

# An aikidōka's contribution to the teaching of qualitative inquiry

Qualitative Research

2015, Vol. 15(1) 4–21

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DOI: 10.1177/1468794113501684

qrj.sagepub.com



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## Abstract

Teaching qualitative research methods on the one hand, and Martial Arts, on the other, seem to have only little in common: one is academic, and one is not; one is essentially somatic and kinesthetic, and the one is not. Yet during two decades of teaching and practicing both I repeatedly noticed a fruitful interaction between these 'arts', which I experienced as exciting embodied insights that shed light on both spheres. In this article I wish to 'translate' three concepts used in martial arts pedagogy, specifically in Aikidō, to the teaching of qualitative methods and methodology.

## Keywords

Embodiment, interaction, martial arts, methodology, qualitative inquiry, teaching, pedagogy

## Editors' note

*Qualitative Research* does not usually publish papers on the teaching of qualitative methods, nor does it generally publish auto-ethnography. We made an exception for this paper, which is best understood as a reflection, of a pedagogical and philosophical kind, rather than a research piece, because of the enthusiasm of the referees.

## Knowledge, qualitative research and a qualitative martial art

Embodied experience is the starting point for analyzing human participation in a cultural world.

(Csordas, 1993: 135)

During the last two decades I have passionately engaged in the teaching of two rather different disciplines: qualitative research methods, which I taught in familiar academic

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settings comprised of methods courses and seminars for bachelor, master and doctoral students, and the martial art of Aikidō, which I taught on tatami mats (traditional Japanese mats made of straw) in the Dōjō, or the martial art training hall. Mostly, I experienced these disciplines as rather separate spheres in my life, inhabited by different practices, roles, ideologies and people. Against that, the following offers an initial attempt for a fruitful cross-fertilization between these life-spheres and their respected pedagogies. Specifically, I describe three concepts that are central to the pedagogical system of the Japanese Martial Art of Aikidō, and propose that they can be fruitfully applied to the academic teaching of qualitative methods and methodology.

Borrowing concepts from the Martial Arts to the Qualitative Arts (and vice versa) might seem, at least at first, far-fetched, for these domains appear to differ on so many grounds: one is academic and one is not; one is explicitly kinesthetic and somatic (concerns the body directly) and one is not; one is highly respectable, and one is generally viewed as leisure activity (at best). But in the embodied ways that I both practice and experience these spheres, they are highly interactional, and teaching and learning in this regard occur similarly. I am also indebted to an inspiring body of research that emerged during the last decade or so, and that has the martial arts as a site of and for research, addressing various issues including learned embodied practices, the acquisition of habitus and their practical consequences, the management of pain, cultural and subcultural socialization processes, globalization and more. These studies examine, usually through participation and observation, the practices of Aikidō (Bar-On Cohen, 2009a, 2009c; Kong, 2012; Noy, 2012; Snell, 2012), Boxing (Wacquant, 2004, 2005), Capoeira (Downey, 2005), Karate (Bar-On Cohen, 2007, 2009b, 2009c; Masciotra, Ackermann and Roth, 2001), Silat (or White Crane Silat – a Chinese Indonesian self-defense art; see Samudra, 2008), Wrestling (Smith, 2008), and most recently, the spectacular Mixed Martial Arts (García & Malcolm, 2010; Green, 2011; Spencer, 2009, 2012). The list is by no means exhaustive, but it nonetheless portrays a variety of fields of embodied interaction, the study of which is instructive from the perspective of social science theory and methodology. There is much that can be taken from these studies, and I presently make use of their employment of the Bourdieuan concepts of *habitus* and *practice* (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990).

Bourdieu's theory resonates with the present work due its focus on *knowledge*, and the claim that the received tradition misleadingly treats 'knowledge' as a corpus of cognitive schemata and representations, when de facto, actors are typically unaware of the knowledge they possess (it is 'passively recorded'; Bourdieu, 1990: 52), which is embodied through a long and subtle social learning process, and is always performed *in praxis*. Habitus refers to a set of habits, one's 'second nature', which preset un-reflected, routine behavior that is individually embodied, but collectively conditioned, and which orients or predisposes (rather than fully governs or controls) actors' thoughts, perceptions and actions. Practices, in turn, are the actions that are shaped by a given habitus, which actors perform, and which can be appreciated by the sensitivities associated with and cultivated by different habitus. Knowledge, then, is not reflexive ('phallogocentric', as Derrida would have had it), and there is no mentalist, cognitivist or other essence that pre-exists performance (Bourdieu, 1990: 55). From infancy and on, learning is mediated through imitation, and it is for this reason that the epigraph of Bourdieu's *The Logic of Practice* is a

quote from Aristotle, who notes humans are ‘the most imitative of all animals’, and that they learn ‘their first lessons from mimicry’ (Aristotle, cited in Bourdieu, 1990: 25).

