

Heterogeneity of Bodily Sensation in Practice: A Case Study of Tai Chi Practitioners in Xinxiang City, China

Kwansei Gakuin University

Akira KURASHIMA

1 Aim

This paper shares its interest with recent works in sociology and anthropology that use a Bourdieusian approach to uncover the reality of embodied practice (Wacquant, 2004; Crossley, 2004; Downey, 2005; O'Connor, 2007). While each work takes up a different specialized practice (boxing for Wacquant, circuit training for Crossley, capoeira for Downey and glass blowing for O'Connor), they share with Bourdieu the premise that each practice requires a congruent practical sense – an embodied and pre-reflexive intentionality that is collectively and objectively oriented to the successful pursuit of the activity (Bourdieu, 1972/1977, 2000).

However, we might ask whether “success” is unambiguously defined among participants of a given practice, and whether its pursuit demands a collectively oriented practical sense among individuals. Even Wacquant, who draws heavily on the Bourdieusian framework, describes how contrasting styles of boxers share the same gym – implying that heterogeneous practical senses might be contesting for “success” – although he tends to dismiss the heterogeneity in favor of theorizing training as collective and synchronized.

This paper challenges the Bourdieusian premise of congruence between practical sense and practice, by empirically demonstrating that participants of a Tai Chi class, who are engaged in the same practice of Tai Chi under the same instructor, develop heterogeneous bodily sensations which they are reflexively aware of. I shall also show that, given the lack of objective institutions such as competition and official grading, individual bodily sensations play a decisive role in determining “success” in Tai Chi.

2 Methods

I shall examine data gathered from participant observation of a Tai Chi class in Xinxiang City, Henan Province, China, during the period of 16 days in September, 2006.

3 Results

Tai Chi practitioners acknowledged the heterogeneity of bodily sensations on two different levels: as temporal variation in their training history, and as interpersonal variation among themselves. This heterogeneity was a significant source of meaning and motivation.

4 Conclusion

We might conclude that practice does not always require the congruence of practical sense, and that heterogeneity of practical sense might positively contribute to practice.

Main References

- Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice*. (R. Nice, Trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1972)
- Wacquant, L. (2004). *Body & soul: Notebooks of an apprentice boxer*. New York: Oxford University Press.