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Wood or Steel? Six Practices for an Effective Learning Relationship from Martial Arts to Psychology

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Wood or Steel? Six Practices for an Effective Learning Relationship from Martial Arts to Psychology

Abstract

Becoming a psychologist is founded on supervision, the practice of learning the craft by doing the craft under the watchful eye of an expert. Becoming a black belt in martial arts is based on a similar principle of endless practice with the guidance of a master. How a teacher, supervisor, or sensei navigates the relationship with their student is crucial to the student's ability to arrive at mastery of the craft. Methods for creating an appropriate and effective teacher/student relationship are explored by examining parallels between teaching practices used by karate teachers, and teaching practices used by graduate-level supervisors. Relevant learning and relational concepts are reviewed, relevant terminology in martial arts and psychology training are established, then six shared practices are explored. Considerations for teachers and students about how to approach teaching and learning the psychology craft are provided.

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WOOD OR STEEL?

SIX PRACTICES FOR AN EFFECTIVE LEARNING RELATIONSHIP
FROM MARTIAL ARTS TO PSYCHOLOGY

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PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE
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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF PSYCHOLOGY

BY
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Abstract

Becoming a psychologist is founded on supervision, the practice of learning the craft by doing the craft under the watchful eye of an expert. Becoming a black belt in martial arts is based on a similar principle of endless practice with the guidance of a master. How a teacher, supervisor, or sensei navigates the relationship with their student is crucial to the student's ability to arrive at mastery of the craft. Methods for creating an appropriate and effective teacher/student relationship are explored by examining parallels between teaching practices used by karate teachers, and teaching practices used by graduate-level supervisors. Relevant learning and relational concepts are reviewed, relevant terminology in martial arts and psychology training are established, then six shared practices are explored. Considerations for teachers and students about how to approach teaching and learning the psychology craft are provided.

WOOD OR STEEL? SIX PRACTICES FOR AN EFFECTIVE LEARNING RELATIONSHIP
FROM MARTIAL ARTS TO PSYCHOLOGY

Sleek wood floors, Japanese architectural features, and strict signs about proper behavior in the dojo do not appear to have anything in common with the soft furniture of a therapy room, inviting quiet exploration of the mind. The classroom and supervisor's office, hung with academic paraphernalia, seem an unlikely parallel with punching bags and photos of ancient Japanese masters. Yet, after years of learning in both worlds, the profound similarities of seeking expertise in these two crafts have become clear to me. Becoming a lethal fighter and an attuned psychologist require a fundamental shift in being, and the only way to sink deeply into this shift is with the support and guidance of a teacher. In learning both, the relationship with the teacher is intimate; psychology supervisors oversee hundreds of hours of work, and your sensei is your sensei for years, even decades or lifetimes. With such intimacy, the teacher can be a catalyst for an important change in the student, but the teacher must execute their role successfully and appropriately to be effective. If not, they are at best ineffective in their student's learning, and at worst, injure them beyond repair.

I will explore qualities of the relationship between a teacher and their student, highlighting how a teacher can best facilitate the student's learning using the relationship between them. As the individual with higher status, the teacher creates and manages the relationship. The practices explored are shared between martial arts training and psychology graduate training, both where the common goal is expertise. In the graduate program, students hope to obtain a doctorate, and clinical skills to effectively treat clients; in martial arts training, students hope to obtain a black belt, and highly effective skills to defend themselves. A sensei or teacher, at these levels, is generally an individual with many hours of practicing the craft itself,

as well as teaching other students. At times, a more senior student may be in the teaching role, while they are supervised by the ultimate expert. The focus of this paper is on how the individual with power manages their stimulus value (managing the perception the student has of them), and the practices utilized to create a specific stimulus value with a specific execution of status, resulting in a relationship which effectively supports the student's learning.

On Aggression, Antifragility, and Edges

Karate provides a helpful and unusual lens to explore psychology training, as aggression is a natural element of any martial art, and rarely overtly discussed in the psychology world. Aggression is a dirty word in the psychology field; we are a helping profession, and the word suggests harm of our clients. Many like to think of therapy as a soft and comfortable experience, a warm holding of our inner worlds. This occurs in learning psychology as well, when many supervisors adore their supervisees, and seek to gently further an existing aptitude for kind support of others. However, even most clients could tell their therapist they want to be different in some way: respond or react differently, feel differently, think differently. Why else come to therapy? Inevitably, a challenge occurs in the therapy room. The client reacts or responds in their old habit, and the therapist draws attention to it. There is an aggression in this moment, a firm challenge to the client's way of being. This moment can be so uncomfortable, a whole therapy (Dialectical Behavioral Therapy, or DBT) was designed to assist clients who experience the very idea of change as rejection (Linehan, 1993). Many beginning therapists begin to recognize their own discomfort in these moments, recognizing how clients can sting at the suggestion they aren't doing something "right." This is mirrored in supervision, as a learning therapist experiences the sting of being told they didn't intervene optimally.

All newly acquired skills are a change, and in the moments where the change occurs, there is a natural conflict, both inner, and outer, with the individual who has brought it to our attention. Defensiveness and resistance are natural, particularly in our current success- and achievement-focused world. In martial arts, you are changing your body to respond to blows effectively, to block attacking techniques and return in kind. It is simply obvious in martial arts how the journey of this change is one that will hurt. Martial arts training makes clear from day one that “this will hurt,” because in the long journey of learning to protect yourself from attacks, many will land on you. In psychology, we recognize the necessity of change, but we shirk from aggression. The traditions and understandings of martial arts provide a clear way to consider how aggression can be managed effectively and thoughtfully in learning, as scores of martial arts students have arrived at mastery without being traumatized in the process. There are countless bruises on shins and welts on forearms, but these growing pains support long-term mastery, rather than hinder it.

