration for sensory processing issues, martial arts training can be tremendously beneficial. His experiences are supported with research which indicates that the traditional training model, with its structure, hierarchy, predictability and Kata (forms or templates). For example, Bahrami et al (2012) found that Kata training was effective for reducing stereotypical behaviour in children with ASD; Movahedi et al (2013) also found that Kata training was effective for consistently reducing social dysfunction in children with ASD; and McKeehan (2012) found martial arts training was an effective methodology for improving baseline behaviours in children with ASD as evidenced in dramatic gains in social skills, physical ability, respect, and overall attitude.
The results of these studies may help educators working with students on the autism spectrum to establish effective strategic plans under which martial arts training will be provided and utilised to engage children with ASD.

**Engaging Children with ADHD**
In addition to the benefits of martial arts for students with ASD, children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) have been found to benefit from martial arts training and the benefits have been investigated by researchers.

Ripley (2003) found that martial arts training helped ADHD children improve their overall behaviour which in turn led to better school performance (i.e., higher grades).

Morand (2004) reported that martial arts training two times a week yielded improved homework completion, improved classroom behaviour, reduced inappropriate callouts in class, decreased leaving seat in class, and improved academic performance in boys diagnosed with ADHD.

Marquez-Castillo (2013) reported that martial arts training can alleviate symptoms of ADHD and improve academic performance.

Cheyne (2013) reported that the practice of the martial arts helps children with ADHD develop skills of self-regulation providing they are taught by an instructor who understands and appreciates the needs of a child with ADHD and has the skills to create an environment that supports the learning of these children.

The aforementioned studies lend empirical support to martial arts as a positive intervention for children with ADHD and when taken in context with Trulson (1986), Regets (1990), Biddulph (2003), and Lakes & Hoyt (2004), 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.

**Other Benefits**
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.

In another study Lakes & Hoyt (2004) found that martial arts practice improved cognitive self-regulation, affective self-regulation, prosocial behaviour, classroom conduct, and performance on a mental math test with demonstrated greater benefits for boys than for girls.

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.

**DISCUSSION**

The research tends to show a clear correlation between martial arts training and the development of a variety of psychosocial traits which are seen to be positive. Unfortunately the mechanism whereby martial arts training develops or achieves these benefits is still obscure and requires further investigation. Thus, like Vertonghen, Theeboom, & Pieter (2014), the author calls for more research due to identified problems with prior study’s methodology and this further research needs to investigate the impact of personality, socioeconomic status, culture, age, martial art (or combat sport) and teaching methodology.

What is evident is that a professionally developed martial arts curriculum delivered by a suitably qualified instructor has a plethora of benefits to the participant. This makes the lack of martial arts in school curriculums in Australia even more disappointing.

Winkle & Ozmun (2003) identified considerable barriers to implementing martial arts programs in school curriculums, no matter how desirable this may be, and at the forefront of these barriers is 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 credentialing of ‘qualifications’ or ‘accreditation’. In the Australian context there are challenges in ascertaining whether an instructor has appropriate certification and indeed what appropriate certification might be.

In the current legislative environment there is little to no legislation of the teaching of martial arts, however there is some control of martial arts competitions and promotions in some jurisdictions (i.e. NSW Combat Sports Act 2013). Instructors are usually able to teach whatever they like 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).

One of the other barriers to implementation is the lay persons perception that martial arts and combat sports form part of a homogeneous whole. This becomes problematic if the individual in a decision making role has had a negative experience with the martial arts or a martial artist at some stage in their lives. Given the population saturation of martial arts participation in Australia, and the lack of regulation or quality control on what is taught, unfortunately negative experiences are all too common; even to the point of the term ‘McDojo’ being introduced into the popular lexicon to mean a martial arts school of poor quality that teaches a watered-down, fake and/or impractical form of martial arts in the name of profit.

The author has been teaching martial arts now for almost 3 decades and is currently teaching a variety of classes with children, adolescents and adults on a daily basis. Like
most instructors he has observed many students gain positive benefits from their martial arts training and has adjusted and altered the delivery model numerous times over the years to better facilitate the development of those benefits for the students. He would like to see more research on the mechanisms available for maximising the benefits of martial arts training, and to develop further professional development opportunities for martial arts instructors to help them to better deliver their lessons.

**About the Author**

Damien has been training in martial arts since he was 13 years of age. He holds dan grades in Okinawan Goju Ryu, Japanese Goju and modern freestyle karate, as well as being a certified Muay Thai trainer and Docé Pares Eskrima instructor.

Damien worked in the private security industry in Australia for 18 years where he was constantly exposed to some of the seedier and more violent characters in our society; an environment where techniques, tactics and training methods had to work! He has been lucky enough to travel the world with his work and has trained extensively in law enforcement and firearms tactics in the US and the UK.

Through his Dojo Damien is the Gold Coast Shibuchō of Taira Masaji Sensei’s Okinawa Goju Ryu Kenkyukai, and the Chief Instructor of the Gold Coast Kudo Doko Kai and teaches up to 5 classes a day at the Gōki-Kai Karate-Do So Honbu Dojo. He continues to train daily and considers himself a lifelong student.

Currently he actively teaches numerous Karate classes a day to children and adults. He also works part time as a community support worker with at risk youth on the Gold Coast, and as a teacher’s aide for special needs teens.

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