

Martial Arts Intervention Theory

THE SEVEN VIRTUES OF BUSHIDO



Violence and aggression in the South African context

The consequences of violence and high levels of aggression are often harmful and emotionally devastating for individuals, communities and societies, especially when committed and outlived by the youth. In South Africa, youth violence is not a recent phenomenon as it is deeply rooted in the violent history of the country, but is still growing in seriousness and extent (Shields, Nadasen & Pierce, 2008; Swartz & Scott, 2014). Research in South African secondary schools indicates that 80 to 90 percent of adolescents reported exposure to two or more different forms of violence, with over a third of learners having witnessed a murder in their community (Collings, Penning & Valjee, 2014; Kaminer, Du Plessis, Hardy & Benjamin, 2013). A further 89 percent of learners have witnessed someone being stabbed, while about 30 percent themselves have been threatened with a weapon (Kaminer et al., 2013a; Kaminer, Heath, Hardy, Mosdell & Bawa, 2013). Furthermore, research indicates that more than a fifth of South African learners experience some form of violence while at school (Leoschut & Burton, 2013). When compared with statistics from previous years (Leoschut, 2009), incidence rates of exposure to violence in schools remains similarly high. Although there has been some reduction in the incidence of robbery at school, the rates of exposure to physical assault and sexual assault have increased (Leoschut & Burton, 2013). Besides high incidence rates of adolescents' exposure to violence as either witnesses or victims, evidence suggests that many adolescents act as perpetrators of violence. This is evident from the finding that an estimated 35% of South Africa's prison population is under the age of 25 years (Department of Correctional Services, 2010). Furthermore, especially in urban areas like Cape Town, where community and gang violence is amongst the highest in South Africa (Goga, 2014), homicide is the leading cause of death for young people between the ages of 15 and 19 years (Groenewald et al., 2008). These alarming numbers are not solely the result of current conditions of society, as the youth in South Africa in the past was also exposed to an environment characterised by violence and aggression as a result of experiences of oppression, marginalisation and impoverishment, thus laying the foundation for multiple risk factors for mental and physical harm for individuals, families and whole communities in South Africa (Fowler et al., 2009; Simpson, 2001).

Consequences of these high incidence rates and multiple risk factors include direct physical harm and further consequences for mental well-being, such as symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, dissociation, depression and conduct disorder (Danielson, de Arellano, & Ehrenreich et al., 2006; Du Plessis, Kaminer, Hardy & Benjamin, 2015; Rosenthal, 2000). Besides that, a lot of indirect consequences, such as crime and delinquency, substance abuse, school dropout, joining of gangs and normalization of aggressive coping strategies are linked to the exposure of violence for the youth, especially in communities with high levels of crime as well as persistent and early exposure to violence (Begle, Hanson & Danielson et al., 2011; Flannery et al., 2007; Leoschut & Burton, 2013).

Research on South African youth from deprived and marginalized backgrounds indicates that young men often have few options to develop a positive male identity and are thus prone to assimilate violent- and gang-inspired masculinities (Cooper & Foster, 2008), which are depicted through strength, toughness and control (Luyt & Foster, 2001). As a result, the violent, aggressive and hyper-masculine behaviour of many young males perpetuates a sub-culture of violence, especially in communities that are already historically vulnerable due to social oppression and marginalization (Choe, Zimmerman, & Devnarain, 2012). It is the exposure to and perpetuation of these environments that are crucial to the high rates of youth violence, as exposure to prolonged oppression can have particularly destructive effects on the youth of a society and even on future generations (Bulhan, 1985). In this sense, the exposure of many young South Africans to different forms of violence, especially when being the victims of such at a young age, can result in an extensive occurrence of displacing the related traumatic experiences into perpetration of interpersonal violence (Burton, 2003), self-destructive behaviour (both as elements of horizontal violence) and creates a vulnerability for the socialization of violent and aggressive behaviour (Fanon, 1965; Ward, van der Merwe & Dawes, 2012). Research across countries has indicated that adolescents show strong tendencies to externalize and displace their experience of violence, meaning that they assimilate violent and aggressive behaviour displayed in their environment and normalize these as strategies of conflict resolution and display of dominance (i.e. bullying, threatening, attacking) against others (Collings, Penning & Valjee, 2014; Du Plessis et al., 2015; Fowler et al., 2009; Shields, Nadasen & Pierce, 2008) and thus present as a specific at-risk group.