How do we learn the edges of our competency? Watching a baby walk is a good example: they sway back and forth, managing their weight, until forces of gravity provide a healthy smack, otherwise known as “falling.” The constant “failure” of falling inherent in learning to walk is necessary; our brains can’t coordinate our muscles and biomechanical systems with gravity without learning the edges of our balance and speed. Our ability to walk is born of a back-and-forth relationship to gravity and the earth, where the mathematics of our universe teach us our limits (or, edges). In karate, practice of basics is emphasized above all else for similar reasons. We execute hundreds of simple punches, in the air, against an opponent, on a punching bag, endless times. As a fighter, a punch must come as effortlessly as taking a step, which only happens when we fail, again and again, at executing a punch successfully.

Nassim Taleb used the term “antifragile” (Taleb, 2016) to describe a system which improves or strengthens when exposed repeatedly to stressors. When children learn to walk, the falls are necessary to learning the skill. In fact, the *more* we fall, the better we walk; missteps are necessary for sure-footedness. The strain of failure builds muscle strength and young children eventually become expert walkers. Human expertise is antifragile; after learning a skill, the progression to expertise only happens with repeated strain and stress. Learning to fight is another clear example of antifragile expertise. The more fights you get in, the better a fighter you are. The more you get hit, the better your blocks will be, and the more times you execute an ineffective punch, the more likely you will be able to execute an effective one. And, as we move towards expertise, we aren’t less likely to be hurt, given our pre-existing experience. The difficulty increases over time. We do not stop as a beginning student, throwing only basic blocks and punches with other beginning students. We advance, going to competitions and fighting others of higher skill levels. We are more likely to be hurt than when we were a quaky child falling down. Learning our edges is the only way to arrive at mastery, and it can hurt when we encounter those edges.

By discussing “edges,” it may sound like a discussion of a student’s limitations. To propose to a student that they have limits is not in vogue. In fact, research suggests the importance of boundless belief in students; helping them understand that capacity for knowledge is not fixed or predetermined (like smart kids versus dumb kids) allows them to believe in their ability to get good at a skill (Blackwell, Trzesniewski & Dweck, 2007). When students are educated from the perspective of this “growth mindset,” their test scores and content knowledge go up as compared to those who are not taught in this way. Believing in a student’s capacity will help them believe in themselves. “Edges” and “aggression” in learning may ring of authoritarian

teachers who insist on demeaning their students. This is actually a helpful consideration, as teachers must both support the capacity of their student to succeed at mastery, while correcting techniques. Here is the nuance between an “edge” as a limitation of capacity and environmental feedback: rather than being something the student is not capable of doing, it is something the student doesn’t get quite right, and the environment gives a healthy smack that this is the case. In martial arts, this may be an opponent landing a punch on you; in therapy, it may be the curt retort of a client indicating they’ve been misunderstood.

As teachers, we hope to help students learn that yes, these are moments of failure; but a student’s goal is not the avoidance of failure. It is to recognize the sting of hurt, and use that experience to re-assess how they might approach the same problem next time. Often we teachers are the ones that offer the hurt of environmental feedback, which is not injuring our students; it is a necessary part of learning. Aggression is as natural a part of learning as gravity is to walking. We are not injuring our students, but rather we are the gravity which causes the fall. The practices used by teachers to develop the teaching relationship explore how best a teacher can manage this inherent aggression to most fully support the student’s long-term growth.

Karate and Psychology: A Shared Language

Before exploring qualities of the teaching dynamic, understanding terminology and the shared meaning of karate and psychology supports a foundation for understanding these qualities.

The developmental nature of learning is inherent and engrained in psychology and karate. In psychology training, first-year students may have some prior experience, but often none at all; if they do have experience, it is not in the context of a doctoral program. Third- and fourth-year students are considered advanced trainees. Students then progress to doctoral internship, before graduating. After graduating with a doctorate comes post-doctoral training and licensure, and

eventually board certification if they choose. At a certain level, like an intern or a post-doc, the individual is advanced in their training, yet still learning. In karate, students progress through belt ranks, beginning with white belts. After progressing through color-belts, or the intermediate stage, students can then test for their black belt, now an advanced student. There are nine ranks of black belt; you begin with obtaining your first dan, then second, and so on. Once you have your first dan, you must wait two years to test for your second dan, three years for third.

Advanced students are known as “sempai,” and beginning students are known as “kohai.” All students of karate, from kohai to senseis, are considered “karateka.” The head instructor goes by “Sensei,” as a psychology teacher is a “supervisor.” In learning psychology, anyone receiving supervision is a “supervisee,” though levels differ dramatically. Similarly to the advanced nature of a post-doctoral trainee, a second- or third- degree black belt is still learning, yet quite advanced. How a sensei or supervisor supports and shows these students their edges will look quite different than with a white belt.

Learning psychology happens in a classroom, or the supervisor’s office; therapy is executed in the therapy room, with a live client. Learning karate happens on the “dojo” (Japanese term for gym) floor, and karate is executed in “the ring,” like a sparring match at a competition, or in daily life, on the street with a nefarious individual. The dojo is a place to practice and rehearse techniques, a low-risk environment where your opponent’s goal is not to end your life. Similarly, classrooms and supervision are for experimentation and play. The therapy room, and the ring or the street, are high-risk situations with live “opponents,” where the consequences of error become much greater.

