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Un-doing Gendered Power Relations Through Martial Arts?*

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ABSTRACT

According to gender theories there is a power differential between men and women that leaves women vulnerable to violence. This paper seeks to analyze whether martial arts training has the potential to improve women's safety by challenging perceptions of their vulnerability. Findings from in-depth interviews with fourteen male and female martial artists show that, although martial artists hold normative beliefs about men's and women's bodies and their self-defense capabilities in general, they recognize that martial arts training can challenge stereotypical views about women's weakness and vulnerability to violence. Specifically, women described how they gained self-confidence and learned to protect themselves and men explained how they saw female martial artists as equals when it came to their physical abilities. As such, martial arts training may be one potential avenue for un-doing the inequitable power relations that exist between women and men.

Keywords: Gender, Power Relations, Martial Arts, Physical Feminism, Body

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Introduction

Violence against women is a serious social problem that has gained public attention in the past few decades. The magnitude of this problem is demonstrated by findings from the National Violence against Women and Men Survey where approximately 1.9 million women are physically assaulted and 302,000 women are raped in the United States each year (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). A gendered power imbalance underlies this problem because the perpetrators of violence against women are almost exclusively men, and most often someone they know (i.e. acquaintances, relatives, or romantic partners) (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2006). According to gender theories such as physical feminism (McCaughey, 1997) and "doing gender" (West & Zimmerman, 1987) there is a power differential between men and women that leaves women vulnerable to male violence. These unequal power relations stem from societal views that women's bodies are weaker and women are less capable of protecting themselves than men. Consequently, women learn to be afraid and report more fear of crime than men (Wilcox, Jordan, & Pritchard, 2006). In contrast, men are perceived to be stronger and more aggressive than women and some men feel the need to prove their masculinity through physical confrontations with men and women (Messerschmidt, 1993).

While there are unequal power relations between men and women that are imbedded in societies and demonstrated through male violence against women worldwide, it is less clear how to solve this problem. One potential avenue for change is martial arts, which challenges the portrayal of masculinity and femininity through men's and women's bodies. Martial arts training is designed to enhance personal safety awareness, prepare students to defend themselves, promote self-control and nonviolence, and strengthen the mind and body. Also, martial arts is unique in that it can be learned by any individual regardless of gender or body type. One of the male martial artists that I interviewed, Eson, typifies how martial arts training has the potential to un-do inequitable power relations between men and women by teaching women the skills necessary to defend themselves: "*Women who are martial artists and dedicate themselves to the martial arts, they are just as formidable of a weapon as a male is because martial arts are designed to make anyone, man, woman, child…able to defend themselves.*" The ideology of martial arts has the potential to challenge normative images of women's bodies and their personal safety. For example, women can build strength and learn self-defense techniques (Hollander, 2004). In addition, men have the opportunity to see trained female martial artists who may not fit into normative perceptions of feminine frailty.

Although martial artists are exposed to training that can potentially challenge conventional gender messages, they routinely experience societal messages that promote female weakness. This paper focuses on how fourteen American martial artist's perceptions of women's safety are simultaneously influenced by cultural messages and their martial arts training. Findings show that, although martial artists hold normative beliefs about men's and women's bodies and their self-defense capabilities in general, they recognize that martial arts training can challenge stereotypical views about women's weakness and vulnerability to violence. For example, women described how they gained self-confidence and learned to protect themselves and men explained how they saw female martial artists as equals who were capable of defending themselves. Martial arts training may be one potential resource for un-doing the inequitable power relations that exist between women and men.

Theory

Doing Gender

According to gender theories there is a difference between sex and gender. Sex refers to the biological or anatomical differences between males and females while gender is a socially constructed understanding of what it means to be a man or a woman in a particular society (Fenstermaker, West, & Zimmerman, 1991). Gender theorists believe that individuals practice socially acceptable gendered behaviors by "doing gender" (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Thus, behaviors that reinforce gender differences are "gendered."

