

Term paper on ethnography

Sociology, Violence



ETHNOGRAPHY

Introduction

Karate is generally a martial art that was started in Japan at a place called Okinawa. This place was previously called Ryukyu Islands. Some of the fighting skills taught in karate include elbow strikes, punching, knee strikes, and punching. Though karate is concerned with fighting methods, I would wish to point out that it is not a violent sport. Last summer I got a chance to join a karate group at a local gym and one thing that I came to learn is that this sport not only involves learning the art of fighting but also trains people to be disciplined. Indeed discipline is as emphasized as the fighting itself within the sport. I have decided to conduct my ethnographic study on karate and in specific the group at the gym. I know one of the gym instructors and hence I am hoping that they will be of great help in my research. Also I believe that my past experience at the gym will help me know how to conduct my research; for example I know when the people meet, which kind of people come at which particular time, and so on.

In particular through my ethnographic study I aim to get to understand this people by understanding the interactions of the various people at the karate group. I would also wish to establish the connection this people attach to their cultural identities. I hope to achieve all these by analyzing the group's language, their norms, clothing, and rituals among others. These attributes are suitable identifiers of various aspects of culture in a group of people. Also of significance in this ethnographic study is to establish the individual identities of members of the group, how these identities are incorporated in

the group, and also how culture influences different individuals into practicing the sport.

History of Karate

As stated previously, karate started in Japan and was developed from traditional fighting methods that are referred to as te, which translated directly from Japanese means hand. This is why most of the techniques taught in the sport use the hand as the basic attacking and defensive tool. Someone who practices karate is called a karateka; for example I was a karateka during last summer. When karate started in Ryukyu Islands it was before the 19th century and hence this area was still a kingdom on its own. After the area was captured by Japan the sport begun being adapted within Japan and this introduction into Japan can be traced as far back as the 20th century (Funakoshi, 1981, p. 12). At this time the sport was among the cultural exchanges that occurred between Ryukyu and Japan.

The Japanese government interest in making the sport a subject in learning institutions became apparent in 1922 after the ministry in charge of education invited a karateka to give a demonstration of the sport in the capital. Two years later Keio University became the first institution of higher learning to start a karate club in the country. The adoption of karate into most university programs soon became popular and by the year 1932 most of the main universities in the country had karate operational karate clubs within them (Funakoshi, 1981, p. 13). By this point in time karate meant 'hand' in Chinese but due to the increasing Japanese militarism karate started being considered to mean 'empty hand'. This is because the word used for

the two things in both cultures was the same and was pronounced the same- karate. This change from Chinese to Japanese can be interpreted as a sign that the government was now fast embracing the sport and it needed to ensure that it was done the Japanese way and not in a foreign way. This would help in preserving national pride.

Karate was used as a form of combat by the Japanese in the Second World War and its effectiveness can best be shown by the fact that after the war the United States sent some of its servicemen to study karate at Okinawa. The use of karate by the Japanese army and the interest shown in learning it by the United States army made the sport popular amongst civilians.

However the actual reason for increased popularity of the sport at around this time was the movies shown from around 1960 to the late 1970s. These movies used martial arts as the main style of fighting in their script. In fact the popularity of the word karate became so much that it was soon the generic term for all fighting styles practiced in the east. This popularity led to opening up of many karate training institutions around the world so that those interested in the sport would learn more about it.

Most of the growing popularity of the karate was however at this point misconceived. This is because in an attempt to make their movies captivating, the movie directors had painted a rather bloated image of karate. These movies showed that with one single blow a karateka had the capability to injure or even kill someone. This is perhaps the reason why most of those who enrolled in the clubs around the world had the perspective that training in karate would help them become skilled fighters.

However with time most of these people learned that what they saw in the movies and what karate really was were two different things. This is one point in time where karate could have been easily eroded or diluted to meet public demands but it did not. One of the main reasons why karate still remained as it was is because of the karate teachers from Japan who ensured that the correct principles of karate were taught. These teachers taught those interested in karate that it was more than fighting and hurting one's enemies; it was all about self discipline. Also with time most of the karate fanatics came to learn that the sport required a lot of hard work and some decided to quit when they felt that they could not handle the training.

What most people do not know is that to some of its adherent followers, karate has some spiritual meaning. To them it is not just about throwing punches and kicks in the ring but also about deep philosophies to be learnt during the training that guide a karateka on how to act in their daily activities. This is one of the reasons why karate is practiced in some areas- to invoke self perfection in a person as it is considered as a life long search for self discipline to resolve the conflict within the individual. However, karate is still practiced for self defense, cultural reasons, and as a sport. Efforts to recognize it as an Olympic sport however failed in 2005 when it could not garner the required number of votes to give it this opportunity. Still the Japanese community and government still consider karate a national heritage and a source of national pride. To them karate came from Japan and seeing it practiced elsewhere in the world shows adoption of part of their culture by other cultures. Recent estimates from the foreign affairs ministry

in Japan show that the number of karatekas across the world could be well over fifty million.

Literature Review

Culture is defined as the totality of behavior patterns, beliefs, arts, and institutions transmitted socially from one people to another. The patterns and other attributes are considered as an identifying aspect of the people or group that transmits the culture. This simply means that culture is a transfer of identity or an integration of a people's identity with that of another. This aspect particularly came clear during my stay at the gym as I was able to identify that most of the karatekas used the karate culture to define how they would behave or react to various situations. This however does not mean that the karate culture is as pure in this gym as it is in Japan.

Obviously since the people here still need to identify with their people (Americans) they have simply integrated the American culture with aspects of the Japanese culture. The question one would ask is what parts of Japanese culture have these karatekas adopted and what is the criterion used for selecting the parts. Every man needs an identity; something they can give people to describe them, something that they can hold on to as them. It is because of this that the karatekas at the gym have adopted parts of Japanese culture that they feel give them an identity, help them in understanding themselves, and also in resolving the internal conflict most people have on controlling their inner desires (Higaonna, 1990, p. 136).

Research shows that karate became popular in the United States after the Second World War. At this time all military personnel were required to learn

the fighting skills (Kanazawa, 2009, p. 22). These personnel later opened up schools where they trained other people, civilians, in the sport. However the training in the army is what facilitated the spread but the actual popularity was made by movies showing at around the same time in the country. These movies showed that a person who had learnt karate was able to defend themselves from any attack. In fact some of the movies went as far as showing that a karateka could outwit an attacker who had a gun (Funakoshi, 1981, p. 64). Considering that most civilians do not have guns, karate then became their sure way of ensuring their own security. Obviously some of the things in the movies were exaggerated as those who chose to practice the sport later came to learn.

Initially karate was taught in the United States by Japanese instructors but with time other races got to learn the ways of the sport and so now it is not surprising to find an American instructor in a karate class. However it still remains a good selling point to have a Japanese instructor at such a class as most people feel that getting it directly from a native of Japan gives them more chances of becoming good fighters.

The popularity and adoption of karate into the United States shows something about the culture in the country; people like to be in charge of their own things- even security. Also what can be seen from those who still pursued karate even after realizing its all about self discipline are a people in search of actualization. The main hypotheses are that those who take up karate are either in search of fulfillment of machismo, inner satisfaction, or simply for physical exercise (Higaonna, 1990, p. 136). But what can be noted

is that despite the reason most people end up being engrossed in karate and being intrigued by its philosophical teachings.

Methodology

In doing this ethnographic study, I used the gym members as the sample and also as a case study to understand the underlying cultural identities in those people that practice karate. I should point out that my interest in the karate group and their culture did not start with this study as during my time at the gym I got interested in their ways. However this research has given me a tool to validate some of my assumptions and also to clarify issues about the culture. I used my acquaintance with the gym instructor to get to the karatekas. With the instructor's help I was able to arrange interviews and sessions with individual karatekas and also group discussions during their breaks between the practice sessions.

I visited the gym for this research on June 25th after I had re-established contact with the instructor who arranged for me to have a short session with the karatekas. This first visit was mainly to introduce my research to the sample population and to make them aware that this was a serious study from which I intended to gain an insight into their culture. The group was very supportive especially since they all seemed to have this feeling that karate is still misconceived by many as a violent sport. They felt that participating in such a study would be part of their contributions to demystifying karate.

In my second visit I had the opportunity of observing one karateka, Sam. I also got the chance to interview him on the sport and how he felt it defined

him and was a way of life for him. I chose Sam because he had studied karate for the last four years which meant that he had a detailed insight on the sport. He was also a very co-operative person who regarded this study as highly as I did. On this same day, I had a ten minute talk with all the members before they left the gym. This session was mainly to establish whether what I had gotten from Sam was what other group members felt about the sport.

On my third visit, which was my final one, I had another interview with Sam. The first interview had lasted about fifteen minutes and I had considered it more of an ice-breaker to make Sam feel at ease opening up to me. This second interview went on for about twenty five minutes and I was glad that by the end of it I had answers for all my questions about karate. To ensure that I did not digress I had prepared a semi-structured questionnaire that had fourteen questions. This helped in guiding me on what to ask Sam to ensure that I was able to fulfill my research objectives.

Findings and Discussion

Visiting the karate gym again was a good experience; there is something about the white robes that the karatekas wear that depicts peace inside the gym. Thy gym is has three colors- blue, red, and white. The white is for the walls while the blue and red are used in alternate on wall and floor cushions. The punch bags are in one section of the room and hang from the roof. These bags and the gloves are all blue in color. However there are some red gloves which are normally for the advanced karatekas. Apparently in this gym, the red color signifies accomplishment and the blue learning. The

instructor told me that the reason why red and blue are used in alternate is to show that an individual's life is all about learning something, accomplishing with the knowledge learnt, then learning something else, and then accomplishing. From what I got life is a cycle of learning and accomplishment. The white walls are considered to be a depiction of the peace one gets in life as they keep on learning and accomplishing new tasks.

There are no chairs in this karate gym and I also learnt from my literature review that this is also the same in most of the other gyms that teach karate. This is a sign of contentment with what is available and also an individual learning to control their desires for pleasure. I noticed that within the gym most of the karatekas sat in terms of their skill, for example most of those with red gloves sat in one corner and watched keenly as those with blue ones fought each other. It is important to clarify that fighting in a karate gym does not have the same context as fighting elsewhere; in the gym fighting is good thing and is not meant to hurt another person or settle scores but rather it is a tool for learning. These sentiments were backed by what Sam also told me in the interview:

“ Karate has taught me that fighting is a good thing when used to defend oneself

but also it has taught me that fighting if misused can be the source of a lot of pain

not only for me but also for those around me.”

Something I established in my interview with Sam is that karate helps a person change their behavior; it gives them a new identity. This shows that karate has a major impact on a person's culture and their perspective towards life. One interesting thing I got from Sam who is also a marriage counselor is that karate can be used alongside counseling to change errant behavior:

" I know of people who I have recommended to karate gyms when they were abusive in marriage but after a month or two training they change. As a professional in psychology I know that this is not just a mere coincidence but rather that the abuser finds something which gives them power to control their emotions even when pushed to the edge."

One thing I really wanted to know was whether karatekas were actually violent people as most people perceived. I was impressed to learn that out of the fifteen members of the gym only one had a record of violence and this was three months before he joined the gym. In this study culture was defined as a transmission of behavior and from what I found it seems that the behavior and ideologies that the founders of karate had in Ryokyu have been transmitted to a place many miles away. In fact I established that there is a lot of respect in the gym regardless of what fighting level one is in. When the instructor or even a lower level fighter stands to speak no one else speaks- not even murmurs.

“ Karate is not about what you are physically but about the inner person that very

few people get to see on first instance.”

Conclusion

REFERENCES

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