

DISCIPLINE AND THE DOJO

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Abstract

"You must be very disciplined?" is a question I've been asked many times, almost the instant after I've revealed my twenty years of involvement in the martial arts. It rehearses a popular perception of the martial arts, and is frequently the motivation of many a parent who has brought their child to a dojo in order to "become more disciplined". This paper is concerned with the productive nature of discipline. That is, with what discipline produces. I use the martial arts as a case study to explore theoretically and empirically Foucault's (1977; 1982/1994) claim regarding the productive nature of power and discipline, particularly because it so frequently is depicted as a site of 'serious' discipline. Informed by the later Foucault, I explore both the constraining and enabling effects of discipline as it manifests in and through the martial arts; and consequently I investigate the way discipline is central to the act of becoming in the dojo. This is not performed in some celebration of martial arts. Rather, I am interested in using the martial arts as a case study to understand the complex ways in which discipline, desire, and power circulate and interact to produce particular kinds of subjects. That is to say, I will argue that there is not one set of 'disciplinary' practices (Foucault, 1977) that is constraining, and another set that is enabling. Instead, I hope to make the case that all disciplinary constraints are precisely enabling forces that operate on and through the individual martial artist as a means of self-formation; and that participation in a disciplinary regime or process results in the 'production' of a particular kind of person, individual, or martial artist.

Introduction

This paper is concerned with the productive nature of discipline. That is, with what subjection within and to a discipline 'produces'. More specifically, I am concerned with the way a "subject comes into being ... comes to mastery, comes into existence and agency, through subjection" (Petersen, 2007, p. 477, original emphasis). I use martial arts training as a case study for my investigation because it is so frequently depicted as a site of 'serious' discipline; a somewhat 'inflexible' discipline that practitioners more or less willingly subject themselves to in order to attain mastery of the art under study. My aim is to develop an understanding of the deliberate act of subjection that is implicated in the disciplining process by which the individual is transformed through the martial arts. Resting upon Michel Foucault's (1980, 1982/1994) thesis on the 'double nature' of power, I argue in this paper for both the constraining and enabling effects of discipline as it manifests in and through the

martial arts; and investigate the way discipline is central to the act of becoming in the dojo. In exploring the ‘voluntary’ subjection to discipline that is a feature of martial arts training, I am clearly indebted to the position taken up within the later Foucault (1980, 1982/1994), that remains attached to the notion that agency arises only through subjection (a legacy of his earlier work), but that offers the possibility of deliberate and ‘motivated’ subjection. I am thus using ‘subjection’ to mean both “subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject” (Butler, 1997, p.2); and it is the phenomenon of wilful subjection in order to become a particular kind of subject that makes the martial arts an interesting alternative site to the public school classroom.

Foucault (1977) has clearly stated that “[t]he chief function of disciplinary power is to ‘train’. . . it does not link forces together in order to reduce them; it seeks to bind them together in such a way as to multiply and use them” (p. 170). In drawing upon Foucault’s conception of self-formation through subjection to or through discipline, I seek to challenge those scholars who over-emphasise the constraining and repressive aspects of power and discipline when drawing upon Foucault’s (1977) work. While I am not entirely sure why this particular use and reading of Foucault is so common, despite his claims to articulate the productive nature of power and disciplinarity, I would hazard a guess that it arises from residual commitments to an emancipatory project held by many scholars attracted to the early phases of Foucault’s work. According to Dominick LaCapra (2000), Foucault “was forceful in bringing into prominence the ways in which marginalization, subjection, and abjection could take place even in the seemingly most liberal or enlightened policies and practices” (p. 16), and this has undoubtedly been the attractiveness of his work to many scholars in fields with ‘social justice’ ambitions, such as Education. I intend to challenge the tendency of viewing discipline as a repressive force – exhibited even within the poststructural literature whenever care is not taken to differentiate ‘productive’ from its everyday association with things ‘positive’ or ‘good’ – by putting forward a case that the constraining effects of discipline may be understood precisely as its enabling or productive aspects (see also Watkins, 2005). To do so is to reject the problematic association of the constraining effects of power with repression, and its productive aspects with positive outcomes. That is to say, I will argue that there is not one set of ‘disciplinary’ practices (Foucault, 1977) that is constraining, and another set that is enabling. Instead, I hope to make the case that all disciplinary constraints are precisely enabling forces that operate on and through the individual martial artist as a means of self-formation in the *bildung* sense (Masschelein & Ricken, 2003); and that participation in a disciplinary regime or process results in the ‘production’ of a particular kind of person, individual, or martial artist.