Masculinity and femininity are the situational expressions of gendered structured-action; these are created by our actions but dependent on the situation and other factors such as race, class, and sexual orientation (Messerschmidt, 2000). There are a continuum of masculinities and femininities, with the idealized types at either end, referred to as "hegemonic masculinity" and "emphasized femininity" (Messerschmidt, 2004). There are also subordinated (those given less value based on race, class, sexual orientation) and oppositional (those that resist or challenge the ideal) masculinities and femininities (Messerschmidt, 2004). Martial artists may portray oppositional masculinities and femininities because their training challenges normative views about men's and women's bodies.

Hegemonic masculine traits such as paid labor, heterosexuality, uncontrollable sexuality, subordination of women, aggression,

individualism, control, and competitiveness are all highly valued in a patriarchal society such as the United States (Messerschmidt, 1993). As a result, some men may use rape or aggression towards women to demonstrate their masculinity. Martial arts is one healthier outlet for demonstrating masculinity because through their training, men can learn how to control their aggression.

Emphasized femininity is at the other end of the continuum from hegemonic masculinity and suggests that ideal women are "passive, dependent, emotional, helpless, inadequate, ladylike, inactive, and incapable of protecting themselves" (Searles & Follansbee, 1984, p. 66). Women experience higher rates of rape and domestic violence and report more fear of crime in general compared to men (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998; Wilcox et al., 2006). Women who perceive themselves as weak and in need of protection may be more likely to participate in self-defense or martial arts classes. Martial arts training can provide women with the skills to protect themselves which in turn, may reduce their fear of crime and victimization.

Physical Feminism

Physical feminism has recently been used to describe the promotion of women's liberation through empowering their bodies along with their minds (Castelnuovo & Guthrie, 1998; Dowling, 2000; McCaughey, 1997; Roth & Basow, 2004). McCaughey (1997) explains, "Hence a feminism that gives primacy to the (re)construction of the body is a physical feminism. If theories *are* practices, then feminism, like the patriarchy that it hopes to eliminate, is physical" (p. 201). She also explains how self-defense can disrupt our rape culture, "as women embrace their power to thwart assaults and interrupt a script of feminine vulnerability and availability, they challenge the invulnerability and entitlement of men and, by extension, the inevitability of men's violence and women's victimization" (McCaughey, 1997, p. 178). Through self-defense and physical empowerment, women are challenging gender norms surrounding men's aggression and violence. Physical feminism challenges men's perceived physical superiority and women's inferiority as a means of empowering women to relinquish their fear of men and sexual assault.

Although not everyone believes women should engage in self-defense classes that promote the use of physical resistance if necessary, McCaughey (1997) retorts that

> Keeping women away from violence, or denying the aggressive potential in them, preserves the association of violence and masculinity, and upholds a false similarity within the category 'women.' It also maintains men in a class of 'protectors' and women in a class of 'the protected' (Stiehm 1982) - an ideological arrangement that justifies heterosexism and perpetuates men's violence against women. (p. 200)

Gender theories suggest that characteristics of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity reinforce male dominance and aggression towards women. For example, if the ideal man is aggressive and domineering while the ideal woman is passive and incapable of protecting herself, then this establishes a power imbalance that sets the context for men's violence against women. Physical feminism is a movement that challenges societal ideals of masculinity and femininity that promote women's subordination and victimization. They advocate for women's empowerment through their bodies as a way to challenge their perceived weakness and vulnerability to violence. There are three underlying facets of these theories pertinent to understanding violence against women and the potential for martial arts training to overcome unequal power relations between men and women: size and strength comparisons between men's and women's bodies, the existence of a rape culture and prevalence of violence against women in the United States, and the benefits of self-defense training for women's empowerment.

Previous Literature

Gendered Bodies

In general, Americans today tend to believe that men are stronger than women. Some physiological size differences between females and males do exist, but these are exaggerated by popular perception. On average men are taller, have a larger body structure, and have more muscle mass compared to women (Frayer & Wolpoff, 1985; Rogers & Mukherjee, 1992). In general women are more flexible and have a lower center of gravity than men (Dowling, 2000). While there are some average physical differences between men and women, there is also substantial overlap in the distributions of these characteristics. For instance, the average man is only 10-15% larger than the average woman and there is a wide variance in each group such that the strongest women are stronger than the weakest men (Dowling, 2000; Larsen, 2003). Almost all of the differences in strength are related to muscle

mass, but when relative muscle mass is compared, the differences shrink or disappear (Roth & Basow, 2004).

Gender differences in size, strength, and ability are also culturally produced and reinforced through the socialization of boys and girls. From an early age, boys are encouraged to develop their physical bodies more than girls so that they develop the skills that are often used as measures of strength, such as throwing a ball (Dowling, 2000). Learned weakness is evident in studies which show that girls self-rate their skills much lower than boys even though the actual differences are quite small (Dowling, 2000). Males are held to a higher physical standard which gives the impression that they are stronger, even though some females can meet those standards and some males cannot (Dowling, 2000). Culturally, visible differences between men and women are exaggerated to reinforce masculine and feminine ideals (Messerschmitt, 1986, 1997, 2004).

Although men and women's biological strength differences are smaller than often assumed and women can develop their strength through training, there is resistance to changing cultural perceptions of gendered physical differences. For example, Dworkin (2001) found a self-imposed 'glass ceiling' effect on women's potential to build muscle mass among females who worked out. These women actively modified their exercise to prohibit their muscles from becoming overly defined to avoid jeopardizing their femininity. Even female bodybuilders, whose goal is to develop muscle, face resistance. Female bodybuilders are penalized for having muscles that are over-developed because they cross the line into masculinity (Choi, 2003; Dowling, 2000). Instead, they are judged on other more subjective feminine characteristics, such as the tone and proportion of their muscles, gracefulness, beauty (i.e., hair, nails, and makeup), and sex appeal (Choi, 2003). Women have also been discouraged from participating in aggressive sports because aggression is a masculine characteristic. Female athletes who do participate in aggressive sports can be stigmatized as lesbians or described as 'mannish' because they appear too masculine (Dowling, 2000; Lawler, 2002; Young, 1997).

Previous studies on the sociology of the body show that differences between men's and women's bodies are built into cultural definitions of masculinity and femininity, and there is resistance to crossing these boundaries. To maintain their femininity women must be less muscular and aggressive than men, which reinforces a power differential that benefits men and leaves women vulnerable to violence. Martial arts is one avenue through which women can learn to overcome this power imbalance. Ideally, men and

women of all body sizes and shapes should be able to learn martial arts because the techniques are designed to rely on skill, not strength. Men and women often train together in martial arts classes unlike most other contact sports such as rugby or hockey where there are usually distinct men's and women's teams. In addition, the rules for martial arts classes and competitions are the same for men and women. Other sports divide competitors based solely on gender, whereas martial arts competitions are generally divided by additional characteristics such as age, weight, and/or rank to control for differences that might benefit one competitor over another. Although martial arts has the potential to challenge cultural differences between men's and women's bodies, strong societal pressures to conform to gender norms still exist.

Rape Culture

Perceived physical differences between men and women are built into the foundation of a rape culture because men's aggression toward women is based on the acceptance that men's bodies are more powerful than women's bodies (Buchwald, Fletcher, & Roth, 1993). Victimization statistics provide evidence of the existence and magnitude of a rape culture in the United States where approximately 302,000 women are raped each year (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). Rape is a crime that disproportionately affects women; approximately 90% of all rape victims are female (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2006).

While women's experiences of violence are real, their vulnerability to violence is exaggerated through public discourse and the media because they are viewed as less capable of protecting themselves, which can lead to heightened fear. Women are afraid of sexual assault in particular and this fear generalizes to other crimes as well (Ferraro, 1996; Fisher & Sloan, 2003; Warr, 1985). Contrary to popular perceptions about women's vulnerability to crime, men are more likely to be the victim of a violent crime overall compared to women (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2006). This is an illustration of how powerful cultural perceptions about women's vulnerability can be.

Although women are more likely to be victimized by someone they know, they internalize a public image of 'stranger danger' from crime prevention literature and media messages (Hughes, Marshall, & Sherrill, 2003; Stanko, 1995), which offer precautionary advice to women on how to stay safe from a male stranger,

> To avert danger- the lurking male menace [other], we are advised how to travel locally and afar ('with petrol in our car'), how to dress, how to walk, how to talk to a potential intimidator, how to appear assertive and in control of our modern lives (original brackets and parentheses) (Stanko, 1997, p. 488).

Research consistently indicates that women's perceived risk of male violence and the negotiation of their safety is part of their daily lives (Gilchrist, Bannister, Ditton, & Farrall, 1998; Stanko, 1997). Common sense dictates that women who are afraid of and vulnerable to crimes such as rape need protection. It is sadly ironic that male partners or close relatives are seen as women's protectors, yet these are the same men who are most likely to be their abusers. Although women's protection is usually viewed as coming from an external source such as a male partner or mace, protection can come in many forms such as self-defense or martial arts training.

Self-Defense Training

Women's vulnerability to crime and need for protection is embedded in common understandings of femininity and societal messages about women's safety. Self-defense training, including martial arts, is one avenue that women can take to protect themselves. The women's self-defense movement is unique in that it focuses on prevention as well as reactive measures to violence and it is aimed at women's self-reliance on their own bodies instead of seeking external protection (Searles & Berger, 1987). The unfortunate and unintended disadvantage of women taking responsibility for their own safety is that it can lead to victim blaming if a crime is committed (Stanko, 1997).

The words 'martial arts' and 'self-defense' are often used interchangeably in the self-defense literature because many women's self-defense courses are taught by martial artists and martial arts classes can promote self-defense abilities (Madden, 1995). The main difference is the focus on women in self-defense classes where males are often not allowed to participate as students, although they do sometimes teach the classes (Madden & Sokol, 1997). Another difference is that women's self-defense classes explicitly and exclusively concentrate on dangerous situations that women would more likely come across. In addition, women's self-defense classes highlight mental and physical techniques needed for self-protection, whereas martial arts classes can also include meditation, forms, weapon training, and sparring for competition. Although there are some differences, both

women's self-defense and martial arts are designed to teach mental and physical skills that could be used for self-protection.

The benefits of self-defense training can include physical and psychological empowerment for women. For instance, studies of self-defense and martial arts training reveal important benefits for improving women's safety such as reduced fear of crime (Hollander, 2004; McDaniel, 1993), increased confidence (De Welde, 2003; Hollander, 2004; Madden & Sokol, 1997), increased self-efficacy (De Welde, 2003; Madden & Sokol, 1997), increased sense of control to prevent an attack (Madden, 1995; Madden, 1990), increased ability to stop an attempted rape (Brecklin & Ullman, 2005), reduced feelings of vulnerability (Madden, 1995), positive therapeutic outcomes for sexual assault survivors (David, Simpson, & Cotton, 2006), and an increase in women's perceptions of their strength compared to men (Hollander, 2004).

Much of the previous research has focused on students from women's self-defense classes instead of general martial arts classes. An important advantage of studying martial arts students is the inclusion of men. When men are included in studies on self-defense they are used primarily as a control group and the focus has been on self-perceptions of their own safety instead of how they perceive women's safety. Considering men are most often the perpetrators of violence against women, it is important to know how they perceive women's safety and if personal experiences, such as martial arts training, could impact those perceptions.

Statement of the Problem

The current study seeks to combine three disparate literatures about gendered bodies, rape culture, and the benefits of self-defense training to understand how martial artists negotiate two prominent lenses in their lives, one as a male or female and the other as a martial artist, to answer the question: "can martial arts un-do societal messages that perpetuate unequal power relations between men and women?" To accomplish this task the present study draws on in-depth interviews with eight male and six female martial artists from the United States to understand how perceptions of women's safety are influenced simultaneously by cultural messages about men's and women's vulnerabilities and their martial arts training. Power relations underlying violence against women are perpetuated at a societal level and solutions for this problem need to challenge the power imbalance between men and women. Considering martial arts can be learned by anyone and the techniques promote self-protection, martial arts is one

possible avenue for un-doing inequitable power relations between men and women.

Methods

In qualitative research the researcher is the instrument; therefore, I discuss how my background sets up an important context for the study. I came to this project with three lenses: as a sociologist, as a woman, and as a martial artist. As a sociologist I am aware of the socialization process that encourages boys to be more physical than girls, the learned weakness that girls often develop, and the cultural motivations to control women. As a woman I am aware of the rape culture that I live in and the fear that I have for my safety. As a martial artist I am constantly questioning the practicality of my martial arts training in self-defense terms. I wanted to combine all three lenses to better understand how societal messages about men's and women's safety are integrated with and perhaps challenged by martial arts training. As a martial artist, I had the advantage of being an insider and may have been granted greater access to this community than an outsider.

Sample

This study is based on fourteen semi-structured interviews with martial artists in a college town in the Midwestern United States. An internet search was conducted to locate martial arts schools. Of the eight schools listed and contacted through a phone call, six head instructors gave me permission to post flyers with information about the study and how to contact me in their schools. In terms of the other two schools, one was being remodeled and the other did not return my phone calls. The types of martial arts represented at those schools ranged from the more popular Taekwondo and Karate to Judo, Jujitsu, Hapkido, Aikido, and Krav Maga. Martial artists, both instructors and students, emailed or called to set up an interview time. Nine of the interviews took place on the local university campus; two at their martial arts school; two at a coffee shop or restaurant; and one at their home. All interviews were audio taped and lasted between thirty-five minutes to one hour and forty-five minutes, with an average length of forty-five minutes. All fourteen interviews were transcribed verbatim. Each respondent received an incentive of ten dollars to participate in the interview. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the author's institution.

Participants

The majority of the respondents (i.e., 12) were White. Respondents were between nineteen and forty-four years of age and half of the respondents

were married. Taekwondo, Karate, Hapkido, Judo, and Jiu-Jitsu were the martial arts currently practiced, with an over representation of Taekwondo (i.e., 7 of the 14). Several participants indicated that they had practiced other martial arts in the past. There was a wide range of martial arts experience from four months to twenty-four years, with a median of four and a half years (see Table 1). Most martial arts schools have ten color belt ranks that signify beginner and intermediate skill levels; a black belt represents advanced training. All of the martial arts students held color belt ranks and all instructors held black belts. The majority (i.e., 11) of the martial artists practiced at least three times per week.

Table 1. Description of Martial Artists

Interview #	Pseudonym	Sex	Length of Training	Primary Martial Art Practiced
1	James	Male	15 years	Hapkido
2	Max	Male	2 years	Karate
3	Colin	Male	16 years	Jiu-Jitsu
4	Paul	Male	4 months	Karate
5	Eson	Male	13 years	Judo
6	Dan	Male	18 years	Taekwondo
7	Shane	Male	4 years	Taekwondo
8	Derek	Male	4.5 years	Taekwondo
9	Julie	Female	4 years	Taekwondo
10	Beth	Female	2.5 years	Taekwondo
11	Katie	Female	14 years	Taekwondo
12	Christine	Female	4 years	Taekwondo
13	Ying	Female	6 years	Karate
14	Jackie	Female	24 years	Karate

Procedure

The interview included open-ended questions about martial artists training and perceptions of personal safety. Most respondents were asked the question "When thinking about your personal safety, are there any advantages or disadvantages to being male/female?" Responses to this question included the majority of the recurrent ideas that became the main themes for this paper. Themes were allowed to evolve naturally from the words of the respondents during the process of open coding (Charmez, 1995). Martial artists talked about safety from two lenses: a gender lens where they talked about men and women as two generalized groups and a martial arts lens where they discussed how their martial arts training challenges some of the societal messages about men's and women's safety.

Three themes emerged from the data to encompass how martial artists perceived women's safety: *Unequal Physical Power between Men and Women; Women More Vulnerable to Crime, Especially Rape;* and *Martial Arts as a Physical Power Equalizer.* After these themes were identified, the process of focus coding began where the most exemplary quotes were isolated for inclusion in the text (Charmez, 1995). Pseudonyms are used to preserve the confidentiality of respondents.

Results

Unequal Physical Power between Men and Women

Martial artists clearly articulated the perception that there is a physical power differential based on body size and strength between men and women in society. The most common safety advantage for men was their greater size and strength, while the most common disadvantage for women was their smaller size and lack of strength. Eson, a male with thirteen years of martial arts experience, typified the cultural perception that men are stronger than women: "*I'm going to say that size and strength have their advantages, and most men are larger and stronger than most women…some men are less, but as a whole, most men are larger and stronger than women*." Dan, an instructor with eighteen years of martial arts training, went one step further and explicitly made a connection between the importance of his larger, male body with regard to his own safety in public,

> *I'm going for a jog and someone comes out on the bike path, ya, I don't think I need to worry about it. But I don't think I need to worry about it because I'm a thirty year old, six foot tall, 195 pound male. I'm probably really not any safer having done martial arts than not.*

He felt safe not because of his eighteen years of martial arts experience, but because of his large, male body. Men who are advantaged when it comes to physical power because of their body size do not have to rely as heavily on other sources of self-protection, such as martial arts training. This is not the case for men and women who feel their body size puts them at a physical disadvantage.

Female martial artists agreed that women as a collective group were viewed as weaker than men and at a physical power disadvantage. Jackie, with twenty-four years of martial arts experience, described the physical disadvantages women face compared to men, "*There are lots of disadvantages; one being size, muscle mass, strength, speed, all those things*." Beth, a Taekwondo

student with two and a half years of experience, reiterates the same sentiment, but describes women's weakness as a societal perception instead of an absolute fact, "*We're viewed as weaker, passive, less likely to make a scene or fight back*." Ying, a Karate student with six years of training, expressed a fatalistic view of men's greater physical power in a self-defense situation, "*Sometimes I feel so frustrated because you can have many different options, but if the guy really wants to do bad things with you, he can*." All of these women make the connection between being female and feeling vulnerable in a physical confrontation with a male because of men's greater physical power due to their size and strength.

Although the overwhelming consensus among male and female martial artists is that women are perceived to be, or actually are, weaker than men overall, when male and female martial artists talked about their own bodies it became clear that there is more variability in body size than cultural perceptions permit. A couple of men talked about insecurities due to a shorter or less muscular body compared to other men. One woman discussed how her body was larger and more built than other women. In addition, women's perceived weakness was generally considered a disadvantage by martial artists, but one Taekwondo student with four years of experience, Julie, suggests that it could potentially be an advantage because people are more likely to help: "*You are sort of perceived as a damsel in distress, at least in our culture. People are more likely to call the police or even stop and help if it's a woman versus a man*." Even though this quote is meant to show how women's helplessness can be a self-defense advantage, it still highlights women's perceived vulnerability in self-defense situations.

Women More Vulnerable to Crime, Especially Rape

The perceived unequal balance of power between men's and women's bodies is extended to self-defense situations as well. Not only were women perceived to be more susceptible to crime in general, but one crime stood out as a particularly ominous threat for women: rape. For example, Colin, an instructor with sixteen years of martial arts training, acknowledged that men and women are fighting for different reasons and women usually have more to lose:

> *I would say I'm more likely to get into a fight than a female, but if a confrontation does happen then the female is fighting for more than I am. I mean she's trying to defend her body, whereas I'm trying to defend my honor. With a guy you can look across the room and get in a fight at a bar. If a girl were to get attacked…by a guy, [she's] trying not to get raped or killed.*

Colin sets up two very different self-defense contexts for men and women: men are defending their honor in bar fights with other men, while women are defending their bodies from being raped or killed by men.

Male and female martial artists alike believed that women were more likely to be the victims of crime. For example, with regard to safety disadvantages for women Julie said, "*I think there are a lot of disadvantages; women are more likely to be attacked than men*." Dan agreed with Julie that women were more likely to be victims of crime than men, but he also made an important observation that the perpetrators were likely to be someone they knew: "*Well statistically…women are more likely to be the victims of robbery, muggings, violent assault, although that is usually their boyfriend or husband, [and] sexual assault, which is also sometimes their boyfriend or husband*." While these quotes explicitly focus on the vulnerability of women to crime, Eson makes the same point but from the reverse perspective, that men are less vulnerable to crime: "*Also, the assailant might be more apprehensive or scared to attack a male person*." Likewise, Paul, with four months of Karate experience, explained that men were less susceptible to sexual crimes: "*Ya, there are a lot of advantages (chuckles). One, you don't have to worry about rape or things of a sexual nature usually*."

Beth told a story to illustrate how women negotiate their safety from male sexual harassment on a daily basis, which is something she felt men did not have to do. One of Beth's female friends had a guy grope her on a public park bench and now Beth was afraid to be alone in a park, but her fiancé couldn't understand why. She responded to him by saying, "*You wouldn't have to worry about some woman coming up and grabbing at your testicles*," we did our interview on a public bench and she continued, "*Whereas if I were sitting here by myself I would be slightly concerned how close the person next to me is sitting; making sure they aren't going to touch or grab at me*." Beth's fiancé could not relate to her feelings of vulnerability. From a gender lens, martial artists talked about women's perceived weakness and vulnerability to violence compared to men's on a societal level, but when they used their martial arts lens they discussed how their training could un-do some of those weaknesses.

Martial Arts as a Physical Power Equalizer

Martial artists talked about how their training could equalize size and strength differences through technique and skill. When I asked Eson the question: 'When thinking about your safety, are there any advantages or disadvantages to being a male?' he made a clear distinction between martial

artists and non-martial artists. He saw physical size and strength as more advantageous for men outside of martial arts because they could rely on strength, but within martial arts men and women were on a more equal playing field:

> *On a non-martial arts level…I'm going to say that size and strength have their advantages, and most men are larger and stronger than most women…some men are less, but as a whole most men are larger and stronger than women. So most people who are not martial artists…I'm going to say that yes, there is some advantage to being male…If we are martial artists though…well, in that sense, women who are martial artists and dedicate themselves to the martial arts, they are just as formidable of a weapon as a male is because martial arts are designed to make anyone, man, woman, child…able to defend themselves. So if we say martial artists I'll say no, [i.e., there are no advantages to being male] but if we say average Joe Schmo on the street, ya probably [i.e., advantageous to being male].*

Other men also discussed the fact that they viewed female martial artists as physically capable of defending themselves against men because of their training, which goes against stereotypical notions of femininity. Paul contrasted female martial artists' small bodies with their advanced training in a way that made him appreciate what they could physically do to him if the need arose:

> *I have watched some of the black belts or brown belts…some of the girls out there. I would like to see what they could do to me because I know they could really hurt me really easily…It's amazing how they look so petite and cute but I know deep down that they could really hurt me if they wanted to. They are very confident in what they could or couldn't do.*

In addition, women were not always aware of their strength or skill and sometimes it took their fellow male martial artists to point it out. Christine, a female martial artist with four years of Taekwondo experience, had a larger, more muscular body than her female peers. While her male peers connected their stronger bodies with a safety advantage, Christine did not see that in herself until the men told her how it felt when she fought with them.

