

Academic Paper

Hierarchy, Community, and Attachment: Integrating At-Risk Youth into Martial Arts and Combat Sports Academies

Adam Lorenz [✉](#)

Abstract

Cultural shifts have eroded the hierarchical structure responsible for vertically transmitting guidance to youth, making the development of secure parent-child attachment relationships challenging. Youth are experiencing an orientation void, which affects development. Integrating youth into supportive communities promotes psycho-social development. Martial arts and combat sports academies provide opportunities for the development of external and internal assets. Research is needed to measure the psycho-social influence academy communities have on at-risk youth. The effectiveness of martial arts and combat sports participation in intervention and reintegration plans need investigating. There are considerations to be made before developing programs that integrate youth into academy communities.

Keywords

hierarchy, attachment, mentorship, at-risk youth, psycho-social development,

Article history

Accepted for publication: 01/06/2018

Published online: 30/07/2018



© the Author(s)

Published by Oxford Brookes University

Introduction

This manuscript was inspired by personal communication with Rich Clementi, retired professional MMA athlete and Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) veteran (October 23, 2015), regarding the benefits of hierarchical structure and combat sports participation for at-risk youth. An observed Dr. Gordon Neufeld lecture discussed the importance of adult-child relationships and hierarchical structure, while sharing an analogy used by Clementi about unbridled young elephants. This analogy is also used by Neufeld and Maté (2013) and Siegel (2013). To access an original source regarding these elephants, communication was established with Dr. Wade Horn, President of the National Fatherhood Initiative. The original intention of this manuscript was to analyse the correlation between academy membership and Neufeld's theory regarding alpha children. However, Neufeld's views do not exist in the literature. A more general review of the literature was conducted. Peer-reviewed articles regarding martial arts and combat sports participation for at-risk youth, mentorship, and adult-child relationships were obtained from the online databases of Athabasca University. The views of Clementi and development attachment theorists were integrated alongside scholarly sources to provide context within this underexplored topic.

Stories about rediscovering a positive direction in life are abundant among recreational martial artists and competitive combat sports athletes. At times, individuals who have struggled with substance abuse, crime, delinquency, and other issues have attributed overcoming these obstacles through their preferred sport. However, these claims are largely unproven. Evidence exists which supports the idea that sport participation reduces the criminal and anti-social behaviour of at-risk youth, but some researchers believe it is inconclusive, because proving a simple causal relationship regarding such a complex correlation is difficult (Chamberlain, 2013).

Martial arts in this manuscript refers to practices such as Wing Chun, Kung-Fu, Kenpo, and other traditional martial arts that are rooted in Eastern Philosophy. These arts are often characterised by lower amounts of physical contact than full-contact competition, focusing instead on internal experiences and meditation, and the development of personal mastery of techniques and self-control. Combat sports in this manuscript refer to practices such as boxing, wrestling, Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, Sambo, Muay Thai, kickboxing, and Mixed Martial Arts (MMA). These modern arts emphasise the mastery of techniques and the development of athleticism to obtain competence in full-contact competition and training practices.

At-risk youth often lack healthy parent-child attachment relationships. These youth benefit from the hierarchical structure, community interactions, and adult-child relationships provided by martial arts and combat sports academies. This has been witnessed first-hand by Rich Clementi (personal communication, October 23, 2015). Clementi, who owns and operates a martial arts facility called Clementi's Gladiator Academy in Slidell, Louisiana, is also a coach and mentor to youth through the Bayou Elite wrestling team. Clementi frequented youth correctional facilities as an adolescent. To replicate the positive influence wrestling coaches had on him, Clementi partnered with the Slidell Police Department in 2011 to help dozens of at-risk young boys develop positive life paths through wrestling (Chiri, 2015). Clementi credits one-on-one sports, positive social interactions, an internalised sense of belonging to a team, and the personal accountability of one-on-one sports for improving the lives of struggling youth (Chiri, 2015). Clementi explained that introducing troubled youth into the hierarchically structured environment of a martial arts or combat sports academy significantly reduced aggressive behaviour (personal communication, October 23, 2015).

This manuscript surmises that the natural hierarchy, community interaction, and adult-child relationships provided by martial arts and combat sports academies reduce problematic behaviours in children and adolescents. Additional research is needed to develop an understanding of how martial arts and combat sports related intervention programs benefit at-risk youth. The impact of sports coaching on youth who participate in mainstream sports is well documented in the literature. This literature review will instead analyse the psycho-social development of youth and the creation of mentor-mentee relationships within the context of martial arts and combat sports academies. Youth crime, the importance of adult-child relationships, challenges in developing relationships with youth, the efficacy of youth participation in martial arts and combat sports, and opportunities for mentorship and community involvement through academy membership are explored. Areas that have potential to benefit at-risk youth are discussed: engaging youth in healthy adult-child relationships, configuring mentorship programs and community participation interventions, and recommendations for further exploration.

Criminal Behaviour of Youth

Juvenile crime is a social and public health issue, as criminal offenses plague the criminal justice system and have serious implications for later adult behaviour (Mendenhall, 2008). Adolescents who have committed a crime exhibit lower levels of empathy and prosocial behaviour, while being more aggressive, emotionally unstable, and angry (Llorca-Mestre, Malonda-Vidal, & Samper-García, 2017). Analysis of the prosocial moral reasoning of young offenders suggested a greater orientation towards engaging in helping behaviours if it will gain them personal benefits or approval (Llorca-Mestre et al., 2017). Unfortunately, committing juvenile offenders to large facilities has not proven to be effective for rehabilitation

(Mendenhall, 2008). In addition the recidivism rate of juvenile offenders has become a significant area of concern in some jurisdictions (Williams & Smalls, 2015).