It is important to note that it is not my intention to make a case for the superiority of an Eastern mode of discipline over Western disciplinary forms. I do not use the concept of ‘self-transformation’ through martial arts discipline in any utopian sense. Nor is this study performed in some uncritical celebration of the martial arts. In fact, I hope to avoid romanticism altogether – including the enduring educational Romanticism of Rousseau and his legacy that would be at best ambivalent towards

discipline as pedagogy, particularly when ‘discipline’ is viewed only through the lens of restriction or constraint. Rather, I am interested in using the martial arts as a case study to understand the complex ways in which discipline and desire interact to produce particular kinds of subjects, and both make available and limit possible subject positions. I will confine my examples on the traditional Japanese martial arts, in order to provide high contrast via the examination of distinct but related traditions.

Discipline as the Way: Subjection and Desire

“You must be very disciplined?” is a question I’ve been asked many times, almost the instant after I’ve revealed my years of involvement in the martial arts. It rehearses a popular perception of the martial arts (Greenberg, 2000), and is frequently the motivation of many a parent who has brought their child to the dojo in order to “become more disciplined”. It might be said that the dojo, the place where ‘the martial Way’ is taught and followed, does not exist without discipline (Lovret, 1987). But a desire for discipline is rarely the reason any adult or teenager begins the training. The most commonly cited reasons for involvement in martial arts, in addition to their perceived benefits as forms of self-defence, have been the ‘interesting nature’ of the arts, their health benefits, and their effectiveness as a means of personal cultivation, or physical and psychological development (Zaggelidis, Martinidis, & Zaggelidis, 2004). Likewise, a sense of affiliation, friendship, and fitness were among the highest ranked motives behind martial arts study, and also a desire for status or reward (Jones, Mackay, & Peters, 2006), what we might describe as ‘recognition seeking’. However, this ‘recognition’ through the attainment of a black belt, let’s say, is only achieved through repeatedly subjecting oneself to the discipline of the dojo and its martial traditions.

What is interesting in the example of the martial arts, is the extent to which the desire to attain mastery so obviously drives the process of subjection. This stands the martial arts in contrast with many formal educational settings, where students are frequently unwilling or resigned participants in the pedagogical enterprise, and have never committed themselves to the system’s goals or intended outcomes. The desire motivating a person who subjects themselves to the training regime of the martial arts, to become someone more confident and capable, is probably not unique to the martial arts. It would undoubtedly be true of many extra-curricular settings, like for example music or dance practice. Further, whereas discipline is experienced as an imposition by many students in mandatory public education, it becomes a key feature of the educational journey in the traditional martial arts. However, the desire for some sense of personal mastery or status attainment comes at a cost, which is not always known to a student when they start, but becomes clear as they progress. It can be attained only if the student demonstrates the ‘proper attitude’ of *nyunanshin* (Lovret, 1987), of surrender to the authority of the Sensei and the traditions she or he embodies (Lovret, 1987; Schine, 1995). In practice this manifests as a willingness and commitment to embodying the techniques and tactics of the *ryu* (or ‘family tradition’) as accurately as

possible. The body operates as a malleable substance during the training, which is shaped through 'self-discipline' (and instructor feedback) into a mirror-image of the tradition, and gains in legitimacy and status as its approximations of the *seitei kata* (standard form) improve. The familiar line of Karate students practicing precise *kata* (patterns) in perfect time (as one sees in Jim Kelly's 'black power' dojo during the introductory scenes of Bruce Lee's Hollywood epic, *Enter the Dragon*; where the syncopated strikes of the students is so well-done that the snap of their uniforms make the sound of a shotgun loading), is one of a number of disciplinary technologies that reinforces this principle. Thus, typical of disciplinary power as Foucault (1977) has described it, legitimacy and status are obtained only through subjection, through disciplining oneself to (re)produce precise technical forms. The self that emerges from this process could hardly be described as a 'docile' body (Foucault, 1977), if we understand that to mean submissive. Rather, subjected to discipline, the body achieves "efficiency of movements" (Foucault, 1977, p. 137), and in Foucault's (1977) example of the soldier, develops "an alert manner, an erect head, a taut stomach, broad shoulders, long arms, strong fingers, a small belly, thick thighs, slender legs and dry feet, because a man of such a figure could not fail to be agile and strong" (p. 135). Thus, through discipline a transformation occurs that produces a subject who is simultaneously more 'capable' and perhaps more 'independent' than they were before (Schine, 1995), but also someone who has been shaped and constrained by the features of the discipline that they have come to embody.

The curriculum of classical martial art *ryu* is typically organised into three levels: *Shoden*, or basics that embody general principles and prepare the student for serious training; *Chuden*, or middle level teachings, that dramatically expand the student's repertoire and give the martial art style its distinctive character; and finally *Hiden*, or so-called 'secret teachings' that are not taught in any regular sense (Lovret, 1987). Certainly, no *Sensei* instructs his students directly in the *Hiden*. Rather, the *Hiden*, as sets of strategies and dispositions, are learnt during the conduct of the training, through what the Japanese masters sometimes call *Shinden*, which literally means something like 'divinely transmitted' but might be more comfortably translated as 'heart teaching'. Such heart-to-heart transmission can be understood as an instructional metaphor for modelling oneself on the conduct of an accomplished practitioner. It is one of the reasons students are encouraged to seek out instruction from a recognised master practitioner, and presents an interesting contrast with martial sports like Boxing, where the coach is neither expected nor required to be an accomplished practitioner. Within martial arts training, this process of modelling oneself on the conduct of an accomplished practitioner would seem to be frequently achieved without conscious deliberation, although it is explicitly advocated in many traditions (see for example, Hatsumi & Hayes, 1987). Certainly, the student comes to embody these unspoken heart teachings through a process that couples intense desire and subjection. The desire is for the perceived benefits of martial arts mastery – including self-confidence, greater autonomy, higher self-esteem, emotional stability, and improved physical capability (see the review of the literature conducted by Lakes & Hoyt, 2004) – which drive the student to subject themselves to the rigorous schedule of training offered in the dojo. They quickly learn in this process that

approximating the movements of their seniors is the surest way to both personal accomplishment and social recognition within the martial arts community.

Disciplines and their Disciples: Subjection as Self-Formation

As we explore the effects of discipline on the martial artist, it is important to understand that all martial arts are not the same. Within some martial art circles, the ideal outcome or telos of the training is the scholar warrior (as exemplified by the Samurai ideal of *Bunbu Itchi*, or “pen and sword in accord”). However, one can find a range of rival conceptions of the ultimate goal of martial arts training including the attainment of *shibumi*, “the aesthetic quality of severe simplicity. . . quiet, graceful, and hidden beauty” (Lowry, 1995, p. 172; see also pp.133-148); and the achievement of a level of “freedom and effortless power experienced as the *ku no seikai* (realm devoid of specific recognizable manifestation)” (Hayes, 1984, p. 154). Derived from historically and culturally diverse contexts, martial arts forms and traditions have decidedly different goals, practices, rules, and structures (Draeger & Smith, 1974), and it is precisely the distinct teleology and practices of Karate-do and Aikido, for example, that has inspired their selection as examples later in this paper.

This shaping effect of martial arts discipline is an expected outcome of ‘traditional’ martial arts training (Lovret, 1987), and recent studies by sports scientists engaged in establishing the ‘benefits’ of martial arts training have made the claim that higher self-esteem, greater autonomy, emotional stability, assertiveness, self-confidence, physical confidence, improved self-perception of physical ability, and enhanced body image (Lakes & Hoyt, 2004), have only been found among individuals who study in a ‘traditional’ dojo, once the ‘gravitational effects’ of self-selection – particular personality types being attracted to particular types of martial arts training – have been controlled and accounted for (Nosanchuk & MacNeil, 1989; Seig, 2004). Frederick J. Lovret (1987) has argued, most martial arts schools teach a person new things, whereas “the goal of a [traditional] dojo is to transform the person into something new” (p. 14). Nosanchuk and MacNeil (1989) define ‘traditional’ not by an arbitrary distinction based on the suffix to its name (*jutsu* vs *do*), or on its documented point of historical emergence (before or after the Meiji period), but by its emphasis on *kata* (ritualised forms) over *kumite* (sparring); the teaching of ethics and philosophy (*do*) alongside technique (*jutsu*) rather than technique alone; and the degree of restraint shown by, and respect shown to, the Sensei (often manifest through a climate of quiet and respectful etiquette). In effect, the martial artist in a ‘traditional’ dojo becomes a disciple, a practitioner of a particular discipline, who embodies the dispositional technical and tactical knowledge of their art as a result of subjection to its disciplinary forms. The disciplinary technology underlying this process is sometimes described as *sanmitsu*, or ‘the triple secret’ – the harmonising or alignment of thought (intention), word (strategy), and action (technique) as a single tool of accomplishment (Hayes, 1981b, pp. 143-159). Such alignment is facilitated by the

way the fundamental techniques of a martial art instantiate particular strategic principles.

Within martial arts traditions the kihon kata or basic techniques are not simply methods of self-defence, but frequently embody complex strategic knowledge and philosophical principles (Lovret, 1987). This is not always apparent to novices (or the parents of children who are brought to the dojo to enhance their self-discipline). However, repeatedly working to model one's performance on the standard form of the basic techniques shapes both the body, and the 'strategic disposition' – or the available tactical repertoire – of the martial artist. Within the Japanese art of Ninjutsu for example, there is a sense that the fundamental fighting postures and techniques are "bodily manifestations of our emotional responses" to danger (Hayes, 1989, p. 30), and that through practicing these postures "best understood as the physical embodiment of mental attitude" (Hayes, 1981a, p. 54), one develops a suite of dispositional responses to conflict. Thus, a particular type of person is produced through subjection to this disciplinary regime. The black belt may be a subject who is more 'capable' and 'independent' than they were before, but they are also someone whose technical and tactical repertoire simultaneously enables them to act in specific ways, by both its affordances and its constraints. A couple of contrasting examples might help make this point more apparent.

The Productive Effect of Aikido and Karate

Let us turn to the principles underpinning the art of Aikido. I have selected Aikido because it is a highly popular martial art with a clearly articulated telos. Gaining its name in 1941, but developing its public reputation in earnest after WWII, Morihei Ueshiba's Aikido reconceptualised a range of armed and unarmed martial arts using the "Principle of Aiki" or 'blending' (Saito, 1975, p. 12). Aikido uses circular footwork and limb-twisting grappling techniques to blend one's own body movement with that of the attacker, redirecting the force of an opponent's grab, blow, stick-strike, or sword-slash, throwing them off-balance, and repelling an attack without necessarily hurting the aggressor. The philosophy of Aikido is centred on the idea that martial arts should focus on the compassionate protection of all beings (including some would argue, the opponent), and its strategy is based on a combination of a strong centredness, coupled with outward extension of body and perception, and the 'leading' of an opponent's force using circular motions, towards a point at which any attack is neutralised (Westbrook & Ratti, 1970). Aikido training constrains its disciples within a technical and tactical repertoire that aims at evading threats and neutralising attacks without retaliation. Its pedagogy promotes interpersonal relatedness and self-learning (Brawdy, 2001). Through the discipline of Aikido practice practitioners become less likely to initiate an aggressive move. The art literally has no attacking forms, and is silent on offensive tactics. The emphasis within the training on becoming a good uke (attacker who ultimately 'receives' the Aikido technique), powerfully inscribes reception rather than initiation as the dominant strategic disposition. By virtue of practicing a form of strategic knowledge focused on artful defence, the Aikido disciple develops a disposition whose major constraint – the

absence of attacking techniques and tactics – produces an individual who is calm and focused during the whirlwind aggression of a combat situation, but whose strategic principles limit their capacity for effective offence. Thus, Aikido practitioners can position themselves to ward off attacks as they arise, but may be unable to initiate a decisive attack if provoked, as they have been denied through the training any tactically offensive subject position. This constraint actually produces the productive effect of Aikido training, the development of a ‘peaceful warrior’.

Now let’s consider the martial art of Karate-do. I have selected Karate-do as an equally popular, high contrast example to Aikido. Originally from Okinawa, and based on ancient Chinese Kenpo (Kung-Fu), Karate-do developed into its contemporary form during the 1930s. Popularised in movies during the 1960s and 1970s, Karate became a household word throughout the world. As a martial art, Karate-do emphasises striking and kicking techniques against the ‘vital points’ of the human anatomy, and depending on the ‘style’ practiced, often involves basic grappling takedown and restraining techniques. Karate training is made up of Kihon (basic partnered techniques), Kata (pre-set solo forms), and Kumite (free sparring). The Karate practitioner aims to develop the kind of focus that would knock an opponent down with a single strike. Styles are typically strong in attack, and may be hard or soft in defence. Whereas the Aikido disciple develops a calm and quiet temperament, the Karate-do disciple will often be demonstrably assertive. The emphasis on striking and kicking techniques undoubtedly produces a practitioner who will be confident in any pugilistic exchange, but who may struggle if a fight goes to the ground and they are caught in a grappling situation. The constraining effect of avoiding mastery of the messiness of close-quarters grappling and ground-fighting, produce the productive effect of Karate training, the development of a warrior who can ‘stand firm’ when challenged or confronted, who may lack sensitivity in a grappling exchange, but will manifest qualities of strength and endurance in other situations.

What can we draw from these examples? Subjugation is an implicit feature of subjection. Martial artists willingly subject themselves to the discipline of the dojo in order to attain the promised benefits of the specific art studied. In gaining the capability to perform in certain ways by training in a particular martial art, you may come to be restricted in other ways. Further, discipline would appear to work in two different ways. Firstly, it shapes and coerces in an active sense, shaping and producing a particular kind of person with specific capabilities. Secondly, it develops and administers criteria for inclusion and exclusion as a discipline. In other words, it legitimates or de-legitimates particular practices and people, based on the extent to which they conform with the norms and standards of the discipline. Importantly, the extent to which a discipline produces through practice in some developmental sense (the training effect), versus the extent to which a discipline produces through exclusions (the selection effect), is not significant. The ultimate result is the same. The discipline produces its disciples, who are productive precisely by operating within the constraints that define the discipline. Thus, the discipline of the dojo is

reproduced as much through self-exclusion as through that which Jennifer Gore (1993) has termed 'self-styling'.

Conclusion: Multiple disciplines and liquid subjectivity

Finally, I believe it is worth addressing the problem of the liquidity of subjectivity that is apparent when switching between disciplines. Using the martial arts as my case study, I have argued that disciplines provide sets of limits that enable thought and action of a particular kind, shaping individuals by applying rules for recognition as a disciple (and thus excluding those who do not meet the standards set); and by providing intellectual and / or strategic resources for thought and action, that work like signatures, shaping a disciple's performance into a recognisable 'style' or form. These resources and practices provide a path for thought and action that may not exist without them, while limiting the possibility of a disciple to think or act otherwise. Thus, disciplinary subjection provides the capacity for agency, while simultaneously shaping that agency in particular ways; and following the argument in this paper, it is precisely the shaping or sculpting effect of various constraints that provides the basis for forming particular capacities, working like a jelly mould for a much more liquid subjectivity.

The liquid metaphor actually has a long legacy in the martial arts, and remains popular in certain contemporary martial arts circles, since being powerfully advocated by Bruce Lee (1975) in the late 1960s and early 1970s as an antidote for what he saw as the 'classical mess' perpetuated by subjugation to stylistic convention. Lee implored the martial artist to become like water, which adapts to the shape of any container it finds itself in, but is able to switch containers as the need arises. Underlying Lee's conviction was an image of the self as a free-floating subject, and his (at the time) revolutionary philosophy might be interpreted in retrospect as the beginnings of a postmodern turn in the martial arts (see Bowman, 2009). Despite the appeal of Lee's postmodern appropriation of Taoist imagery, undoubtedly there can be difficulties for a martial artist who attempts to change 'styles', not the least being the residual effects of one's previous discipline. This has not affected the popularity of switching or collecting disciplines that has become a feature of the contemporary martial arts scene since the permission provided by Lee as popular 'cinematic pedagogue' (Morris, 2002) and 'oriental master' almost forty years ago. However, the possibility that a martial artist might be subject to more than one discipline does little to challenge the main thesis of this paper. If the self is liquid, then its capacities are formed precisely when it is moulded into shape through subjection to discipline. The purpose of subjecting oneself to multiple disciplines is most likely to be a desire to develop new capacities, and the new capabilities one attains and new subjectivities that emerge will be formed in the same crucibles of stylistic constraint.

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