Institutions and organisations responsible for interventions with violent and aggressive youth, often lack the capacity to detain adolescent offenders and fail to create an environment for these at-risk youth to learn and adapt alternative, prosocial behaviour strategies (Muntingh, 2007; Ward, van der Merwe & Dawes, 2013). Previous interventions often failed to remediate experiences and trauma caused by violence between victim and perpetrators and thus perpetuate the cycle of violence (Gevers & Flisher, 2013). Especially interventions for individual with high exposure to violence, such as male adolescents in South Africa, have to address the meaning of violence for the individuals and the community (Govender & Killian, 2001) and should explore the individual coping and possible externalisation strategies related to experienced violence in the personal environment, as well as to teach competences for conflict resolution (Martinez et al., 2014). In order to counter the increased risk of young individuals to engage in violent and antisocial behaviour and to decrease the risk for those to become involved in criminal activities as adults, the development of alternative and evidence-based intervention programmes are highly needed (Burton, 2008), especially for male adolescents in communities with high crime rates.

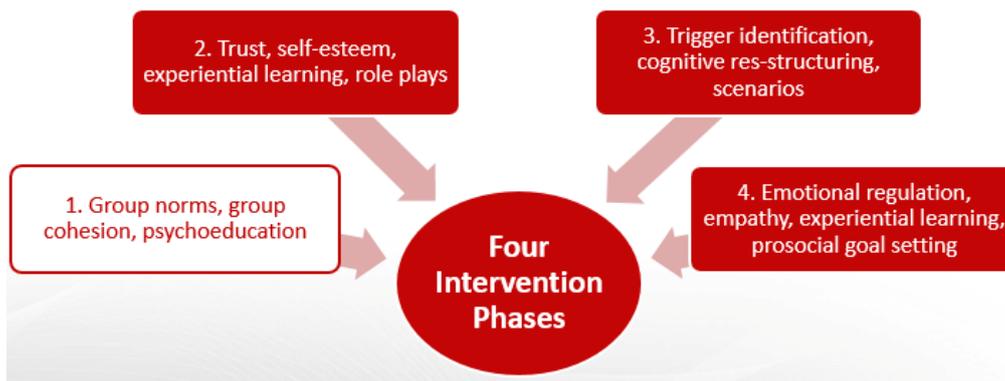
Martial Arts based interventions

In search of alternative intervention methods, martial arts based programmes have been proposed to carry the potential for violence prevention for adolescents who are at increased risk of engaging in violent behaviour and delinquency (Zivin, Hassan, DePaula & Monti, 2001). According to the existing scientific literature, martial arts provides the framework to attract many of the mainly male at-risk adolescents to engage and adhere to an intervention programme (Lakes & Hoyt, 2004; Woodward, 2009) and has the potential to be an ego-building method of therapy in support of controlling aggressive impulses (Twemlow & Sacco, 1998). Weiser and colleagues (1995) have argued that the martial arts deserve the recognition to be as worthy as other established psychotherapeutic supplement methods and forms of emotional expressions, such as art therapy, dance therapy or psychodrama. A review of socio-psychological outcomes of martial arts practice on youth indicates a positive trend of this form of activity (Vertonghen & Theeboom, 2010) and while arguing that physical fitness is on aspect in producing psychological benefits, it is suggested that the non-physical aspects of martial arts practice influences the long-term, psychosocial changes of participants (Binder, 1999), underlying mechanisms however remain unclear. Especially for at-risk populations, research found the effects of participating in sporting activities for young male offenders in prison to confer significant psychosocial benefits, while promoting rehabilitation of young offenders (Parker, Meek & Lewis, 2014). Martial arts practice in general has been found to reduce aggression of participants (Kusnierz & Bartik, 2014; Weiser et al., 1995) and can promote positive behavioural change (Burt & Butler, 2006), but again lacking in a specific theory of change. Thus, there is a need for more nuanced and accurate research approaches to support existing findings and to establish an evidence-based methodology for specific target groups (Vertonghen & Theeboom, 2013) and also a general need for empirical validation of effective violence interventions programmes in the scientific literature.