Reducing problematic behaviours in youth is supported by recognising the influence that external and internal assets have on personal development, rather than solely focusing on punishment (Scales & Leffert, 2004). According to Scales and Leffert (2004), the categories of support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time comprise the external assets that benefit youth, while commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity are internal asset categories. Their data suggests that average adolescents possess under half of the 40 assets that the authors assigned to these eight asset categories. It seems that more must be done to strengthen the assets of youth, as opposed to punishing the negative behaviours they have developed. The modeling of adults and structure provided by positive adult-child relationships has been shown to aid the development of assets in youth (Higley, Walker, Bishop, & Fritz, 2016).

Horn (2000) likened a group of young men's criminal activity in Central Park to a destructive group of transplanted young male elephants in South Africa who killed rhinoceroses and destroyed property. He claimed that similar to the animal kingdom, young men run a particularly high risk of exhibiting negative behaviour without the guidance of their fathers or other responsible adults. Clementi (personal communication, October 23, 2015) has observed with confidence the negative alpha dynamic developed in unguided young men being positively influenced by martial arts and combat sports participation due to the hierarchical nature of academy communities. In recent decades, cultural changes have weakened the natural hierarchy of Western society and the development of parent-child attachment relationships (Neufeld & Maté, 2013) and therefore the needs that young people have for social structure is not surprising.

Alternative approaches based on developmental attachment theory are a theoretically viable option to rehabilitate young offenders or to act as a preventive measure. Insecure attachments create externalizing and internalizing behaviours, such as aggression and anxiety, while secure parent-child attachments promote positive development (Bowlby, 1982). A consistent link between parenting style and development suggests the negative behaviours of young offenders are influenced by adult-child relationships (William & Smalls, 2015). Survey data produced by Williams and Smalls (2015) provided evidence that parental involvement, reactions, attitudes, monitoring and supervision, and use of positive parenting techniques impact juvenile recidivism. Supporting youth relies on the effort and abilities of caregivers. If youth are not afforded support by parents, then other supportive role models can be utilised to effect change through the development of earned-secure attachment relationships (Saunders, Jacobvitz, Zaccagnino, Beverung, & Hazen, 2011; Venta, Sharp, Shmueli-Goetz, & Newlin, 2015).

Adult-Child Relationships

The natural hierarchical structure of Western society and our ability to develop secure adult-child attachment relationships is diminishing (Neufeld & Maté, 2013). Hierarchical structure provides vertical transmission of culture to children, allowing them to become oriented to adults and experience the benefits of parental guidance (Neufeld & Maté, 2013). Natural hierarchy is comprised of adult-child attachment relationships, which provide youth with a compass point that produces psychological orientation and reduces negative behaviours (Neufeld & Maté, 2013).

Society is failing to support natural hierarchy and adult-child relationships due to economic realities that require dual-employment, geographical distancing, the abolishment of attachment villages (adults within the community who help raise youth), decreased extended family bonds, increased solitary activities involving technology, contemporary parenting practices (i.e., egalitarian parenting), and peer orientation versus parent orientation (Neufeld and Maté, 2013). Society's failings are producing psychologically disoriented youth who experience anxiety and exhibit unruly behaviour in the absence of adult-child attachment relationships, which are needed to serve as their compass point and provide security (Neufeld

& Maté, 2013). Attachment is also necessary for youth to reach maturation and realise their potential; becoming independent, exploring curiosities, taking risks, acting on instincts, forming relationships, thinking for oneself, learning from failure, and developing resilience. This potential can be pursued and achieved when youth possess the safety and security of an adult-child attachment to fall back on (Neufeld, 2012).

According to Scales and Leffert (2004), a considerable amount of research has demonstrated that resilient youth have at least one adult in their lives who cares for them (Scales & Leffert, 2004). Supporting the development of connections with positive influences is important when working with youth in the criminal justice system, school system, through an organisation or team, and as a mentor. It is vital that adults who take on mentorship roles possess the strong ethical standards necessary for working closely with youth, especially at-risk youth who are exceptionally vulnerable due to lacking familial support. The boundaries and expectations influencing the realities of youth are instilled by the adults in their lives, which models prosocial behaviour (Scales & Leffert, 2004).

Henley (2013) claimed youth who have experienced separation, loss, and dislocation will develop an ingrained sense of alienation and distrust. He contends that ingrained negative senses are amplified by solely addressing the resulting external behaviour, making it vital to attend to youth's need for belonging, inclusion, and security. Henley stated that:

...although we often take it for granted, our belonging with one another is the very stuff of life, equally, if not more important than the food and drink that nurtures us. In order to survive, grow, and develop, we need to connect to one another in families, in communities, in cultural and language groups and ultimately, as citizens of the planet. (Henley, 2013, p. 19)

Providing youth opportunities to interact with responsible adults and develop positive relationships can be facilitated by having a structured and supportive place to belong.

The development of responsibility and independence in youth requires their needs for belonging, closeness, and security being satisfied (Neufeld & Maté, 2013). Instead of punishing negative behaviour we must focus on attachment relationships. A lack of adult-child attachment affects the thoughts and emotions of youth, not just their behaviour. Therefore, the causes for behaviour must be addressed instead of just symptoms; securely attached children have a desire to be good, so it is not youth, but relationships, that need correcting (Neufeld and Maté, 2013). Aggressive behaviours of youth, such as crime, violence, and bullying, and the subsequent victimisation, suicide, and substance abuse, that plague both perpetrators and targets, can be combatted by entering secure adult-child attachment relationships with youth. These connections can restore natural hierarchy (Neufeld & Maté, 2013).