Worldwide, Shotokan classes are begun and finished with the same kneeling, meditative ceremony on the dojo floor. All students bow to the instructor; at the closing ceremony, the “dojo

kun,” or philosophical tenets, are repeated. Classes are nearly always split into three focuses, beginning with basic moves and combinations to warm up. Next is “kumite” (sparring), a back-and-forth rehearsal of a fight. This rehearsal is done differently, depending on developmental level. Class is finished with “kata” (forms), or a pre-determined set of 20-40 techniques practiced in a certain way (with more basic kata for beginning students, and complex moves for advanced students). In supervision, two main pillars are didactics (learning and consideration of theory), and application, like watching tape of a student with a client, or case conceptualization of a client. Though we do not bow to our supervisors at the start of supervision, the recognition of their authority is inherent in the structure and exercise of learning.

Karate is about hitting (techniques like punches, strikes, kicks) and avoiding getting hit (techniques such as blocking and shifting). In all scenarios of sparring, regardless of level, there is an attacker and defender; this is generally designated in more basic learning, such as five-, three-, and one-step sparring. One party is “attacking” and the other is “defending”; as students advance to free sparring, they have the opportunity to interchange roles. In psychology, our interventions and conceptualizations are our techniques. As we explore and rehearse in supervision, supervisee and supervisor exchange techniques by discussing cases and the appropriateness of our considerations. Inherent to learning karate is that both the attacker and the defender have consented to the hitting process; the attacker knows they must try to hit the defender, and the defender knows they are trying not to get hit. Psychology training is less overt about this process, that part of supervision is the “sparring” over interventions and theory.

Becoming an expert in psychology or martial arts is not just learning a series of techniques, to be executed according to a set of rules. Learned techniques must be practiced. In practicing, one sees the absolute limits of knowledge of technique; Orange cites “Aristotle’s

phronesis,” highlighting the importance of “the practical reasoning that searches for the right thing to do at the right time for the right reason” (Buirski, 2005). Orange writes the foreword to Buirski’s text, framing the importance of psychological work as ongoing “practice.” Just as every therapist-client dyad creates a unique relationship, which cannot follow a predetermined set of steps by its very nature, every physical fight will be unique to the participants and context it is in. One must practice, execute and re-assess, try and fail, to approach a different way of being with a client, in a fight, where one is not so much knowledgeable about numerous techniques, but engages in an effective way of being with the other. According to Orange, practice is “the artistry that goes beyond the perfect technique of the craftsman” (Buirski, 2005). The six practices discussed can be considered ways of engaging with students which can be thoughtfully engaged at the right time for the right reason, which serves to develop the relationship into an effective guide for the student’s learning.

Of utmost importance is the difference between being “hurt” and being “injured.” Growth hurts; “growing pains” is a common phrase communicating the stinging hurt one experiences when trying their best, and still not getting it right. Particularly when pursuing expertise, you’ve already become quite good at something, and having this challenged will force you to question if you’ve been wrong all along; an understandably uncomfortable and challenging experience. You might have practiced a kick or sparring combination countless times, only to have it easily blocked by your teacher, leaving yourself open for a counterattack. In psychology, when our ideas and approaches are questioned, we experience a stinging hurt, which may be an indication of growth. By contrast, an “injury” results in damage. A broken bone does nothing to further learning, nor does intentional and unnecessary shaming of a supervisee. Time is needed for recuperation and healing, and there will likely be a wariness around the individual who injured

the person. The cold shock of an injury is clear on the dojo floor. Interpersonal injury in psychology learning hopefully is as clear, but students are not always supported in understanding the difference.

Setting of Expectations (Not Too High, Not Too Low)

Disclaimer: Expectations should not be discussed without first acknowledging proven systemic inequity. Evidence shows teachers hold students to different standards based on their demographics and backgrounds, holding students of color and disadvantaged students to a lower standard (Burgess & Graves, 2013; Irizarry, 2015). Not only does this communicate to the student they are not capable of a higher standard, but a teacher will not continue to raise the bar as the student progresses. The student then is not able to continue to raise their level and progress to a higher standard, which is unfair for all. Hold yourself to a high standard, understand when you may be at risk for doing this, and move forward appropriately.

The importance of setting expectations for a student has been shown through Carol Dweck's "growth mindset" theory, by having boundless belief in their capacity (Blackwell et al., 2007). When teachers think that boys are better at math than girls, the boys in their class outperform the girls on math tests. Yet, understanding when students are having difficulty and supporting them through it is an important function of a teacher, by acknowledging and addressing the difficulty of their students. Setting expectations at an unattainable level results in disheartened despair. Expectations must be appropriately titrated for the student, a task which rests on the teacher.

In karate, as students test for higher belt ranks, it is understood that they are expected to improve as compared to themselves during their prior belt test. Students learning karate have a variety of athletic ability. Some are graceful, moving with lovely precision, speed, and balance,

making it appear effortless; these students can be spotted from their first days as a white belt. As they learn the basics, it is clear they have an aptitude. Others, by contrast, persevere to obtain black belt ranks and train for hours. Yet no matter how hard they try, their techniques appear clumsy and encumbered. Regardless of inherent athletic ability, every karateka can improve themselves, and can continue to do so, over the course of their training. But, if the clumsy karateka are held to the standard of the graceful ones, they surely would lose faith in their ability to attain that ideal.

As people begin the practice of martial arts, they quickly recognize how far they have to go, which can be demoralizing. However, suddenly other things begin to fall into place. The regularity of training results in getting into shape and feeling competent with your body. Individuals find they think more quickly in confrontational situations; when they get distressed or upset, their brain is used to maintaining enough of a sense of control to manage following the instructions for the drill. One might face off with an aggressive partner, which is activating, but the opponent will punch to face level, and all the defendant must do is block at face level, and counterattack. This set of skills translates helpfully into daily life; suddenly one is better able to catch a phone when knocked off the counter, and more able to be thoughtful in arguments. Even if students are having difficulty in karate itself, perhaps failing a belt test or struggling to fix errors in kata, real-world benefits become noticeable. This supports a student's efforts and failings, as they notice these benefits regardless of progress. A punch which would draw criticism from a sensei due to its errors might impress a peer and be effective in self-defense. A friend loves to recount the tale of a green belt, who found himself witnessing domestic abuse, and intervened; the man tried to punch his head, and without thinking, the green belt did a very basic combination of a rising block and reverse punch. The green belt was astonished that it was

absolutely effective, though he knew he was somewhat of a beginner, and there was much room for improvement in his technique.

As students progress through a psychology degree, there is an inevitability to their own psychological growth. As they become adept at identifying emotions in clients, recognizing their history of emotions and relationships, this skill becomes more accurate and instantaneous. For many students, they become more thoughtfully aware of their own histories and emotional patterns. Suddenly they find themselves in conflict with a close friend, and can't help but recognize their own defensiveness, and their friend's distress. Even if a student is struggling to progress with a client, or having difficulty in making sense of assessment data, the fringe benefits of psychology training are obvious in day-to-day life. These benefits provide motivation and encouragement to continue training, even if becoming demotivated during the exhausting daily pursuit of learning.

A teacher can use their own experience of students to assess a student's level and set the bar appropriately. Importantly, a teacher must be ready to adjust their expectations based on ongoing information, observing the student's efforts and failures. Also important is having a keen eye for the student's learning history. Has the student been injured in the past by a teacher who flexes their authority needlessly? This student might flinch every time the sensei throws a punch, though the student will block as the drill necessitates. A graduate student may have a clammy sweat before showing tape in supervision, convinced their therapy session will be shamed or berated. Conversely, another student might never have been told before that their blocks or interventions are ineffective, thinking they are exceptional in their role as therapist or fighter. This student may benefit from firmer correction (demonstration of their edge), and the former might necessitate a gentler approach. Cognizance of the student's responses and ongoing

efforts enables the teacher to most effectively show students their edges. With the teacher's thoughtful assistance, a student learns their own strengths and weaknesses, and how they can hold themselves to an appropriately high expectation.

A supervisor can mistakenly set the bar too high for first years, and not high enough for advanced students. Awareness of one's own body, like avoiding nail-picking and excessive head-nodding, is relatively easy to bring to practice. By contrast, theory-based case conceptualization is complex, requiring understanding of theory and improvement with practice. A first-year supervisor might focus too much on an in-depth case conceptualization and focus too little on the student's direct presentation in the room. How do they begin the session? How much does the student nod and placate the client's distress, and seek to soothe? Do they recognize their own discomfort in tense moments? These are relatively easy conversations to have; not necessarily quick fixes on the part of the first year, but easy to bring to their attention and have them consider. This is not to suggest that case-conceptualization is not important for beginning students to work through, but myopic focus on it leaves out other important skills for beginners to build. Pointing out nail-picking and head-nodding early on communicates to a student their ability to manage their own body in the room, and too much focus on case-conceptualization delivers a message it is important to master the skill early on (which communicates it *can* be mastered). As teachers set the bar uncomfortably, but attainably, high for students in the classroom, students recognize their own progress within and outside training, understanding their progression while holding themselves to continue to grow.

Status and Power Management

As the individual with more power in the relationship, the teacher fundamentally defines the relational dynamic between themselves and the student and creates the nature of the

relationship. In managing their power, the teacher can define their status between themselves and the student. A teacher can opt for greater status and use their power to define themselves as far superior and unreachable. There are some benefits to this; being able to fantasize about the ideal which is the teacher can assist the student in developing their own competent identity as a professional. There is a sense of security and safety in having an untouchably great teacher, feeling safe about their ability to protect you. However, this is not a sustainable method; inevitably, there is a failure (or rupture) on the part of either the teacher or the student. The rupture will inherently knock the teacher from the pedestal in the mind of the student, and the repair will be more complex to manage because of it.

If a teacher overly emphasizes their status and they take full advantage of their position and abuse their role, it can result in fearfulness, mistrust, and a lack of willingness to engage or explore. The student learns they can be injured, or at the very least, not helped, by the teacher, if they are in need. Either implicitly or explicitly, students receive the message the teacher is more interested in gratifying themselves with the status available to them than they are in furthering the student's growth, whether the teacher chooses to be aware of it or not. We have likely all met these teachers; a sensei who gives a student a black eye, or knocks the wind out of a purple belt, berating them that it is their own fault. A professor who gives conflicting feedback on an assessment or case conceptualization, calling the student stupid for not having a better grasp of the situation. An instructor to edit months' worth of notes, suggesting you should have been aware of your mistake all along (thus the hours of work is your fault), rather than acknowledging they should have told you the first time around.

At the other end of the spectrum are those teachers uncomfortable with their status, and deeply concerned about injuring their students by asserting their status. Realistically though, the

individual with greater status cannot choose to abdicate their authority, as it exists of a natural consequence of the relationship. Teachers decide if their students can progress to the next levels of the program, and senseis evaluate the capacity of their karateka, for belt levels, appropriateness for competition, and in the basic back-and-forth of sparring. When a teacher tries to assert equal status, or inferior status with the student, it is generally as a guise for helping the student feel comfortable and strengthening the relationship. A sensei does not correct a consistent error, not wanting to injure the karateka's feelings; a supervisor only praises a student's thoughts and doubts their own. But similar to an over-assertion of status, which inevitably results in falling from the pedestal, eventually a student needs the expertise and authority of their teacher to support them. A highly complex client or conflicting testing data must be understood, and the student fears the teacher cannot manage it. A karateka arrives at a competition unprepared for the advanced level of the situation, and is left angry that the teacher did not better prepare them. When this rupture occurs, the student is left feeling that the teacher is ineffective in assisting them with their learning and advancement.