The synergy that I experience from the juxtaposition of the teaching of qualitative methods and the teaching of the Martial Arts – specifically aikidō – emerges from what I believe these two artful disciplines, and their habitus, share. My first point concerns appreciating both aikidō and qualitative inquiry as *Arts* (with a capital A), with developed *senses of embodiment and aesthetic pleasures*. Though perhaps not as developed as it should, viewing qualitative research and inquiry *as art*, is a leitmotif running through the field’s development (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, 2000, 2005; also Collins, 1992; Knowles and Cole, 2008). It is a position propelled by emancipatory humanistic approaches to qualitative inquiry, which emphasize the ‘social’ over the ‘science’ (in the term ‘social sciences’), and which, in line with Harold Garfinkel and Erving Goffman, view the realm of the social as a matter of everyday artful affair. People are actors who are creatively expressive, and this bears aesthetic dimensions on everyday interactions and performances.

For me, aikidō is precisely that, an *Art*, and for similar reasons: counter the popular image of the martial arts, which portrays instrumental practices engulfing machismo aggression and the exhibition of competition, violence and pain (or alternatively an utterly spiritual, ‘one-with-the-world’ type of movements), the Arts of the Martial are first and foremost Arts in that they evince salient *aesthetic, embodied and performative components*. In various ways and to varying degrees the arts of the martial are fundamentally social and interactional, and no learning is accomplished, or knowledge gained, without embodied interaction within and as part of a community of diligent practitioners. In her ethnography of karateka’s body-work, Bar-On Cohen stresses that even ‘inner’ bodily qualities (such as *kime*), can be developed and revealed ‘only within social interaction’ (2006: 81), and she illuminates the essentially collective character of the attainment of individual practitioner’s Kibadachi (Bar-On Cohen, 2009b). In his boxing apprenticeship ethnography, Wacquant (2004: 100) too, addresses the issue by pointing out the ‘*paradox of an ultraindividual sport whose apprenticeship is quintessentially collective*’ (emphasis in original). There is always a partner to interact with (real or imagined/stimulated) in the martial arts, and aesthetically, there are sophisticated sets of norms and rules by which the mutual execution of interactional movements (‘technique’) is appreciated.

‘Members’ (as Garfinkel would put it) in these arts can assume and perform membership not only if they punch accurately enough or kick strongly enough. These qualities are essential, to be sure, but membership, and the acquisition of the relevant habit(u)s, can be attained only if members develop the embodied senses and skills of appreciating what is – and what is not – a powerful punch or a precise kick (Bourdieu’s *Distinction*; 1984). In these bodily arts, efficiency is always *also* a matter of how the technique looks and seems; it is always also the *artful performance* that is being judged and appreciated aesthetically and by how it seems feels to those partaking in the interaction, whose habitus predisposes and allows an appreciation of the movements. This is true from Bruce Lee films to everyday interactions and encounters in the dōjō. ‘Participants themselves are the audience’, Klens-Bigman (2002: 2) observes of aikidō training, and in his ethnography of Capoeira, Downey (2005: 28) notes how skillful action merges with astute

perception. There is a tight dialectics or even homology in the learning-embodiment process between actions and perceptions, expressions and impressions. Following Gibson's (1979) ecological approach to perception, I observe of aikidō that, 'kinesthetic and somatic knowledge is simultaneously created, shared, and performed, as are also the sensitivities and sensibilities that are acquired and required in order to reciprocate it; to "understand it"' (Noy, 2012: n.p.).

In addition to the aesthetic nature of the arts of aikidō and qualitative inquiry, and the habitus that is learned in and through group-work, another resemblance concerns the relations between teaching and practice. In line with performative hermeneutics, one could say that the days of the representational are over: when we teach aikidō we practice the art (and vice versa), and when we teach qualitative methods we perform qualitative sensibilities (and vice versa: when conducting an in-depth interview, we also teach our informants how one conducts an in-depth interview). A situated approach to the construction of knowledge in different disciplines (aikidō, qualitative inquiry), to the communities in which this knowledge is pursued, and to the embodied practices by which it is pursued, acknowledges, must acknowledge, that the 'classroom' and the 'field', and in aikidō terms 'in the dōjō' and 'outside the dōjō', are not passive environments. What transpires in them is better understood in terms of performance than in terms of representation, and teaching is not about 'representing' knowledge. Dōjōs and classrooms are not mere 'containers' of social activity, but shared stages (Goffman, 1974). Participating in practices in both classroom and dōjō is part of acquiring the skills required in order to be a member in the respected communities. Executing aikidō techniques, or conducting qualitative research, does not commence in the field (out there) any more than it does in the classroom or in the dōjō. These two locations are social sites that are (inter)linked by the people who move between them, the practices they perform, and the ideologies they embody; the classroom too is a field.

Specifically extrapolating from martial arts to qualitative research and teaching is a project underway (De Campos, Delamont and Stephens, 2010; Delamont, 2006, 2009). Notwithstanding performative critical pedagogy (with which this article corresponds; see Kincheloe, 2001; Stucky and Wimmer, 2002), I join this multi-disciplinary discussion, bringing different disciplinary knowledges together, suggesting aikidō is a 'qualitative martial art'. Yet my input stems also from a concern regarding the relative lack of work on teaching and instructing methods within the qualitative sphere, certainly compared with the encompassing vital corpus published on actual methodological practices. Though a decade has passed, the observation made by Josselson et al. remains as valid today as it was when stated: 'There are many books that purport to detail how to do qualitative research, but none that tell you how to teach it. (One way not to teach it effectively is to try to follow a "methods" text telling students how to do it).' (2003: 4; see also Keen, 1996; Rowe and McAllister, 2002).