The classical clinical work of John Bowlby, which addresses the development of attachment disorders in young offenders, was analysed by Follan and Minis (2010). They surmised that the youth in Bowlby's studies were impaired in their ability to form appropriate social relationships because their parents were not attuned to them, which affected their social development. To assist youth who lack parental support, interventions should focus on more than parent-child attachments by exploring the interactions of youth with strangers and peers (Follan & Minnis, 2010). Opportunities to interact with others and develop attachments are afforded by martial arts and combat sports participation; sports programs promote social inclusion, a sense of belonging, and relationship building (Bruening, Clark, & Mudrick, 2015).

Adults support the development of positive behaviours in youth by developing, enhancing, and sustaining the connections youth have with a world that includes responsible adult models (Henley, 2013). Clementi illustrated how youth need adults by drawing attention to how young male elephants who were removed from the herd became destructive and their aggression was curbed by reintroducing mature older male leaders back into the environment (personal communication, October 23, 2015). The occurrence described by Clementi took place in South Africa and involved elephants who were transplanted from Kruger National Park to Pilanesberg National Park. (Slotow, van Dyk, Poole, Page, & Klocke, 2000). These young

elephants gored many rhinoceroses to death and destroyed property (Slotow et al., 2000). Horn (2000) surmised that fatherlessness led to the destructiveness of these elephants. Similarly, parallels have been drawn between troubled youth and these elephants by Neufeld and Maté (2013) and Siegel (2013), who contend that loss of natural hierarchy and isolation from the adult community negatively impact behaviour development. This creates a link between developmental attachment theory, biological science, and the anecdotal observations of an experienced martial arts and combat sports athlete and coach.

Youth Separating Themselves from Adults

Today's parents were amongst the first to experience the societal changes distancing youth from parents and towards peers, which has made the shift difficult for contemporary adults to recognise (Neufeld & Maté, 2013). With parents and children being separated by economic, social, and cultural trends, youth are filling this orientation void with peer relationships (Neufeld & Maté, 2013). Much like has been observed in the animal kingdom, where peer-oriented monkeys and young elephants have become aggressive and destructive without adult leadership, human youth are also at risk when they become separated from the adult community (Neufeld & Maté, 2013; Siegel, 2013). Youth benefit greatly from having interactions with peers who engage in positive behaviours, as this motivates them to practice similar positive behaviour. However, they require expectations and boundaries to be implemented by adults to ensure they do their best regardless of the quality of their peer relationships (Scales & Leffert, 2004; Siegel, 2013). Excessive peer orientation, insecure adult-child attachments, and psycho-social deficiencies lead to youth distancing themselves from interactions with adults.

Adolescence is the developmental stage where youth naturally begin to push away adults in search of independence, which is different than shutting them out completely. Adults pushing back against adolescent rebellion, hyperrationality, and novelty seeking can lead to complete shut out. With today's technology of cars, synthetic drugs, and the internet, it is easier for youth to do this than ever before (Siegel, 2013). Siegel (2013) believes the pruning of at-risk childhood circuits is heightened by stress, which reveals vulnerabilities in adolescents, leading to mood or thought dysfunction occurring during brain remodeling. He cites that high school and college is a prime time for major psychiatric disorders like depression, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia to first present themselves in well-functioning people. Siegel theorised that if youth obtained assistance from responsible adults at times of need, it would reduce their stress and prevent excess pruning. More factors than genetics determine neural growth; supportive relationships and the feeling that one belongs to a larger group significantly influences development (Siegel, 2013). Youth forming secure attachment relationships may positively affect their behaviour due to physical and neurological changes, as well as by the psychological and emotional support that it provides.

Community development initiatives achieve success based on the efforts of everyday people, perhaps more so than the labour of professional youth workers (Scales & Leffert, 2004). Youth's connections with supportive adults in day-to-day life have important implications for their development. However, many adults and communities are not working to promote youth development or modelling constructive and prosocial behaviours to them (Scales & Leffert, 2004). With the declining presence of attachment villages, which Neufeld and Maté (2013) define as the community of supportive adults that exist in youths' lives, alternative methods for engaging youth with the adult world are needed. Martial arts and combat sports academies provide opportunities for at-risk youth to become immersed in an alternative sub-culture separate from the negative ecological environment that they have been residing in.

Benefits of Martial Arts

Two contrasting views regarding the essence of martial arts are that of violence and discipline. Every individual is influenced by unique biological factors, systemic factors, and experiences, which shape their perception (Arthur & Collins, 2010). Therefore, how martial arts participation affects the thoughts, feelings,

and behaviours of each individual youth will vary. However, research has shown benefits to youth being trained in martial arts.

Internal martial arts training, which relates to the mindful and meditative practices associated with becoming a martial artist, have been shown to reduce aggressive behaviours and psychological arousal in children and adults; increasing their ability to control feelings related to alarm (Hernandez & Anderson, 2015). People who participated in martial arts as children are less frequently aggressive and are more likely to assist the targets of bullies (Twemlow, Biggs, Neelson, Vernberg, Fonagy and Twemlow, 2008). Martial arts programs have been found to be effective for reducing violence and producing positive changes in the psychological risk factors of high-risk youth (Zivin et al., 2001). The internal personal growth afforded to youth, which is part of becoming a martial artist, positively affects self-control and the development of values. Martial arts participation and academy membership may be a catalyst for developing the external and internal assets outlined by Scales and Leffert (2004).

Developing the ability to learn from experienced adults is afforded to youth through the martial arts. Twemlow, Sacco, and Fonagy (2008) asserted martial arts training helped high-risk youth foster attachments to instructors because respect and discipline is needed to learn the techniques being taught, which cannot be done efficiently when lacking self-control. The development of youth is significantly impacted by the modelling of positive and responsible behaviour and the implementation of clear and consistent expectations by adults, as this motivates youth to put into practice preferred behaviours (Scales & Leffert, 2004).

The influence of peers also makes significant contributions towards youth development; positive and negative peer influence impacts behaviour, while the social and emotional context of peer interactions influence information processing and decision making (Scales & Leffert, 2004; Siegel, 2013; Neufeld & Maté, 2013). Positive norms are regulated through verbal and non-verbal communication in martial arts academies (Cole, 2015). The enculturation of youth into respectful communities, which contain peers and adults who model positive behaviours, social interactions, and lifestyles, has encouraging implications for at-risk youth.

Benefits of Combat Sports

Sports-based extracurricular activities appeal to young people and benefit their social development (Bruening et al., 2015; Parker, Meek, & Lewis, 2014). This is especially important for underprivileged youth. Youth with challenging social conditions have limited access to resources, so including them in meaningful leisure activities connects them to mainstream society and other communities (Hopper & Yoshitaka, 2017). Becoming involved with sports introduces at-risk youth to peer groups and coaches who are positive role models; promoting positive development, such as aspiring to attend college, and diminishing the influence of negative role models (DeMeulenaere, 2010). According to Parker, Meek, and Lewis (2014), through sports programs young offenders experienced physical, social, and psychological benefits. They noted increased self-esteem, social skills, and positivity regarding the future amongst program participants. When part of a holistic program for the resettlement of young offenders, participants developed trust, multi-agency connections, renewed familial connections, and self-advocacy skills that supported their transition back into society. Bruening et al. (2015) discovered relationships created through a sports-based youth program were significant to a youth's personal development and sense of belonging. These findings reflect the beliefs of attachment theorists, who place vast importance on attachment relationships for the development of youth. Through leisure, youth develop positive connections with the peers and community members who they learn alongside (Hopper & Yoshitaka, 2017).

Despite the one-on-one format of combat sports competition, the training takes place within a team environment. Boxing coaches hypothesised that the full-contact nature of combat sports training provides unique opportunities for youth to develop responsibility and awareness of others, as these social interactions require them to adjust themselves towards less able participants (Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, &

Coalter, 2012). Much like participating in martial arts or other sports, people train in combat sports for many reasons; exercise, comradery, stress relief, fun, or to compete. Actively competing in combat sports is not necessary to belong to an academy. Combat sports involvement can distance individuals from behavioural, social, and economic risk factors, which makes participation beneficial for violent or impulsive offenders, gang members, and young offenders who lack familial support (Jenkins & Ellis, 2011). Combat sport participation achieves this by strengthening youth's relationships with family and friends, while providing alternate non-deviant peer networks. The encouraging and supportive atmosphere of combat sports can reduce their exposure to community risk factors (Jenkins & Ellis, 2011). In addition Jenkins & Ellis (2011) show how pride in affiliation with the combat sports community increases self-esteem and self-confidence in participants, resulting in an increased sense of self and decreased need to identify with antisocial behaviour. Combat sports participation may foster a sense of belonging and assist at-risk youth with developing healthy adult-child and peer relationships with responsible others.

The role of competition includes the development of competent competitive athletes, who may then serve as role models. Opportunities to achieve competitive goals is important for retaining talented athletes within the academy community (Haudenhuysen et al., 2012). Combat sports competition also has lessons to teach youth. Clementi (personal communication, May 23, 2017) stressed the development of accountability and resiliency that wrestling competition fostered in youth. He witnessed the growth of personal accountability in young athletes who had to ensure that they were living a healthy lifestyle and remaining consistent in their training because their athletic performance was impacted by their decisions. He also saw resiliency instilled in youth by learning from failure. Clementi (personal communication, May 23, 2017) explained that in the real world, people will not always succeed in everything that they do, which mirrors competition. The individual nature of combat sports competition heightens the development of accountability and resiliency in youth because there is nobody else to blame when they lose; there are no teammates to drop the ball or miss the shot (Clementi, personal communication, May 23, 2017). Clementi additionally identified that the hierarchical structure of combat sports communities reduces the confrontational and aggressive behaviour of troubled youth, especially fatherless young males who exhibited alpha complexes. He witnessed how young male offenders who had developed the sense of being above authority figures, and who were used to being in charge, resigned to taking their place as novice members of combat sports academies (personal communication, October 23, 2015). By succumbing to the natural ranking order among academy members, these youths were provided opportunities to develop psycho-social attributes under the influence of responsible adults and peers. This process mirrors the vertical transmission of culture that Neufeld and Maté (2013) deemed as vital towards orienting youth and staving off the development of negative behaviour.

The Benefits of Mentorship

The underlying theoretical underpinning of mentorship programs is that positive adult-child relationships provide the trust and support necessary for youth to experience positive social-emotional development and become dissuaded against behaving negatively (Bellamy, Sale, Wang, Springer, & Rath, 2006). These core beliefs resonate with the tenants of developmental attachment theory, which emphasises the significant influence that adult-child relationships have on the development of youth. Adult role models influence the future endeavours of youth who develop academic, family, and work-related expectations, through the adults they identify with (Scales & Leffert, 2004). The use of mentorship interventions for at-risk youth are gaining empirical support, as researchers continue to analyse alternative interventions to support youth outside of correctional institutes (Weinrath, Donatelli, & Murchison, 2016). Quality mentor-mentee relationships heighten the receptiveness of youth to other intervention strategies, which enhances the overall effectiveness of at-risk youth's intervention programs (Bellamy et al., 2006). Well-matched, long-lasting mentorship relationships have been found to improve behavioural, social, emotional, and academic development in youth (Higley et al., 2016).

Research indicates that professional mentors are effective for promoting positive behaviours in youth, which makes being inventive in establishing mentor-mentee relationships in the lives of at-risk youth a

worthwhile endeavour (Weinrath et al., 2016). Additionally, it has been established that keeping mentors and youth matched for the long term, which is often a large barrier to mentorship programs, is highly important to reaping the maximum amount of benefits from this process (Higley et al., 2016). Academy coaches are a creative and attractive option for mentorship, as these professional instructors are often permanent fixtures of the facility and role models to an entire community of individuals. Research suggests that it is beneficial to include mentors within the multidisciplinary team (Higley et al., 2016). However, the practice of adding the mentorship of a martial arts or combat sports coach to the intervention plan of an at-risk youth is not prevalent in the literature.

One-on-one mentorship has become an increasingly popular intervention for working with youth and so too have other formats, such as mentoring a group of youth (Bellamy et al., 2006). However, matching a youth with a coach/mentor and immersing them within a supportive community has not been addressed, despite the possible social benefits it may afford. Adult-child relationships may be established through a variety of mentorship formats, with shared mentor-mentee interests and establishing trusting relationships with youth proving to be more important than mentors' external attributes (Bellamy et al., 2006). Matching at-risk youth who are interested in martial arts and combat sports with academy coaches and immersing them within the community of an academy has the potential for creating positive social interaction and relationships.

Developing Adult-Child Relationships

Developing relationships between youth and responsible adults may occur through a variety of contexts, such as involvement within the community, school attendance, belonging to sports teams, and enrolment in mentorship programs. Connecting to youth in a way that promotes the development of these relationships to their full potential is essential to unlocking their benefits. Neufeld & Maté (2013) refers to this practice as “the task of collecting our children — of drawing them under our wing, making them want to belong to us and with us” (p. 179).

To connect to youth, a high school staff in Alberta began collecting students by engaging with them in a friendly way (not a correcting way, which is common), providing an adult to be attached to, inviting dependence, and becoming their compass (an orienting function) (Dame, Peat, & Burger, 2010). As a school team, they studied the perspective of developmental attachment theorist Gordon Neufeld and realised the development of strong adult-child relationships would improve mental wellness in their school. By using friendly greetings, conversing, taking an interest, nurturing, and helping they produced many positive changes in the students: improved behaviour, increased desire to please, more receptive to teacher requests, stronger relationships, showing more compassion and concern for others, and more open to correcting behaviour (Dame, Peat, & Burger, 2010). The team's respectful, friendly, intentional, and guiding philosophy is reminiscent to the behaviour that most would expect from a competent instructor at a legitimate martial arts or combat sports academy. The instructional practices, interpersonal skills, and personal attributes of coaches may differ, which will make the results of interventions that use martial arts and combat sports for at-risk youth vary between academies (Strayhorn & Strayhorn, 2009). Intervention programs should ensure that coaches are competent in collecting youth in a way that promotes the development of positive adult-child relationships before asking them to instruct or mentor at-risk youth.

Successful prevention programs recognise youth are highly influenced by what they learn through social relationships and everyday experiences, so these may be used to instill social competence and positive values (Scales & Leffert, 2004). Membership in a martial arts or combat sports academy provides an opportunity to develop relationships and gain positive experiences. Based on his experience, as a former at-risk youth and current mentor, Clementi (personal communication, May 23, 2017) explained the importance of “being both far to the right and far to the left” when simultaneously leading youth towards achieving their human potential and building supportive relationships; challenging youth and pushing them to do their best on one side, while openly providing praise and unconditional positive regard on the other. Adults learning how to align themselves with youth and recognizing the influence they have on their

development is important for effectively collecting young people and fostering positive adult-child relationships.

More Research Necessary

According to Vertonghen and Theeboom (2010), past research has mainly pointed towards the positive effects of martial arts participation, such as increased self-regulation abilities, heightened psychological well-being, and decreased violent behaviour. However, they also pointed out that a few contrasting studies have found increased antisocial behaviour in participants, which suggested a need for more conclusive evidence regarding the psycho-social impact of martial arts programs. Youth development programs, such as Boy Scouts of America, promote the development of positive attributes in youth (Wang, Ferris, Hershberg, & Lerner, 2015). While Scouts has produced positive results, more research is needed to determine how various out-of-school programs affect the development of youth's attributes (Wang et al., 2015).

Parenting practices play a role in the recidivism rate of young offenders (Williams and Smalls, 2015). Furthermore, the relationships youth have with responsible adults influence their behaviour (Neufeld & Maté, 2013). Empirical evidence is needed to determine the extent that young offenders are lacking strong adult-child relationships. Research is needed to determine if parents or other adults becoming more attuned to young offenders, and creating adult-child attachment relationships, benefit rehabilitation and psycho-social development. Exploring the connection that intervention structure and the training of those facilitating interventions has on successfully collecting youth is recommended. In general, the literature regarding the development of earned-secure attachments by adolescents is sparse and clinical work is needed for this topic (Venta et al., 2015).

Research is needed to investigate possible links between academy community involvement and the development of external and internal assets in youth. In particular Scales & Leffert (2004) highlight the need for research into: obtaining support, becoming empowered, benefiting from boundaries and expectations, using time more constructively and experiencing structured activities, becoming committed to learning, developing positive values, increasing social competence, and creating a positive identity. According to Richards (2014), the importance of community in restorative justice theory and practice is highlighted by the literature. However, the findings of Richards did not support this notion. Richards recommended closer examination of the role community plays in restorative practices. The effectiveness of academy communities in collecting youth, establishing adult-child relationships, and reducing recidivism in young offenders are areas to explore. The impact academy hierarchical structure has on the development of youth requires investigation.

Additionally, there is limited professional dialogue regarding the motivational climate of varying martial arts and how different approaches, from traditional to modern arts, may influence the structural qualities of martial arts participation and the impact participation has on youth (Vertonghen & Theeboom, 2010). Researchers are advised to recognise the individual differences between youth. To obtain clear data regarding how martial arts and combat sports impact youth, researchers must control for the various factors influencing participants outside of martial arts participation. The characteristics of participants, which include social contexts and personal attributes, may obscure the reality of psycho-social outcomes (Vertonghen & Theeboom, 2010). Therefore, what benefits some at-risk youth may not benefit others. Strayhorn and Strayhorn (2009) found zero correlation between martial arts participation and mental health outcomes such as self-esteem, self-confidence, concentration, and self-discipline in children. Afterward, they articulated that interventions are not homogenous and that other factors may be present. They admitted to not controlling for how long participants had studied martial arts or the differing focus and methods employed by instructors, which may have led to the negative and positive outcomes produced by various academies cancelling each other out. Research is needed to determine who martial arts and combat sports participation benefits the most and which would be best utilised as part of an intervention program.

Strayhorn and Strayhorn (2009) also noted that using martial arts participation as an intervention may have produced different results if based on particular instructors. At-risk youth will benefit from coaches who have insight regarding group dynamics and the skills needed to initiate group processes (Haudenhuyse et al., 2012). Research is needed to determine what personal attributes of coaches are a help or hindrance for influencing personal growth in youth. Brinton, Hill, and Ward (2017) found that authoritative coaching styles were superior to authoritarian coaching styles for improving self-determination and positive development in adolescents. A recommendation for future research is to explore the effectiveness of providing training in mentorship, teaching, or coaching to adults who work with young offenders. The impact of coaches having personally experienced being a young offender is another area to explore.

Determining what factors make the community of martial arts and combat sports academies a positive influence for youth is an area for future inquiry. Involvement in a community produces opportunities for social interactions, which by their nature have psycho-social implications. This suggests that academy community can influence youth. Determining how to create an atmosphere that produces positive effects on the psycho-social growth of youth may prove to be a worthy endeavour. The professional combat sport of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) has enjoyed a rapid growth in popularity during recent years (Woolf, Berg, Newland, & Green, 2016). Observations from an established MMA academy populated by a mixture of professional athletes and the public suggested that unlike traditional martial arts there was not just one organisational elite, such as a single athlete or coach, who established and contributed to the institutional order of the academy (Woolf et al., 2016). Research is needed to determine the influence community of practice frameworks and institutional order have on the psycho-social development of youth. With multiple influences existing within MMA academies, investigating the effect of multiple role models versus a singular elite leader is recommended.

Mentorship programs have become an increasingly popular intervention and various approaches beyond the traditional one-on-one format are being utilised more frequently. Further research regarding the factors that make mentorship relationships effective is necessary (Bellamy et al., 2006). The literature regarding mentorship practices is growing to include more formats than just one-on-one mentor-mentee relationships (Weinrath et al., 2016). More information is required to explore the immersion of at-risk youth within the culture of an academy, where various role models may be present. Research is also needed to determine the effectiveness of programs that utilise martial arts and combat sports participation with young offenders, as opposed to voluntary participants (Jenkins & Ellis, 2011). Also, the benefits of mentorship for actively offending youth needs more research (Weinrath et al., 2016).

Through courses offered by the Neufeld Institute, Gordon Neufeld communicates a unique perspective on how the development of alpha instincts in youth negatively affects behaviour when a concurrent development of intrapersonal controls does not occur. These views do not exist in the literature. More research regarding how the alpha dynamic places youth at risk of exhibiting aggressive behaviour is needed to determine the validity of Neufeld's perspective and enable the field of human sciences to pursue new paths toward supporting at-risk youth. In addition, the correlation between implementing hierarchical structure and reducing negative behaviour in previously unregulated and unguided alpha youth needs to be explored. In general, the influence of hierarchical structure within youth developmental programmes is unknown. The results of this exploration would substantiate or refute the positive changes observed by Clementi when alpha young offenders have become members of his academy's community (personal communication, October 23, 2015). When parent-child attachments are weak, youth may lack responsible guidance or not be accepting of the guidance being offered (Neufeld & Maté, 2013). Research is needed to determine the effectiveness of interventions that integrate these youth into a community environment that has a strong hierarchical structure.

Recommendations

Considerations must be made when constructing intervention programmes that utilise martial arts and combat sports participation. Coaches impact the psychological development of their athletes and should be trained before becoming part of a community intervention programme (Brinton et al., 2017). Plans that promote the involvement of parents and other responsible adults, such as coaches and mentors, would provide youth with multiple opportunities to develop positive adult-child relationships. Programmes may need to cover the financial costs involved with academy membership or obtain funding in conjunction with the host academy, as finances may be a barrier for at-risk youth. Effective discharge planning is valuable for assisting young offenders with rehabilitation and reintegrating into the community (Wilson & Tully, 2009). Including academy membership as part of the reintegration plan of young offenders may increase the success of using martial arts or combat sports participation as an intervention. Criteria will need to be developed to screen academies to ensure they possess competent coaching staff and positive atmospheres. Safeguards must be developed to ensure that coaches possess the character needed to fulfill a vitally important role in the lives of youth and diminish the risk of abuse. The screening effort would be time well invested if academy membership proved to be effective in supporting the positive development of youth.

Limitations

Anecdotal accounts provided by martial artists, combat sports athletes, and coaches are inherently limited. These anecdotal accounts are subjective and difficult to prove. The limitations of this manuscript's anecdotal sources and their use in arguing for the implementation of intervention programmes for at-risk youth that involve martial arts and combat sports participation must be recognised. Limitations have been addressed by firmly suggesting more research is needed to provide evidence regarding the effectiveness these programmes.

Conclusion

New approaches are needed for supporting at-risk youth and rehabilitating young offenders outside of correctional institutes through interventions that reduce negative behaviour and recidivism. Strengthening adult-child relationships and developing personal assets supports the positive development of youth. The effectiveness of mentorship programmes in assisting in the positive development of youth is supported by the literature. Involvement with communities that are populated by responsible and supportive group members assists in the development of psycho-social assets of youth. There is reason to be optimistic that the integration of at-risk youth into martial arts and combat sports academies can be an effective practice. Unfortunately, recent research regarding the psycho-social benefits of consistent martial arts and combat sports participation for at-risk youth is sparse. In addition, academy enrolment as an intervention strategy needs long-term empirical evidence. Future research is needed to determine the effectiveness of mentorship and community involvement programmes set within martial arts and combat sports academies. Measurements must also be obtained to demonstrate the correlation between positive psycho-social developments in youth and the social interactions afforded by martial arts and combat sport communities.

References

- Arthur, N. and Collins, S (2010) *Culture-infused counselling*. Calgary, Canada: Counselling Concepts.
- Bellamy, N.D., Sale, E., Wang, M.Q., Springer, J.F. and Rath, S. (2006) 'Spoken, but perhaps not heard: youth perceptions on the relationship with their adult mentors', *The Journal of Youth Ministry*, 5(1), pp.57-75.
- Bowlby, J. (1982) *Attachment: Vol. 2 of Attachment and Loss* (2nd edn.). New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Brinton, C.S., Hill, B.J. and Ward, P.J. (2017) 'Authoritative Coach: Building Youth Through Sport', *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration*, 1, pp.51-65. DOI: [10.18666/jpra-2017-v35-i1-7296](https://doi.org/10.18666/jpra-2017-v35-i1-7296).

- Bruening, J.E., Clark, B.S. and Mudrick, M. (2015) 'Sport-based youth development in practice: The long-term impacts of an urban after-school program for girls', *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration*, 33(2). Available at: <https://js.sagamorepub.com/jpra/article/view/5703>.
- Chamberlain, J.M. (2013) 'Sports-based intervention and the problem of youth offending: a diverse enough tool for a diverse society?', *Sport in Society*, 16(10), pp.1279-1292. DOI: [10.1080/17430437.2013.821251](https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2013.821251).
- Chiri, K. (2015) 'Wrestling program for kids teaching boys skills for life', *The Slidell Independent*, August 24. Available at: <http://www.slidell-independent.com>.
- Cole, B.M. (2015) 'Lessons from a Martial Arts Dojo: A Prolonged Process Model of High-Context Communication', *Academy of Management Journal*, 58(2), pp.567-591. DOI: [10.5465/amj.2012.0986](https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2012.0986).
- Dame, S.L., Peat, D. and Burger, J. (2010) *Collecting kids: Triggering the attachment reflex in a high school setting*. Rocky View Schools.
- DeMeulenaere, E. (2010) 'Playing the game: Sports as a force for promoting improved academic performance for urban youth', *Journal of Cultural Diversity*, 17, pp.127-135.
- Follan, M. and Minnis, H. (2010) 'Forty-four juvenile thieves revisited: from bowlby to reactive attachment disorder', *Child: Care, Health and Development*, 36(5), pp.639-645. DOI: [10.1111/j.1365-2214.2009.01048.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2214.2009.01048.x).
- Haudenhuyse, R.P., Theeboom, M. and Coalter, F. (2012) 'The potential of sports-based social interventions for vulnerable youth: implications for sport coaches and youth workers', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 15(4), pp.437-454. DOI: [10.1080/13676261.2012.663895](https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2012.663895).
- Henley, A. (2013) 'The necessity of belonging and other discoveries', in Chang, J. (eds.) *Creative interventions with children: A transtheoretical approach*. Calgary: Family Psychology Press, pp.12-19.
- Hernandez, J. and Anderson, K.B. (2015) 'Internal Martial Arts Training and the Reduction of Hostility and Aggression in Martial Arts Students', *Psi Chi Journal of Psychological Research*, 20(3), pp.169-176. DOI: [10.24839/2164-8204.jn20.3.169](https://doi.org/10.24839/2164-8204.jn20.3.169).
- Higley, E., Walker, S.C., Bishop, A.S. and Fritz, C. (2014) 'Achieving high quality and long-lasting matches in youth mentoring programmes: a case study of 4Results mentoring', *Child and Family Social Work*, 2, pp.240-248. DOI: [10.1111/cfs.12141](https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12141).
- Hopper, T.D. and Iwasaki, Y. (2017) 'Engagement of 'At-Risk' Youth Through Meaningful Leisure', *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration*, 35(1), pp.20-33. DOI: [10.18666/jpra-2017-v35-i1-7289](https://doi.org/10.18666/jpra-2017-v35-i1-7289).
- Horn, W.F. (2000) 'Of elephants and men', *The Washington Times*, July 4.
- Jenkins, C. and Ellis, T. (2011) 'The Highway to Hooliganism? An Evaluation of the Impact of Combat Sport Participation on Individual Criminality', *International Journal of Police Science and Management*, 13(2), pp.117-131. DOI: [10.1350/ijps.2011.13.2.234](https://doi.org/10.1350/ijps.2011.13.2.234).
- Llorca-Mestre, A., Malonda-Vidal, E. and Samper-García, P. (2017) 'Prosocial reasoning and emotions in young offenders and non-offenders', *The European Journal of Psychology Applied to Legal Context*, 9(2), pp.65-73. DOI: [10.1016/j.ejpal.2017.01.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejpal.2017.01.001).
- Mendenhall, M. (2008) 'A Radical Approach to Delinquency Reform', *ReVision*, 30(1/2), pp.71-76. DOI: [10.4298/revn.30.1/2.71-76](https://doi.org/10.4298/revn.30.1/2.71-76).
- Neufeld, G. (2012) *The keys to well-being in children and youth: Why children need to be raised by their families which, in turn, need to be supported by society and the state*. Available at: http://www.neufeldinstitutet.se/Resourcer/121113_neufeld_brussels_address.pdf.
- Neufeld, G. and Maté, G. (2013) *Hold on to your kids: Why parents need to matter more than peers*. Toronto, ON: Vintage.
- Parker, A., Meek, R. and Lewis, G. (2013) 'Sport in a youth prison: male young offenders' experiences of a sporting intervention', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 17(3), pp.381-396. DOI: [10.1080/13676261.2013.830699](https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2013.830699).
- Richards, K. (2014) 'Locating the community in restorative justice for young people in Australia', *British Journal of Community Justice*, 12(2), pp.7-20.
- Saunders, R., Jacobvitz, D., Zaccagnino, M., Beverung, L.M. and Hazen, N. (2011) 'Pathways to earned-security: The role of alternative support figures', *Attachment and Human Development*, 13(4), pp.403-420. DOI: [10.1080/14616734.2011.584405](https://doi.org/10.1080/14616734.2011.584405).
- Scales, P.C. and Leffert, N. (2004) *Developmental assets: A synthesis of the scientific research on adolescent development* (2nd edn.). Minneapolis: Search Institute.
- Siegel, D.J. (2013) *Brainstorm: The power and purpose of the teenage brain*. New York, NY: Penguin Group.
- Slotow, R., Dyk, G., Poole, J., Page, B. and Klocke, A. (2000) 'Older bull elephants control young males: Orphaned male adolescents go on killing sprees if mature males aren't around', *Nature*, 408, pp.425-426. DOI: [10.1038/35044191](https://doi.org/10.1038/35044191).
- Strayhorn, J.M. and Strayhorn, J.C. (2009) 'Martial arts as a mental health intervention for children? Evidence from the ECLS-K', *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health*, 3, pp.32-40. DOI: [10.1186/1753-2000-3-32](https://doi.org/10.1186/1753-2000-3-32).
- Twemlow, S.W., Biggs, B.K., Nelson, T.D., Vernberg, E.M., Fonagy, P. and Twemlow, StephenW (2008) 'Effects of participation in a martial arts-based antibullying program in elementary schools', *Psychology in the Schools*, 45(10), pp.947-959. DOI: [10.1002/pits.20344](https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.20344).
- Twemlow, S.W., Sacco, F.C. and Fonagy, P. (2008) 'Embodying the Mind: Movement as a Container for Destructive Aggression', *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, 62(1), pp.1-33. DOI: [10.1176/appi.psychotherapy.2008.62.1.1](https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.psychotherapy.2008.62.1.1).

- Venta, A., Sharp, C., Shmueli-Goetz, Y. and Newlin, E. (2015) 'An evaluation of the construct of earned security in adolescents: Evidence from an inpatient sample', *Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic*, 79(1), pp.41-69. DOI: [10.1521/bumc.2015.79.1.41](https://doi.org/10.1521/bumc.2015.79.1.41).
- Vertonghen, J.J. and Theeboom, M.M. (2010) 'The social-psychological outcomes of martial arts practise among youth: A review', *Journal of Sports Science & Medicine*, 9(4), pp.528-537.
- Wang, J., Ferris, K.A., Hershberg, R.M. and Lerner, R.M. (2015) 'Developmental Trajectories of Youth Character: A Five-Wave Longitudinal Study of Cub Scouts and Non-Scout Boys', *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 44(12), pp.2359-2373. DOI: [10.1007/s10964-015-0340-y](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-015-0340-y).
- Weinrath, M., Donatelli, G. and Murchison, M.J. (2016) 'Mentorship: A Missing Piece to Manage Juvenile Intensive Supervision Programs and Youth Gangs?', *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 58(3), pp.291-321. DOI: [10.3138/cjccj.2015.e19](https://doi.org/10.3138/cjccj.2015.e19).
- Williams, R.G. and Smalls, E.W. (2015) 'Exploring a relationship between parental supervision and recidivism among juvenile offenders at a juvenile detention facility', *International Social Science Review*, 90(2), pp.1-22.
- Wilson, A. and Tully, P. (2009) 'Reintegrating young offenders into the community through discharge planning: a review of interventions and needs of youth in secure care', *Australian Journal of Primary Health*, 15(2), pp.166-172. DOI: [10.1071/py08063](https://doi.org/10.1071/py08063).
- Woolf, J., Berg, B.K., Newland, B.L. and Green, B.C. (2016) 'So You Want to be a Fighter? Institutional Work and Sport Development Processes at an Elite Mixed Martial Arts Gym', *Journal of Sport Management*, 30(4), pp.438-452. DOI: [10.1123/jsm.2014-0301](https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.2014-0301).
- Zivin, G., Hassan, N., DePaula, G., Monti, D., Harlan, C., Hossain, K. and Patterson, K. (2001) 'An effective approach to violence prevention: Traditional martial arts in middle school', *Adolescence*, 36(143), pp.443-459. DOI: [10.1001/jama.286.5.605-jbk0801-2-1](https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.286.5.605-jbk0801-2-1).

About the authors

Adam Lorenz is a private practice therapist in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada. He holds a Master of Counselling from Athabasca University. Adam obtained a Bachelor of Arts (Sociology) and Bachelor of Education from the University of Saskatchewan. Adam is a professional Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) athlete. He co-owns the Modern Martial Arts Center, where he coaches MMA, Bang Muay Thai, and Brazilian Jiu Jitsu. Adam promotes the professional combat sports organization Modern Fighting Championship.