Ideally, the teacher defines their status through enabling the inherent power dynamic without abusing it. The teacher is cognizant of the dynamic and its benefits. As a student learns their craft, they have a superior to turn to in times of need and guidance. One way to use status to support the teaching dynamic is by recognizing high- and low-status moves (Johnstone, 1981), both by the teacher, the students, and what is being communicated when we engage in them. In karate, a high-status move might be the demonstration of an awe-inspiring, advanced technique which subdues an opponent during a class demonstration. Karateka are invigorated to achieve those same results themselves. Place this same technique in different contexts, and the result is different: with a beginning student who is unprepared for receiving such a technique, the result

may be injury and the over-assertion of high status. With an advanced, confident student, and the result may be an important check in their ability. Appropriately executed, the student would wonder at their ability to achieve the same results, and endeavor to do so; if their teacher has appropriately asserted their status, the faith is instilled in students that they too may one day arrive at such advanced results. A supervisor might correct a student's idea, but the context is crucial to the result – in front of the class, or in private? An advanced or beginning student? A student who is over-confident with their technique, or one who is deeply anxious? The difference is feeling awe-inspired by the takedown, or being injured and ashamed. This is the importance of ongoing practice; the appropriate thing to do, at the appropriate time, for the appropriate reason.

A teacher may periodically engage in “low-status” (Johnstone, 1981) actions to show the student their own flaws and mistakes. Similar to high-status moves, cognizance of the purpose of the action will enable its efficacy. A sensei of mine often reflects on witnessing a grandmaster, up at the crack of dawn, doing one thousand punches with each hand. He was awed by the exercise; the grandmaster was capable of much greater things than a simple punch, yet the practice of basics is foundational, which is always communicated to beginners. The demonstration of such practice and self-correction made obvious the humility and philosophy of the grandmaster. Though practice of the basics may appear a status-lowering move, making some teachers doubt that their student can appreciate the teacher's expertise, cognizance of context can result in the same sense of awe. The mirroring of how to manage low status actions teaches the student the same skill (humility and self-correction), without compromising the perception of the teacher.

To arrive at the status of a teacher in both martial arts and psychology, talent is helpful but dedication is necessary. This is one of many reasons why some teachers are dedicated, rather

than talented. As students progress, a teacher's limitations can become obvious. When a teacher hasn't earned their status, it makes engaging in high- and low-status actions more complex. Feeling that they are less capable than their student might result in some teachers emphasizing their equality with their students; others might over-assert themselves as superior. The consequences of both are not ideal, as both parties are generally savvy to the situation; to enable, rather than abuse or avoid, the status difference is most helpful, through cognizance of the teacher's deeper expertise and knowledge.

In martial arts, Japanese traditions are helpful in creating a structured environment and roles for teachers and students, supporting the status of the teacher and enabling their authority. The structure of classes allows for high-status and low-status maneuvering by the instructor, whether by allowing the attack of a beginning student to land during 3-step sparring, or by flexing their speed and power while demonstrating or free-sparring with an advanced student. The sensei may encourage the advanced student to make every effort to block the sensei's technique, and demonstrate the success of their attack nonetheless. They can encourage and congratulate an intimidated white belt, purposefully blocking too slowly so the beginner's punch lands on the intended target.

An important correlate in supervision is the structure of supervisory courses, generally centered on watching tape and discussing case conceptualization. Generally, an overarching schedule indicates which student is presenting in a given week. Similar to martial arts courses, the teacher's inherent authority is clear in the presentation of a case, as the material is not just educational for the students involved, but also allows for the teacher to evaluate the student's competency and progress. Another helpful framework for navigating supervisor authority is Bordin's working alliance model (1979); by generating and working towards mutual goals, the

status differential can be effectively navigated by both supervisor and supervisee. Watkins (2019) further elaborated Bordin's model to examine the rupture/repair dynamic between supervisee and supervisor, and how this process can further the supervisory relationship. When status is appropriately acknowledged and managed, and an environment of curiosity is enabled, ruptures are navigable and repairs are effective, as supervisor and supervisee are aware of mutually beneficial end goals. In watching tape, and engaging in demonstration and role play, and navigating ruptures and repairs, the teacher can demonstrate high- and low-status engagement as warranted for the students.

Watching Tape

In karate, you will inevitably be told to watch tape of your kata. "You are your own worst critic," and "we can tell you a dozen times, but once you see yourself do it, you'll never do it again," are common refrains. The idea is that you think you look one way doing your kata (read: you think you look good), and when you see it, your face flushes red with the obvious errors you make. The little mistakes you know you make, which you've convinced yourself aren't that clear to the viewer, are put on stark display. Most relevantly, as a sensei recommends watching tape of your kata or your sparring, you'll hear an important aside: "Every time I watch my own tape, I see something I do that I know I need to fix."

Watching oneself engage in the craft offers a unique method of critique and learning. We are fortunate to live in a time that audio and video recording is so accessible, and both karate and psychology have taken advantage of the technology. Watching tape is a critical aspect of supervision in psychology graduate training, which provides students the setting to be critical of their performance with their teacher. It also enables the teacher to facilitate the student's self-critique to be effective, rather than overly critical or complimentary.

In the course of my own training, I was fortunate that very early on, a teacher began the course by showing tape of therapy he conducted with a client. In the process, he paused the tape and gave examples of things he could have said differently or different avenues he could have pursued. This demonstration not only provided an example of an approach to therapy, it also provided an example of healthy self-critique for the students. Critiquing his work functioned as an effective “low-status move,” which enabled students to recognize his fallibility, and to allow them to challenge him. Watkins (2020) provided a compelling argument that humility in the supervisory relationship is critical to effective supervision; by watching a supervisor’s own tape, a platform is provided to mirror humility in one’s own work. Critiquing our own work communicates the importance of mucking around with one’s own fallibility, rather than saving face. If a teacher is overly concerned with being right, and saving face, students learn that failure and being wrong is to be feared and avoided. In demonstrating the importance of exploring one’s own work and finding the cracks and flaws, a teacher demonstrates how mastering a craft and saving face are mutually exclusive. This provides a template for students to recognize that failure is not failing, and antifragility to failure is the goal.

Demonstration and Role Play: Wood or Steel?

Psychology supervisees often engage in role play. This occurs in a variety of contexts. Two students will role play therapist and client for supervision group, to demonstrate a technique; a supervisor will play a client and invite experimentation with intervention by the supervisee, playing themselves as therapist. A supervisor may invite a supervisee to play their own client, as the supervisor demonstrates different intervention considerations. This kind of role play, which allows experimentation in a low-risk environment, also gives the supervisee a template to look up to. The students see the skill of the supervisor and recognize the gap between

their skill set and the supervisor's. A supervisor can warmly believe in their supervisee's ultimate capacity to obtain such expertise, while a supervisee wonders at their ability to arrive at such a level.

In karate, students first learn to spar with heavy emphasis on the role of attacker and defender. Mentally maneuvering back and forth between attacking and defending is advanced, and as students are learning to become adept at executing techniques, they are assisted by having their roles and actions clearly defined. A black-belt can engage in 3-step sparring with a white belt, and the white belt still only needs to manage what they are able to at that level; they are expected to block and punch, which they have learned to do. By defining roles, as supervisors and supervisees do in supervision, it allows for freedom to rehearse and practice what you have learned, without fearing injury. A supervisee can "try out" a considered intervention, and the supervisor can respond as their client, taking the opportunity to either thoughtfully support, or firmly show an edge.

Learning is not always a warm and fuzzy experience of smiles and encouragement. As a teacher recognizes a student's aptitude, they may raise the bar to an uncomfortable level for the student. There is a Japanese parable about a sword master teaching his craft to students, who used both real steel and wooden swords. For students whom he respected and recognized their capacity, he used real steel, a frightening, difficult, and sometimes painful experience for them; for students he did not respect, in whom he recognized a lack of diligence, he dueled with them only with wooden swords. Those students felt they were unstoppable, feeling capable and strong, rather than covered in cuts and exhausted. Their peers felt downtrodden, worn out by fending off fatal steel. Then came time for battle; the students with the experience of confronting a sword-master and practiced at managing their fear as a sharp blade whistled by them lived to tell the

tale. The students whose only experience was feeling masterful with a wooden blade quickly discovered they had no capacity to manage the real thing and were unprepared for battle. As students advance in karate and progress to free-sparring, they find themselves in an intimidating exchange with their instructor, being batted about like a rag doll on the dojo floor. The experience of fear, disillusionment, and rage, is profoundly necessary to their advancement as a karateka – what else would happen in a sparring match, or a true fight? You get hit, thrown out of your senses, and the faster you can regroup and react, the more likely you are to successfully manage the situation. One of the most important functions of a sensei is to educate a student on the effectiveness of their techniques, in a way that does not do lasting damage (physically or emotionally). This can only happen if the sensei is adept at managing their techniques: without the aggressive use of real steel, exactly managed to hurt without injuring, instructors do a disservice to their students when they go to battle:

The usually lithe and vigorous Sasaki, who could defeat first dan and most of the second dan black belts with ease, was staggering like a drunkard on the dojo floor. His techniques were slow and weak. He would try to kick, but lose his balance. Unthinkable! Yaguchi sensei was berating him, attacking him at the same time with seemingly casual techniques that smacked against his body, focused shallow enough not to damage, but stinging, and leaving red marks on the skin. (Yaguchi & Pinch, 2016, p. vi).

In graduate school, role play can be an enjoyable and playful experience. Important too though, is the teacher recognizing the inherent safety of the situation, as it isn't the real thing. Entering the therapy room is live; the client is real, an individual who can harm the therapist, and whose psyche and soul are present for commentary and discussion. The ability for the therapist to injure the client is very real, and there is little room for error – both therapist and client are

equipped with steel. A teacher can support their student in higher-risk situations by choosing an opponent or client who isn't easily injured, so the student can practice their techniques without total fear of injury. An opponent or client with some ability to manage themselves is a good partner for a beginning therapist or newly advanced karateka, as they have the skills to injure, and may not yet have perfected their technique.

In the classroom, the teacher can take the opportunity to ask deeply uncomfortable and challenging questions in the role of the client, disarming the student while fully expecting them to have a thoughtful response. If you have ever sat across from a quick-witted, highly experienced and studied instructor, you know the complex set of emotions which comes up; a desire to impress and appear competent, to show how good your techniques and interventions are, and a fear of disappointing them. A hiccup in the therapy is considered, and you offer what you thought was a brilliant conceptualization of the situation. You provide an answer to a question, or an example of an intervention, and rather than a warm smile and gentle praise, you receive a brisk correction which leaves you thinking, "Oh; well, that's obvious... why didn't I think of that?" You are left with a sting, and a nagging sensation of failure. However, the classroom is a low-risk situation, and if the student has the opportunity to practice managing this disappointment and hurt, they will be much more adept at doing so in the therapy room. In a high-risk environment, gravity and its consequences are greater, and mistakes mean injury.

You Manage Your Body, I'll Manage Mine

People decide to go to therapy and decide to begin martial arts for fundamentally very similar reasons; they have been hurt in the past and want to better learn how not to get hurt again in the future. There is often a misconception in both worlds that there is some secret ultimate action one can take, like a devastating and complex technique to destroy an attacker or a

confident way of being that will result in universal adoration. These are often, in fact, happy byproducts of a more fundamental concept. We learn to manage ourselves in a healthier and more effective way, and through this, we are less affected by others. Karate teaches that most importantly, you've got to be aware of your surroundings, which averts many conflicts before they start. Therapy teaches a deep understanding, appreciation, and softness for one's flaws, and when those flaws are insulted, we shrug it off with indifference.

From your first days in karate class, it is reiterated to you to be aware of the distance between yourself and another person. During sparring practice, it is the duty of the attacker to ensure their distance is appropriate while attacking. You must endeavor to understand how long your arms and legs are, and how much space you need to execute a technique effectively; you can't expect your opponent to do you a favor and be at the appropriate position for your attack to land on them. Importantly, this communicates between partners that your body is your responsibility; one individual is not responsible for another's success. You can fully manage the attack coming your way, and don't need any extra support to do so; you can curl your hand into a fist and effectively defend yourself, against anyone.

Knowledge of one's body becomes more important over time, as distance is a crucial element in executing an accurate attack or defense. Precision in landing a technique will not come without knowing the length of your arm or leg. Similarly, shifting away from an attack is effective with millimeters to spare, but only works if you know where your nose is. An advanced defensive maneuver is the art of stepping towards an attack, which renders it ineffective before it lands (as you wreck your opponent's use of their distance). It requires both a deep understanding of one's own body, as well as confidence; you must have a level of management of your body to avoid the attack while shifting into the opponent's body. As supervisor and supervisee

theoretically spar, considering interventions and challenging one another, the supervisor can undercut an “attack” from the supervisee by “stepping into their technique,” like reflecting an underlying anxiety or distress. A supervisee may be invested in an interpretation or intervention of the client, and the supervisor can recognize how this is rooted in the supervisee’s anxiety or attachment to a certain theory. By articulating the supervisee’s experience, rather than responding to the verbal invitation, the technique itself has been neutralized.

In therapy, two individuals step into a space, sit in opposite-facing chairs, and explore deeply difficult and conflicting thoughts and emotions. As any first-year (hopefully anyone) can tell you, therapists don’t have sex with their clients. Along with other vital reasons for this, an important aspect is the communication that the therapist can manage their own emotions and reactions to the client. This is one of the reasons why it is important to manage one’s own bodily output as the therapist, such as anxious behaviors like nail-picking, expressions of anger and irritability in the face and tone, and the experience of arousal. A therapist remains in the chair, aware of a physical expression of emotional neutrality. The therapist communicates to the client their ability to hold the client’s darkest and foulest aspects of themselves while remaining unfazed, yet curious and contemplative, about the client’s projections.

In supervision, many supervisors are concerned about the boundary between supervision and therapy, hoping to keep their conversations and observations clinically related. There is a concern that commenting on the supervisee’s emotions may breach this boundary. However, an important point is made by Buirski (2010) that a supervisee cannot “[learn] effectively in a disruptive state of anxiety,” (p. 180) and attunement to anxiety is needed “to facilitate professional growth” (p. 180). Buirski’s exploration of a co-created supervisory experience, with attunement to the supervisee’s developmental anxiety, provides a helpful framework to consider

as an ongoing practice of managing oneself and assisting a supervisee in doing the same. In attuning to a supervisee's anxiety, the goal is not to "fix it" for the supervisee; this would be like a defender creating the appropriate distance for the attacker, which communicates they can't do it themselves. Rather, it allows the supervisee to recognize their anxiety in a warm, upfront manner, leaving to the supervisee to consider how to deal with it. It allows for a conversation about how that anxiety might express itself in the therapy room, and considerations for the supervisee on their physical expressions. It also allows the supervisee to witness the adjustment to the interaction on the part of the supervisor by undercutting a "sparring match" when they step into their distance, leaving them the model of how they could do so with their client. The supervisor mirrors emotion management to the supervisee as they do not get caught up in the supervisee's anxiety (by "blocking" and responding to the "technique," continuing the "fight,") but instead helps the supervisee understand their own body, and their expression of emotion. The supervisee can use the supervisor's reaction to understand how long their arms are and re-titrate their own physical output for their utility.

Punch Me in the Face

In my particular discipline of martial arts, lethality is of high concern. When we train, we intend to hone skills which can kill; "Ikken Hissatsu," meaning "one punch, one kill," is an ancient and foundational aspect of the karate philosophy. As we are training to be so devastatingly lethal, having control over such lethal techniques is a necessity. Most obviously, students train together; you must be able to practice your skills without harming your peers. The goal is to throw a technique (like a punch) with full force; were it to connect with a fragile part of the body, such as the throat, it could kill. However, karateka seek to land such a punch "one rice-sheet of paper's thickness away" from the target. The notion is that, in landing such a technique

so perfectly accurately, you would be fully able to place that technique anywhere you wish; you could kill a person, or you could stop just shy of touching them. Even trickier: you can land the technique on your opponent, and hit them, but not hurt them. Having control over the techniques furthers the lethality of the technique: if you can land a punch full-force, precisely on a target which is two millimeters away from the nose, you can also land a punch full-force, precisely on a target which is two millimeters behind the bridge of the nose.

This might sound needlessly aggressive, but as many karateka come to learn, getting hit has a wide range of consequences. One of the important lessons that karate teaches is how to manage getting hit. Getting hit is not one-size-fits-all; some hits are so light you don't notice; others certainly stop you in your tracks. As a karateka advances and becomes more adept with this skill, they begin to transition to a teacher role. This skill of hitting precisely becomes important not just for self-defense, but for helping less advanced students understand the limit of their techniques. The best way to learn that your block is not effective is to experience the immediate consequence of a blocking failure; the punch makes it through your defense and hits you. As a senior student or instructor, you must be able to do this without injuring your kohai.

As we know, learning by doing is the most effective way to get good at a craft. To be an effective attacker, one must attack. As students advance, their ability to attack becomes more honed and lethal; they can't be attacking full force on most students, as an advanced student would come out on top of the interaction. To practice *Ikken Hissatsu*, your partner must be fully adept to avert your devastating blow. Yaguchi Sensei was (and is) renowned for his ability to calmly, with a smile on his face and his hands casually at his sides, challenge you: "Hit me," he'll say. In a sparring match, he'll suddenly drop his hands or hold them out to the sides, providing a beautifully open target – "hit me." In this, he provides the student a moment to

muster everything they have, and attack full force, with full speed, and full intent to harm. It never works. He laughingly dodges and blocks, and smacks the top of your head as your reward for your labor.

Yaguchi Sensei has a level of skill where most could attack him with everything they have, and they wouldn't get very far. He also has demonstrated his skill numerous times to his students, and they are well aware that he can defend himself against their attacks. This dynamic is equivalently important to learning to defend as a karate student, knowing you'll get hit without being injured, and involves a similar, yet different, type of trust. As a student, I must be certain that I will be shown where my blocks are ineffective without being injured in the process; I must also be certain that I can practice my attacks to the fullest of my ability, and not fear potential repercussions from my sensei.

In graduate psychology learning, there is an important parallel in discussing theory, clients, and interventions between students and their teachers. Students need to feel assured they can engage in the practice of "sparring" with their teacher, and that their teacher will both correct their thoughts and considerations which need improvement, and genuinely reflect when they are accurately on to something. Teachers must have the ability to manage an "attack" from the student. The student must be liberated in "giving all they've got," which sometimes means challenging their teacher. If a teacher is too nice, too kind, or too saccharine, it inherently communicates "we can injure each other." A too-kind teacher communicates that we are unable to manage disagreement or discord with one another, and "attacks" will injure. A student then cannot approach a problem with full force, as they are cautious about injuring the individual on the other end. The benefit of thoughtful execution of high- and low-status moves by the teacher (Johnstone, 1981) and a working alliance which enables ruptures and repairs (Watkins 2019) is

the communication of “this might hurt, but I won’t injure you,” and “go ahead and hit me – if it hurts, good, but you have no reason to fear you will injure me.” One of the most crucial skills of a therapist is to take in stride the full force of a client’s rage and despair, and the engagement of this dynamic in supervision will translate to the supervisee’s capacity to hold emotions and rupture in therapy.

Conclusion

How karate is taught, with such an engrained understanding of aggression, offers valuable insights to supervisors. It can help us manage our own anxiety about guiding our supervisees to understand the inevitable growing pains of the experience. There are ways to recognize if you are being too soft, or if you are abusing your role. Hurting your supervisee is no more your fault than when the ground gives a child a bump on their knee; it is a natural consequence of gravity. You don’t need to negate your authority, nor do you need to advertise it with a neon sign. It exists naturally, and naturally will cause your supervisee to fall.

Our trainees may benefit from a more open discussion that the experience of becoming a psychologist is going to hurt. The point of role-play rehearsal isn’t just to hear about what’s going right, but also receiving a clack on the forehead when you’ve got something wrong. We could more thoughtfully engage supervisees in a discussion about the difference between feeling hurt and being injured, and ask they reflect on those different experiences in their lives. We might invite students to discuss feeling hurt versus feeling injured with us, to explore with them how they can recognize the difference. Spoiler alert; if you’ve never been injured, it’s hard to differentiate between the two. We could ask to receive feedback about our own techniques, as many teachers likely air either on the side of too gentle or too hard.

Supervisors must acknowledge the inherent aggression of an authority role, and ask themselves how they wield it, and why this might be so. Perhaps a supervisor was injured by teachers and vowed never to do the same to a student, collapsing the concepts of hurt and injury into one category to be avoided. Perhaps a supervisor does not recognize how they relish their command, thinking that coping with absolutist teachers is a fact of the learning experience, as they were likely once subjected to. They might understand injury as a growing pain, neglecting to understand the nuance of using real steel while being mindful of the reaction from the student (as a wince might suggest the student was hurt, but a look of sheer terror suggests injury).

If we use real steel on our students, there is a general likelihood that we will injure at some point; we aren't perfect. A supervisee will yelp out in pain, alerting us to the situation. Ideally, the trusted relationship leaves no doubt in the supervisee's mind of our intent not to do lasting damage; it is a rupture, feeling hurt, but not an injury. We have an opportunity to use that reaction to stop and re-assess. What happens next – do we explore, or blame them? Coddle their wound, or ask what could have happened differently? When a student makes an error and the consequence is their teacher smacking them into their edge, either lightly or with full force, it is the relationship with their teacher which helps them propel their failure into an adjustment for next time. We begin to execute mastery of craft after we experience this over and over; it comes with practice. In time, our antifragile systems respond differently to getting hurt, as our edges expand and the line between a hurt and an injury moves. As a white belt, a hefty bruise might cause you to step off the floor; by contrast, many black belts have fought through broken ribs, experiencing a smarting ache, but knowing they have the ability to finish the match. Having a trusted teacher's support helps to navigate the difference between hurts and injuries, supporting the process over time.

My program's orientation offered us a metaphor to consider: given the length of the program, the difficulty of it, and the dedication required, they said, "This is a marathon, not a sprint." They could consider adding, "You'll get a lot of stitches in your side along the way."

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