## **Doing it simply: teaching concepts from aikidō and qualitative research**

The art of aikidō was developed in Japan in the first half of the 20th century by the master-teacher Morihei Ueshiba.<sup>1</sup> The meaning of the term resides in the kanji that

comprise it: Ai (合) meaning unifying, blending or harmonizing; Ki (気) meaning energy, spirit or vitality; and Dō (道) meaning way, path and also 'doctrine of' and 'art of'. Hence literally the meaning of aikidō, which is recited to newcomers and reiterated to experienced aikidōka (practitioners), is the Path or the Way of Blending and Harmonizing with the Energy. This art is a 'traditional' martial art, in the sense that it is a non-competitive sport (largely speaking, some schools are competitive). The training process is based on a dyadic structure in which one of the participants, called *ukè*, initiates a move (the attack), and the other, called *nagè*, attempts to blend with the motion and neutralize the threat it presents. *Nagè*'s correct response involves blending with *ukè*'s motion effectively, which in itself suffices in defusing the danger of a confrontation. In other words, the practice of aikidō does not involve one participant defeating, tricking, beating or harming the other, by the use of force, aggression or violence, nor competing with the other. On the contrary: force and rigidity are replaced with smoothness and flexibility, competitiveness with cooperation, conflict and confrontation with harmony, and a monologic approach with interactionism.

While studies show that most martial arts involve a sensitive intersomatic interaction throughout the training session, in aikidō it is not just that a connection or a dialogic state takes place between *ukè* and *nagè*, but that creating and sustaining such a state are both the *tool and the goal* of and for the training. Not just the means but also the ends. Neutralizing the attack and defusing its threat, which is one of the goals of any martial art, are not achieved by defeating the other, but by placing her or him in a state of harmless dialogue. This reciprocal state is then not just a feature of the aikidō training method, but also the *solution* offered for situations of conflict and antagonism. A session in which partners fail to reach and maintain a dialogue, often referred to as 'a connection', where one does not sense and respond to the motions of the other, is an unsuccessful training session. Crucially, the responsibility for attaining and sustaining 'a connection' is not only the *nagè*'s, who must be sensitive and attuned to the moves of the *ukè*, but also the *ukè* (the initiator of the attack) needs to be attuned to the moves and counter moves of the *nagè*. Thus, the interaction between the two can involve more than one sequence of two movements (attack and blend). It is a complex exchange, comprising mutual initiatives, moves and sensitivities, so much so that roles fuse and at one point or another it is difficult to tell who is the *ukè* and who is the *nagè*; or where agency lies.

These points are based on my personal experience and observations of aikidō, but some of them hold true of other martial arts, mainly the Japanese ones. Interestingly, both as a scholar and as a practitioner, it strikes me how sometimes martial arts that have developed at a great distance (geographical and sociocultural) from aikidō, such as Capoeira, resemble it more than, say, the Chinese martial arts. Avoiding an expansive comparative appreciation of the relations between various martial arts, my sense is that martial arts share commonalities but also have their own unique structures of training, teaching methods and mythology (conceptual and narrative elements), and that consequently, different arts can yield different 'lessons' which can then be productively translated unto different spheres. The discussion can expand further when considering that the relevant unit of analysis might not be only 'a martial art', but a given school or organization therein (Aikikai Aikidō or Shin Shin Toitsu Aikidō), and even more specifically, a particular club or dōjō.

I now turn to address three concepts used in the teaching of aikidō, that were introduced by my teacher, Roderick Kobayashi Sensei (1933–1995). One of these concepts (*maai*) is common in Japanese martial arts, and the other two are more unique to aikidō pedagogy and specifically to the school that I study (Seidōkan aikidō). Kobayashi emphasized the *fundamental principles* of aikidō, and in line with his minimalism repeatedly referred to only a few basic yet essential concepts. Whether teaching theory or technique, Kobayashi never stressed the mechanical aspects alone, but rather the fundamental principles, or ‘the basics’, which both underlie the techniques and are manifested in them. Though his formal education was in engineering and not in pedagogy, he was an inspiring teacher and a thoroughly pedagogical figure.

### *Shoshin-ni-kaeru: returning to the beginner’s mindset*

One of the key concepts used in aikidō to underscore the basics of teaching is *shoshin-ni-kaeru*, which literally means ‘returning (*kaeru*) to the beginner (*sho*) mind (*shin*)’. The concept constantly reminds the teachers – the system’s ‘experts’ – that in approaching new students who have recently entered into an institutionalized and disciplined system of knowledge, or habitus, they must meet the latter at eye level. This is not a triviality, because the process of gaining skill and expertise creates a widening gap between experts and novices. The foremost responsibility is to avoid intimidating students with detached, complicated and threatening research methods. On the contrary, their mission is to *simplify* the material and make it *accessible*, so as to meet the students half way in the complex learning process they must undergo. As teachers, we need to contend with students’ apprehensions, prejudices and lack of knowledge, as well as with their creativity and thought processes that have not yet been systematically disciplined by academic knowledge. The more expert and experienced are the teachers, the more difficult they will find the task of returning to the mind or mindset of the beginner. Furthermore, a dialectic return to the ‘beginner’s mind’ is not only a matter of teaching; it is also a vital quality for the practitioner herself. It means being able to inhabit states of knowing and not-knowing simultaneously, and being in touch constantly with the art’s bare elements.

Simplifying knowledge and the ways by which it can be obtained (i.e. methods) is easier said than done, because it requires that its most essential parts and relaying them in a coherent fashion, is suited to the students’ level. This requires a thorough grip of what is being taught, together with self-confidence on the part of the teacher. In my opinion, *simplicity* is a key principle in qualitative thinking, because sticking to the simple(st) aspect of things and understanding their most (ostensibly) trivial rudiments is one of the foundations of qualitative research. I am influenced here by ethnomethodological sociology, and its emphasis on the everyday routine and seemingly trivial activities, through which people perform their social roles and identity seamlessly (Garfinkel, 1967; Goffman, 1974).

Ludwig Wittgenstein, who dealt extensively with epistemology, reflected on the pragmatics of real-life social situations, which is one of the reasons that his approach had such a considerable impact on the development of qualitative thought (Sullivan, 2002). Though Wittgenstein’s philosophy did not directly deal with methods, his insights on epistemological issues and on the status of knowledge in Western cultures are thought-provoking.

Speaking of the accepted ways of acquiring knowledge, Wittgenstein wrote: 'If the place I want to reach could only be climbed up to by a ladder, I would give up trying to get there. For the place to which I really have to go is one that I must actually be at already' (1998: 10). The first sentence in the quote refers to the fact that many people, and I am presently interested in researchers, invest great efforts in 'acquiring knowledge'. To signify the notion of *effort*, Wittgenstein aptly uses a metaphor associated with height: that of climbing a ladder. Knowledge is perceived as something 'lofty' and inaccessible that one must ascend to. Indeed, language often refers to knowledge using terms associated with elevation: for example, 'higher education' (as opposed to 'primary' or 'elementary' education); and in languages such as Japanese and Hebrew, a genius is respectively someone whose 'head is in the sky' (*tensai*), or is at the uppermost place (*illuy*). The ladder represents the method used by the researcher to reach her goal, namely the acquisition of knowledge. What Wittgenstein is criticizing here is the Protestant work ethic, which posits that hard work, and only hard work, is the way to get good results.

This issue was discussed by Max Weber (2011/1904) in his renowned work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, which demonstrates how the Protestant religious philosophy paved the way for the success of Capitalism and for its domination of the West and beyond. If this formula posits that good work, and only good work, can yield good results (God rewards the diligent), its flip side is the highly problematic implication that one who does not succeed (financially or otherwise) must not be working hard enough! Wittgenstein criticized this Protestant/Capitalist worldview and the research practices that derive from it (represented by climbing a ladder). He repudiates the ladder and all that it represents, and suggests an idea that seems to be borrowed from Zen thinking, which rejects, or at least minimizes, the need for effort. It seems that Wittgenstein understands that the 'effort' is a kind of performance-of-effort (of Protestant devotion), which serves to create knowledge and at the same time to identify those researchers qualified to produce it.

Much of this is also true in aikidō, and it is one of the connections I find so exciting between qualitative arts and martial arts. When newcomers express a strong desire to gain expertise in a short time and to rapidly ascend the ladder of ranks (willing to expend the required effort), we often tell them the following allegorical tale:

*A student joins a martial arts class and asks the sensei: 'How long will it take me to learn the secrets of this art and earn a black belt?' The teacher thinks for a while, and says: 'About five years'. The student, unsatisfied with the answer, says: 'But if I train very hard, and come to class every day and make an effort – how long will it take me then?' The teacher replies: 'Ten years'. The student, not yet comprehending the message, insists once again: 'But if I invest all my energy and all my time in the most diligent training – how long will it take me to earn a black belt?' The teacher replies firmly: 'Fifteen years!'*

Obviously, in order to do well, our students must work diligently, just as researchers and teachers too must invest efforts in improving both research and lesson plans, etc. But the message of the story is clear: in both aikidō and qualitative research, the desire to rush the learning process can harm the very quest for knowledge and the attempt to research and teach, and there is a stress – that is both ethical and political – on process

(practicing, trainings) rather than on product (black belt). (Note that this is not singularly unique to aikidō, and holds for other martial arts schools that overtly stress the importance of a slow and gradual learning process.) Qualitative research methods aim to sensitively explore people's lives, behavior, relationships and experiences. In this endeavor, patience, acts of listening and readiness to engage in dialogue are virtues, whereas ambition and a desire for fast results are counterproductive. The same applies to the actual (physical) blending moves one learns in aikidō. Counter common perception, quick movements are not always effective ones, for they are not conducive to blending, and the same is true for movements that are too slow, too forceful, too strained or lax, etc. Aikidō teaches self-discipline, but not in a machismo sense of pushing the body to extremes. On the contrary, learning and self-discipline mean developing sensitivity and awareness to the body and the movement of the other, and cultivating the ability to attune one's movements to the rhythm of one's partner. This is no easy task, and the fact is that most trainees tend to move too fast; too competitively or 'capitalistically'. And we teachers typically remind them: 'Slowly, gently. Blend. What's the hurry? Relax your shoulders; they're so tense. Ease up'.

In qualitative research classes I often find myself curbing the students, limiting the scope of the research they propose and the size of their study sampling. Like aikidōka, college students, too, try to cope with the difficulty of learning by 'stepping on the gas' (as one student, impatient with the pace of his research, put it). In other words, it is easier for them to work fast, and it is harder for them to take the time and figure out what the study aims to achieve, what has already been discovered, and how one can attain the desired results. In many of the other classes that they take, students learn that 'the more the merrier', and I keep reminding them that a large-scale study is not *necessarily* a better study. In conversations we have, I am often the one who pushes to interview fewer people for their study, and to limit the number and the length of the observations they wish to conduct! It is easier for students to gather large amounts of data, to interview more people than needed, and to record long strips of verbiage, than it is to do what I ask, namely: to be sensitive and attentive to their own movement in the field and to those of the others, to collect enough data rather than 'lots' of data, and, as a direct result, to make original, well-grounded observations and well-argued claims that emerge from the data and focus on the basic and simple truths of the phenomenon they chose to study. Many students ask: 'How can I generalize and draw conclusions from only five interviews?', while others propose to add more research locations. The difficulty faced by the students is obvious, and so is the strategy that they choose for dealing with it: by doing more and 'stepping on the gas' they try to avoid the real difficulties with approaching the material.

Indeed, internalizing this lesson is no easy task, since the students must *unlearn* an approach that is common outside the spheres of qualitative inquiry. In teaching qualitative research we go against the current, against neo-liberal perceptions so dominant in our societies and against the Olympic motto *Citius, Altius, Fortius* (Faster, Higher, Stronger). Running especially fast or jumping particularly high may well be very difficult, but the goal and the ways to victory are clear. Beating a rival is a simple concept, and one that is easily measureable and quantifiable. But aikidō always refrained from following older martial arts, like Judō and Taekwondo, which have become full-fledged Olympic sports.



It is interesting to add that Kobayashi used to say that ‘advanced aikidō techniques are simplified basic techniques’. At first, this assertion sounded as an oxymoron, illogical and irresolvable. We were accustomed to fields in which, the more expert and professional one becomes, the more complicated the material and the steeper the requirements. But Kobayashi’s approach was different. For him, the simplest and most elemental principles were in fact the most difficult aspects of the practice (cf. ethnomethodology). Consequently, the lessons became increasingly simpler, not the other way around, and the learning process was reversed: more time was spent on the simple – or ‘simplified’, as he would call it – and elementary aspects; those aspects which the founder of ethnomethodology famously described as ‘seen but unnoticed’ (Garfinkel, 1967: 41). Kobayashi’s aesthetic simplification of the art was in line with contemporary modern-abstract art.

Likewise in qualitative research training: as the courses, semesters, and the years go by, the requirements I present to students become simpler, on the one hand, yet more challenging, on the other – and qualitative inquiry really has no limits in terms of the richness and nuances of both collecting and interpreting procedures. This polysemy concerns the multifaceted nature of human action and meaning, both of the researched and of the(ir) researchers. During methods courses the level becomes progressively higher and the requirements more demanding, in the sense that I expect the students to show increasing skills of ‘blending’ in their interviews and fieldwork. That is, I expect to see increasing sensitivity to the demeanor of the interviewees and to the ‘motions’ that characterize them and the people being studied, and greater capacity for ‘blending’ with this motion. The students’ ability to blend rests first and foremost on respecting the field (interviews, informants, interactions, places) *for what it is and for what it gives* in and of itself. As I will indicate later (while discussing *shodō-o-seisu*), the first obstacle to overcome in the martial arts, before dealing with the opponent, is one’s own fears, anxieties, premonitions, and the like, which interfere with and blur the ‘field’.

The need to blend with the field is not limited to the physical encounter with interviewees or informants, or the collection of ethnographic data. The modification of these experiences into textual encounters also requires a capacity for blending. Before they transcribe their interviews and write their impressions (transforming data into text), I ask the students to ‘listen to’ and ‘blend with’ the data: with what they write, record, feel and remember. I remind the students that the language we use is full of imagery, such as the image of ‘analyzing’ the text, and that images can affect the manner in which we conduct our research (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). We do not want to ‘perform surgery’ on the text, ‘vanquish’ it, or compete with it or with its significance, but to understand it by *blending with it* and by approaching it – almost physically – in different ways. An interesting example of textual hermeneutics was provided not by an academic student, but by one of my aikidōka students. Yonatan Sagiv, who has since become a teacher and opened his own dōjō, completed his doctoral dissertation on early Talmudic texts while training in my dōjō (Sagiv, 2009). Sagiv’s research focused on interpreting early texts of Biblical exegesis. When we trained together in the mornings, in one of the campus’s cooler spots, he repeatedly told me that the principles of aikidō had helped him to shed new light on hitherto difficult texts, and to formulate an original understanding of them:

*One of the first things we learn in aikidō is to understand that there's an attack, but not to resist it, and by moving off the line of the attack we transform it from a threat into a movement that can be blended with and eventually controlled. I tried to apply this [principle] to difficult and unclear Talmudic sermons. What I've noticed is that if you let the sermon move in its own path, without interfering with it, its interpretation emerges naturally. Sometimes, difficulties in interpreting are due to researchers' 'stiffness' as we hold preconceptions, or are unwilling to accept the sermon as it is. If we let ourselves loose from these 'blocks' and blend with the sermon – things become clearer and the interpretative solution becomes evident. (Y. Sagiv, personal communication, 11 July 2012)*

I propose that changing metaphors of research, and in this case replacing the aggressive notion of 'analysis' with the notion of 'blending', can be fruitful. In Sagiv's words, when he 'let the sermon move in its own path, without interfering with it', i.e. blending with it, the 'interpretation emerges naturally'. Such a proposal can find the students 'where they are', namely at the sensitive and formative juncture of their first encounter with the academic world, with research methods and with the institutional production of (scientific) knowledge. This proposal applies to all stages of research: to the physical and sensuous encounter with the field, and to every subsequent contact and interaction. It of course also embodies the teacher's efforts at blending with the students; for after all, can we ask our students to research in certain ways, while teaching them how to do so in drastically different ways?

### *Maai: the research range of effectiveness*

Another central aikidō teaching concept is *maai*. The first kanji in this word, *ma*, means distance (and is used in various Japanese martial arts), and the second kanji, *ai*, means 'blending' (as in *aikidō*) – and so the term refers to 'distance of blending'. The *maai* concept suggests the importance of recognizing and assessing the distance between the interactants: too great a distance precludes effective interaction (attack or defense), and too small a distance is unsafe. In Japanese society, *maai* relates to appropriate distance of interactants in various everyday occasions, such as family, workplace and friendships (which intersects, establishes and reflects social status, gender and kinship).<sup>2</sup> In a study on how *maai* shapes the dialectics of the Self–Other relationship, Masciotra, Ackermann and Roth note that, '[i]n the Western tradition, distancing is a spatial concept defining proximity in social transactions, whereas distancing as *maai* becomes an integrated spatiotemporal construct that drives the dynamic coupling of mutually attuned entities' (2001: 120).

This too is a concept that caused me to start thinking of aikidō as a 'qualitative martial art'. First, I see *maai* as a matter of agency, because it is not merely a physical distance but an intersubjective one, or more precisely an *intersubjective range of effective interaction*. Masciotra, Ackermann and Roth (2001: 120) address it as 'the art of relating and communicating within constructed space-time intervals in and through which people interact', and following Sommer (1969), they define *maai* as 'a maximum zone of comfort' (2001: 120). Movements and techniques must take place within this range, if they are to be effective. This is why it is not a 'distance' as much as it is a 'range', where the latter concept is dynamic and points at a potential for an encounter.

Harmonious encounters in aikidō can occur within, and only within, one's *maai*, and moves made outside it are unlikely to be effective. Therefore, one of the things we routinely practice in the dōjō, a point which we constantly repeat to the students, is that the contact and joint action must be made *within* the range of effectiveness. This is an important lesson, because it teaches of agency and social efficacy, and that the ability to make an impact and engage reality meaningfully outside one's range of effectiveness is limited. The students are asked to explore and determine their own range of effectiveness, and then try to act within it. There are a number of exercises that we teach in the dōjō in order to convey this, and they include very simple movements, such as asking the students to lift or move an object that is located inconveniently at a distance from their body, and then to try to push someone, who is standing too close to them. The lesson is embodied immediately: in the martial arts and beyond, kinesthetic sensitivities to an interactional space wherein we can perform effectively are developed, and also to distances that are beyond our comfort zone and effectiveness. Students learn to recognize and sense when they are operating inconveniently, and how they can change their circumstances favorably.

The concept is applicable to qualitative research methods, and I refer to it in the classes I teach as the 'research *maai*', and use it to draw students' attention to the 'moves' made in the course of a study and to the space that the students occupy with these research moves. I also draw their attention to the moves and the *maai* of their interviewees or informants. I do so by sharing with the students my experience as an aikidōka and teacher, which I reveal in the beginning of the course, and then throughout it I demonstrate basic exercises from the dōjō curriculum. Depending on the size of the room and its physical attributes, we practice these movements in class, or if weather permits, outdoors. In their formal (and informal) feedbacks, students find the physical movements to be both entertaining and memorable. They often write that 'it was the best part of the class', that it helped them focus, and that it was effective in learning and implementing their knowledge of research methods. As one student recently elaborated,

*In the interviews I did in the museum I felt that I am keeping myself and the [museum] visitors inside my Range, and it helped me open myself up to them and ask good questions. They replied at length with rich data for my research.*

Other students relate to their physical location as the sites where they do observations and interviews, noting how that helps them engage with people and facilitate creative interactions in situ.

Teaching the 'research *maai*' and the researcher–researched dialectics, raises several questions that touch on the ethics of the interaction, including which side is more interested in creating rapport and which is less interested? Which side initiates the move (usually it is the researchers, but not always), how is this done, and how does the other side react? Who enters whose range of effectiveness? How is the field of 'joint action' defined, both physically and in terms of the interrelations and interactions between the sides? Could one side be threatening the other, intruding on the others' *maai*? As mentioned, these are physical and social aspects of the study, which trigger a discussion of questions like: where does the study take place (physically)? Who chooses the location?

Does the location change in the course of the study, and if so, how? Does a certain location feel safe and comfortable to both parties? Studies on qualitative research that examine procedures and locations, and the question of ensuring a safe and comfortable range of operation for both sides, show that research usually involves negotiation throughout the course of the study, and yet that it is usually ‘unmarked’ as research data. For instance, studies that examined sexual harassment in the course of interview research (Lee, 1997), and the effect of location on such research (usually in geographically sensitive research) (Chih Hoong, 2003; Elwood and Martin, 2000). These studies interestingly draw attention to material and spatial aspects, which are easily ignored despite – and perhaps because of – their tangible character. In another study (Noy, 2007), I inquired into what happens not within interviews, which I conducted with tourists, but *between* them – outside and in-between the interviews, where I asked about systemic knowledge and connections between interviewees that are not evinced in the words and stories of the interview. This illuminated the tourists’ social networks, which was their collective *maai*. Furthermore, ethnographic observations and participation are essentially spatial practices, and we have rich discussions in class concerning not only the abstract notion of positionality in terms of reflexivity and power-relations, but also positionality taken in a rather concrete and physical way: where is the ethnographer located physically? Since qualitative research focuses on feelings, experiences, memories, identities, relationships and the like, physical and ecological aspects, trivial but by no means banal, do not usually gain the attention they deserve.

In aikidō, training is anchored in physical movement aimed at actual (inter-)somatic contact, so that the spatial nature of the interaction cannot be overlooked. And movement is reciprocal. In qualitative research, interactional choreography should also transpire in the *maai*, a space that is actual and potential. When it is realized within the study’s ‘range of action/effectiveness’, the feeling effect is aesthetic and artful. It embodies a cooperation that is both a tool *for* good qualitative research and a result *of* such research, and is as tangible as it is conceptual.

### *Shodō-o-seisu: controlling the first move*

The third and last concept is *shodō-o-seisu*, which means ‘controlling the first move’. This is one of my favorite concepts, and I like asking about it during aikidō exams. The exams follow a format that consists of a physical section and then a theoretical or conceptual section. First, I ask about the concept itself and its literal meaning, and if the answer is satisfactory, I then present further questions which invite in-depth discussion of the concept. Once the examinees show that they know the literal meaning of *shodō-o-seisu*, one of the questions I like to ask is to *whose* first move does the concept refer? This simple question invites an intricate discussion about the dialogic and kinesthetic relations between participants. It is admittedly also a trick question, because most students too-quickly provide the seemingly obvious answer: in order to avoid being harmed by the attack, one must control the first move of one’s adversary. This answer, though outwardly logical, is insufficient and even misleading. *Shodō-o-seisu* refers in my view primarily to *one’s own* first move, or to the first move of the Self, not the Other. The difference between the two answers is crucial, because the focus of the first is the adversary

and the wish to control her or him, and yet the philosophy of aikidō assumes that the first thing a student must learn is to know oneself: one's body, movements, gestures and feelings. Without a good acquaintance with one's self, without controlling one's own movements and one's 'lived body', one cannot effectively blend with the movements of others. Put paradoxically, one needs to blend with oneself before one can blend with the other, and hastening to control others before one is familiar with one's own movements and potential is disruptive of aikidō.

It is also disruptive of research. Indeed, the applicability of *shodō-o-seisu* to teaching and conducting qualitative inquiry is immediate. First, 'controlling the first move' evokes the basic *reflexivity* and *positionality* of the researcher in the research process and in the field. I refer to a recognition of the significance of movements and actions taken in the course of the research by the researcher: s/he is not external to the field of study (not an 'invisible observer' or 'fly on the wall'); rather, s/he has beliefs and carries meanings regarding the object of his study (Macbeth, 2001). Like baggage of sorts, we schlep our informed and uninformed preconceptions, stereotypes and research questions with us to the field, and it is not until we let them go, or at the least re-negotiate them (anxiously, at times; Noy, 2003), that learning occurs. This point is not easy for beginners to understand, and the questions they pose, and the metaphors they use, reveal that they regard social science research as a detached and objective perspective on what is being studied. While learning and practicing research methods, the students speak of 'obtaining' or 'collecting' data, and stress their desire to 'remain objective', showing little awareness of the research's interactional aspects. Since qualitative research entails interactions at different levels, the students are always 'involved', to some degree, in the observations they conduct. It is undesirable (and largely impossible) to make 'uninvolved observations'.

Second, in both aikidō and qualitative research we try to teach how to create and maintain a *connection* between the partners: the *ukè* and *nagè* in aikidō, and the researcher(s) and study participant(s) in qualitative inquiry. The researcher should be sensitive to the 'moves' of the participants – actions, words, decisions, intentions, with the emphasis here being on recognizing and understanding these moves, rather than controlling them. The researcher needs to recognize the 'first move' made by the participants, and at the same time also be cognizant of her own 'first move'. Just as we can ask where and how aikidō movements begin, we can also ask where and how the research commences, and the answer is by no means simple or banal. In fact, it sometimes captures the narrative of the research in a nutshell.

For instance, there can be several points at which a research begins, and we might think that it started at one point in time, only to discover later that it actually started at some other point in time, of which we were not aware. We might think that it started when the idea first occurred to the researcher during a qualitative methods class, or when she made the first phone call to a potential interviewee, or when the first interview took place, or several weeks later, when the researcher had a significant intellectual or emotional insight, etc. The research can also begin at a number of points, which suggests a plurality. When I ask students where their research started, their answers, supplied in class discussions and in papers they submit, are rich and varied, ranging over a surprising spectrum of temporalities, places and experiences. For some, the research began with the first interview or at the first time they accessed the field, and for others, it started earlier,

in class. Other students describe the study as a realization of ideas they had much earlier (as teenagers or even children), which they finally got to test or experiment with. Others yet say that the research did not start when they first met the informants, but rather when they formed an emotional bond with them (at some meaningful point during the interviews or fieldwork). Finally, some admit that the research they conducted as part of the coursework never started, because it was only a 'trial run' or a 'pilot' and not the 'real thing', unlike the research they plan to conduct for the seminar classes or thesis. In these regards, I find taking fieldnotes – the tradition prerequisite of ethnography – to be effective in allowing them to reflect on their actions and on those of their informants. Through fieldnote-taking they are able to simultaneously participate and reflect, be actors in and audiences of the research drama, and it is through this practice that they can have a sense of when their research had begun, and how it progresses.

In any case, questions on *shodō*, or the 'first move', which is the starting point of the study, force the students to reflect on their research moves, and to acknowledge not only its formal procedures and facets, but also the internal and experiential development of the qualitative process: the changing degrees of engagement by the researcher and participants and their dynamic positionalities in the field. Most of the students' replies reflect a growing sensibility to the movements *in* the research field and to the movements *of* the field itself: to the physical (but also emotional) journey of the researcher and the participants, which together comprise the choreography of the qualitative research process (Janesick, 1994).

## **Conclusion: intersomatic dialogue in class and in research**

This article is born of my dual 'membership' (Garfinkel) and converging habituses (Bourdieu) in two communities of practice and in two respected knowledge disciplines: qualitative research and aikidō, and of my reflections on possible shared concepts and practices of teaching. The art of aikidō, which I called a 'qualitative martial art', has much in common with the art of qualitative research (Knowles and Cole, 2008) and with its artful teaching (Ruckdeschel and Shaw, 2002). Both are fields in which knowledge is produced, shaped, shared and transmitted through embodied interaction and dialogue between the participants/practitioners. Recognizing this common denominator allows insights regarding the teaching and practice of both fields, in a way that challenges the authoritative, monologic and static definitions of knowledge. I argue that, not only in aikidō but also in qualitative methods, participants together take part in creating a state of connection and cooperation. This is an ethnomethodological insight, that proposes that a range of everyday physical and discursive practices gives rise to situations of interpersonal sense of togetherness, and that this is not a trivial phenomenon but one that merits interest and study. Both aikidō and qualitative research involve a system of materialized interactional movements, where the main principle is reaching a state of cooperation between the participants.

Crucially, for both qualitative communities the dialogic situation *itself* contains within it the knowledge sought, which is not positivistic knowledge or a sort of entity that exists and must be collected or picked up, like a stone. In qualitative research and in aikidō, the

state of *ai-ki* (harmony of movement) is simultaneously the means and the end. As Bruno Latour (2004: 214) put it, it is “The action of knowledge”, or how knowledge is not represented, but interactionally enacted. My claims are aimed at *teaching*, because in light of this, the teaching is inseparable from the taught. If in class we present an authoritative model of knowledge (with the teacher playing to the role of the unquestioned ‘expert’), but attempt at the same time to teach interpretative and dialogic methods, we – and surely our students – run into contradictions and impasses. Hence the three concepts that I shared from the sphere of aikidō, in the hope of generating fruitful and beneficial insights within the world of qualitative inquiry. *Shoshin-ni-kaeru* – returning to the beginner’s mind, *maai* – acting within the research range of effectiveness, and lastly *shodō-o-seisu* – controlling the first move, present a few concepts used in teaching harmonious and artful interactions in aikidō; the art of the encounter. Truly, they are not academic concepts, but proposals for embodied senses and (co-)mobilities. In the cultural ‘translation’ from the dōjō to academic pedagogy, I hope that they retain their initial context, and help widen the embodied experience of both teaching research methods and conducting qualitative research.

## Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

## Notes

1. I briefly venture beyond the present scope, suggesting that Ueshiba’s charismatic and symbolic figure played a crucial role in transforming a set of pre-modern martial techniques into a modern popular sport (aikidō), and that his actions and figure resembles those of Kanō Jigorō, in the genesis of modern Jūdō, and those of Mestre Bimba, in the genesis of modern Capoeira. About the latter, Downy (2005: 61) writes that he ‘symbolically closed the age of epic violence’. The point is that these and other ‘symbolic personas’ (Handelman, 1985) acted in more or less the same time, and deserve research.
2. I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for pointing this out.

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