The following intervention concept is a modified version of a community based project that aims to provide a support for adolescent boys struggling with violent and aggressive behaviour by channelling related emotions into proactive and prosocial behaviour through the teachings of martial arts in practice and philosophy as well as individual support services. The intervention therefore directly addresses one of the major struggles of the communities in the Cape Flats by evoking violence and aggression-related emotions in the training practice, while teaching participants how to control these. Participation in this multi-phased martial arts based intervention programme consists of two 60- to 90 -minute sessions per week and will be facilitated through a combination of martial arts instruction, group counselling and should be assisted by an involved staff partner (i.e. school sport teacher, social worker or counsellor). The intervention is sub-divided in four different phases and strongly builds on cognitive-behaviour techniques and psychoeducation, which is in line with recommendation for effective intervention from the respective literature (Fagan & Catalano, 2013; Thakore et al., 2015; Wilson & Lipsey, 2007).

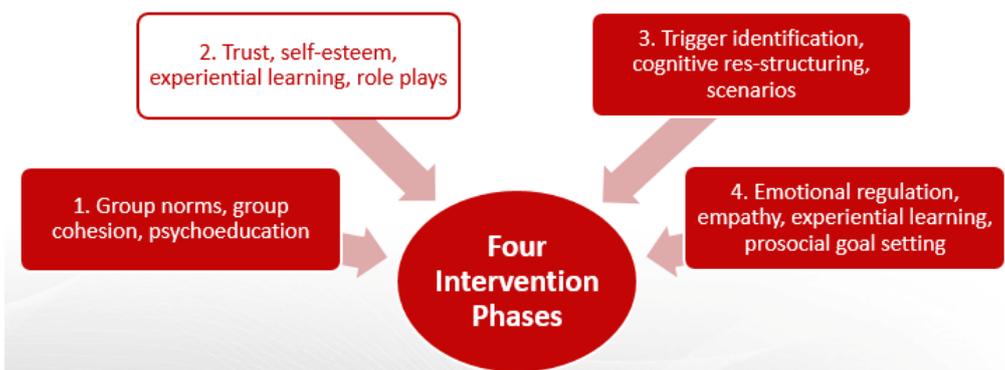
Phase 1

In the initial phase of the intervention, the focus lies on the creation of group norms and rules, as well as group cohesion and the creation of a bond between coaches and peers and amongst peers themselves. The importance of the initial intervention phase is to create an environment in which participants feel comfortable to engage in activities, build social ties with other participants and to commit to the programme and are stated to be generally important for support group settings (Burlingame, Fuhrimam & Johnson, 2001; Kawachi & Berkman, 2001).



Phase 2

In the second phase of the intervention, the focus shifts towards the establishment of trust amongst participants for each other through martial arts specific partner exercises, where participants explore roles of leading others in form of coaching and with a constant reflection input of experiential learning aspect of these exercises and their translation into the participants every day engagements. Especially the placement of trust amongst participants to follow the exercise-specific and still supervised lead of other participants aims to further build trust relationships and a positive group climate that is related to increases in self-esteem based on group participation (Marmarosh, Holtz & Schottenbauer, 2005) and individual improvements that are highlighted by the instructors. The third phase of the intervention shifts its focus towards exploration of violence and aggression-related behaviours and experiences of participants in the recent past and challenges maladaptive beliefs and cognitions towards violent and aggressive behaviour as a reflection of dominance, masculinity or conflict resolution.

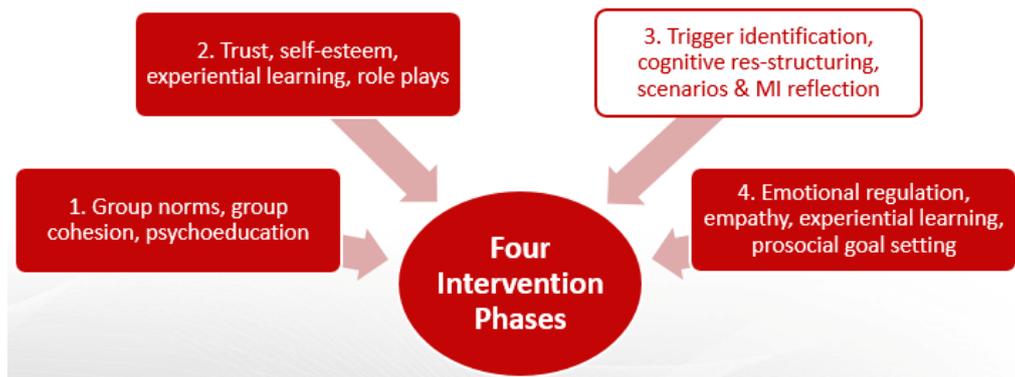


Contact:

[Bom Combat Managing Director](#)
Martin Gerry Gerhardt
079 829 3129
gerry_gerhardt@web.de

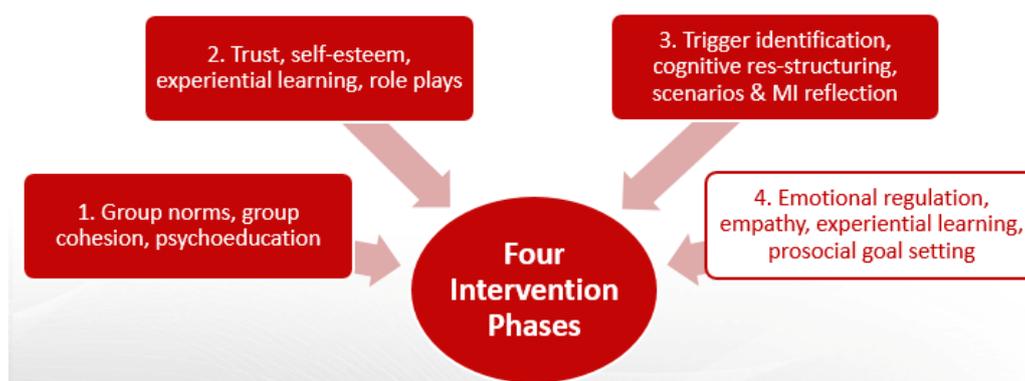
Phase 3

Especially in the third phase, the intervention programme builds on elements of psychoeducation around identifying behavioural triggers and of cognitive re-structuring and re-evaluating of situational factors that influence decision-making to positively cope with stressful situations (Bradshaw et al., 2009, Martinez et al. 2014). Participants will be asked to carry out reflection assignments in between sessions, in order to identify personal triggers and to facilitate the transfer of martial arts values into their life's, which will be addressed, challenged or affirmed within the sessions.



Phase 4

In the fourth and final phase of the intervention, emotional regulation becomes the main focus of the programme and participants will be exposed to cognitive and behavioural techniques to regulate emotions that have previously been identified to be present when engaging in aggressive or violent behaviour. In that, participants are supposed to explore possibilities to resolve conflicts by using assertive instead of aggressive behaviour and will be confronted with possible scenarios in which these have to be applied (Martinez et al., 2014, Thakore et al., 2015).



Theory of change

As an alternative psychosocial violence and aggression intervention concept, the described project is necessarily community based and aims to explore the causes of violence in young adolescents by channelling strong emotions into proactive and prosocial behaviour through the teachings of martial

arts in practice and philosophy as well as to offer role-model mentoring, in combination with group- and individual support services. Drawing from ancient philosophies and practices, the practiced martial arts mainly practiced in the project, Muay Thai and Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, are deeply rooted in an inclusive and essential respect for oneself and for one another, creating the framework we ultimately want to foster in our modern society.

Martial arts in general provide an opportunity to learn and practice important values such as respect for self and others, empathy, dedication, discipline and a sense of unity. Having its roots in centuries of historical and philosophical teaching, the practice of martial art itself and even more so the way of life that is based on the experience of the limits and possibilities of the one's own body movement provides an opportunity to learn and practice these often exclusive skills and teachings to parts of society that often do not have the access to these experiences.

Martial arts and combat sports generally offer a unique frame of development by experiencing once own limits, while building relationships with peers and coaches that require inclusion and discipline of all to develop one's individual skills. The very nature of Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu and Muay Thai involves a student to work through strong emotions evoked in the practice and requires them to learn to control these, which is not only a humbling experience, but initially a factor of attraction for young adolescents to participate and wanting to learn.

Through experience, target themes and motivational climate set by the coaches, a bond between coaches and peers and amongst peers themselves is created that fosters their confidence as a group and as individuals to overcome adversity and to develop skills that can translate from the training into everyday life. We offer the opportunity to strive and to become a champion in sport, as well as in school and in life.

The methodology is adjusted from group to group, building on the experience violence-related challenges and socioeconomic struggles in the personal and community environment, but always dynamically combines **four different dimensions** within the project:



Every dimension stands in interaction with the personal point of perception of the group participants and will be a significant focus of the programme at different points in the four phases:

