

1-1-1985

That Mild-Mannered Bruce Lee

Michael E. Trulson

Chong W. Kim

Marshall University, kim@marshall.edu

Vernon R. Padgett

Marshall University

Follow this and additional works at: http://mds.marshall.edu/mgmt_faculty



Part of the [Personality and Social Contexts Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Trulson, Michael E., Chong W. Kim, and Vernon R. Padgett. "That Mild-Mannered Bruce Lee." *Psychology Today*, January 1985, 79.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Management, Marketing and MIS at Marshall Digital Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Management Faculty Research by an authorized administrator of Marshall Digital Scholar. For more information, please contact zhangj@marshall.edu.

PLAY

That mild-mannered Bruce Lee

The dramatic rise in popularity of the martial arts has resulted in expressions of concern by some psychologists, law-enforcement officials and the general public, based on the assumption that training in the martial arts inevitably leads to increased aggressiveness on the part of the *karatekas* (martial arts practitioners). This assumption is strongly supported by the numerous motion pictures and television movies that sensationalize violence in the form of martial arts expertise.

Scientific evidence, however, supports the hypothesis that martial arts training results in a decrease, rather than an increase, in aggressiveness. A study by T. A. Nosanchuk of Carleton University, for example, found an inverse relationship between aggressiveness and length of martial arts training.

As researchers interested in the martial arts, we designed a study to identify possible variables, such as personality characteristics, that could account for this unexpected decrease. We administered a personality test (the Jackson Personality Inventory) to numerous students of Tae Kwon Do karate (the Korean form of martial art) in West Virginia, Kentucky and Ohio. The people tested were high school and college students and businessmen, housewives, doctors and unemployed laborers. They were told that the test was being administered merely to collect data on personality traits of people residing in this tri-state area. Thus, they were unaware that the survey was related to the study of the martial arts.

Several interesting findings emerged. First, those who had practiced the martial arts less than one year were not significantly different from the average subjects on whom the test is based on any of the 15 personality variables measured. This indicates that people who register for

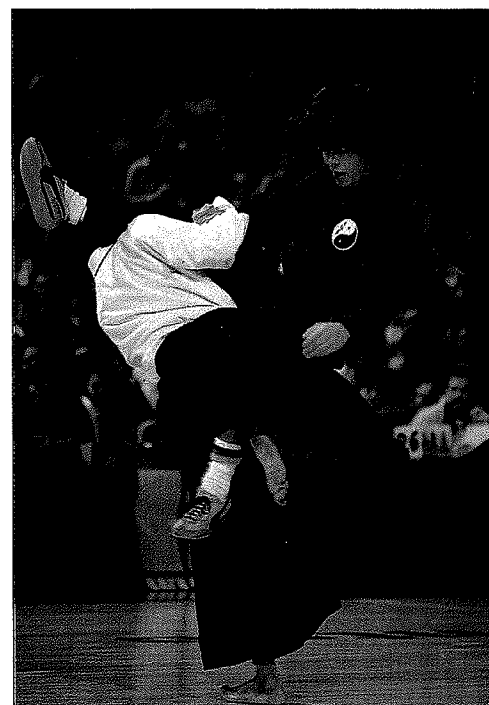
martial arts lessons do not have uncharacteristic personality traits. We also found that people who continue to practice the martial arts for prolonged periods are different from the general population in several ways: They have a lower level of anxiety; an increased sense of responsibility; a decrease in the willingness to take risks; they are less likely to be "radical"; they have an increased level of self-esteem; and they are more socially intelligent. These traits were particularly prominent in those who had attained the black-belt rank.

Since aggressiveness is frequently a manifestation of low self-esteem, a lack of respect for traditional customs and beliefs and a high level of anxiety, we concluded that we had identified the factors most critical in leading to decreased aggressiveness in martial arts practitioners.

In addition to these findings, there are numerous other benefits that accrue from practice of the martial arts. Physical fitness and the ability to defend one's self are two obvious advantages. The traditional martial arts also place a very heavy emphasis on mental attributes; students are trained to incorporate self-discipline, mental concentration and respect for others, not only into their practice sessions but into all aspects of their lives as well.

Indeed, in a related study we found that teenagers who have been in trouble at school, home and with the law, due largely to their aggressive nature and lack of respect for the rights and property of others, changed dramatically after a few months of practice in Tae Kwon Do. According to their parents, they became more respectful and self-disciplined within a very short period of time. Although more research is needed, these findings suggest that practice in the traditional martial arts may be an effective method of dealing with the problems of juvenile delinquents.

It must be pointed out, however, that the above benefits derive from



High on karate: Low on aggressiveness?

the practice of traditional martial arts (as practiced for centuries in the Orient), as opposed to many modern versions of the sport in which the instructors teach only fighting techniques. This approach, together with the still-popular Bruce Lee and pseudo Bruce Lee movies, has led to the stereotype of the *karatekas* as aggressive troublemakers. Our study should help change that image by showing that *karatekas* are not hostile bullies but, for the most part, are well-adjusted, happy and constructive members of our society.

—Michael E. Trulson, Texas A & M University, and Chong W. Kim and Vernon R. Padgett, Marshall University.

PUBLIC SECTOR

Standard deviation

"Normality is only a statistical mean to which none of us wholly belongs."

—John Weightman in The New York Review of Books (Vol. 31, No. 17)