> *I'm not a small person, and when I fight in the school, they kind of tease me because I don't necessarily realize how hard I can hit, it does kind of hurt I guess (laughs). I don't see that in myself, I don't perceive that, like when I have to fight some of the bigger guys, when I hit them, I don't think it's hurting them, but then later they will tell me 'oh yeah, it really did hurt' (laughs).*

Martial arts training was seen as a potential resource that could overcome a physical power disadvantage for smaller, weaker women facing larger, stronger male attackers. For instance, Jackie explained how it is possible for women to use their martial arts skills and techniques to overcome men's strength advantage, but it takes hard work:

> *Women tend to be more observant and pick things up. A lot of the women who train, they pick skills up quicker too than a lot of the men that train. They look and they observe and they can get better technique quicker than a lot of the guys do. There is a little bit of a trade off. You have that strength aspect, but the women tend to be more technical. It's hard to overcome that strength; you gotta have the technical part to work on that.*

Katie, a Taekwondo instructor with fourteen years of training, talked about how important the element of surprise is when it comes to trained female martial artists overcoming their physical power disadvantage.

> *I think it's just unexpected…women are more often victims just because we have a tendency to be physically weaker, which we are, and I think a man just wouldn't expect a woman to come out fighting and know where to hit and how to hit.*

Female martial artists talked about how the physical skills they learned through their martial arts training helped them feel more confident in their ability to protect themselves in a self-defense situation. For instance, Julie says, "*[I am] more confident in my physical abilities, and that gives me more confidence in my outward expression of how I walk [and] things like that*." She described how she is confident to rely on herself instead of other people because of her martial arts experience. Self-confidence is important for women to feel autonomous and in control of their own safety. Christine talked about how sparring (controlled fighting) experience in Taekwondo helped her feel more confident in her ability to protect herself in a real situation:

> *I just think having fought so many times and having sparred so many times it doesn't scare me…If you get clocked on the back of the head and you get your bell rung, unless you are falling down, most of the time you don't stop unless you need to, so…you keep going. Which helps you realize, ok ya, if someone hits me on the street pretty hard then I can keep going and I'll be alright.*

Beth talked about how she still felt that size was important, but perhaps less so now that she had some other skills to rely on:

> *I think size would play a part in it, but for the most part I have the general idea of what I can do to get myself out of a bad situation. I wouldn't necessarily win the fight as in knocking the person out, but to get away and get to safety, I'm fairly confident I can always do that.*

Although women were more confident in their self-defense abilities, they were not foolishly overconfident. They still had a firm grasp on the reality that self-defense situations are fear-provoking, largely unpredictable, and something they would rather avoid. For instance, Jackie said:

> *I feel just as nervous as the next person. You just don't know what's out there these days…Martial arts training doesn't make me feel like I can go out and ask for it. I can walk my dog at 2 a.m. and not worry about getting a gun in my face, no. I would totally avoid a situation like that.*

Any self-defense situation is going to be frightening and all of the women agreed they would rather avoid that situation altogether, but most women felt more confident in their ability to protect themselves because of their martial arts experience. In this way martial arts training is one avenue to challenge societal messages that women are vulnerable to crime because they are unable to defend themselves.

Discussion and Conclusion

Similar to previous literature on gendered bodies, the martial artists interviewed for the current study were well aware of societal perceptions and stereotypes that men's bodies are bigger, stronger and more powerful than women's bodies. In addition, they provided further evidence that when the generalities are explored on an individual level there is substantial variability in men's and women's bodies. Male and female martial artists demonstrated that they have internalized societal messages consistent with a rape culture because they perceive women to be more vulnerable to violence than men. Specifically, they focus on rape as one of women's biggest vulnerabilities. Consistent with previous literature on the benefits of self-defense training for women, female martial artists described how their training provided them with self-defense skills that increased how confident they felt in their ability to defend themselves. This study extends these findings by also interviewing male martial artists to examine how their perceptions of women's safety are influenced by their training. Findings show that male martial artists contrast female martial artists with their generalizations about women because they see them more as equals due to the skills they demonstrate during training. The female martial artists defy

perceptions of weak, vulnerable women who are afraid and incapable of protecting themselves.

The current findings support the physical feminism movement that suggests women would benefit from engaging their bodies in addition to their minds to fight against a rape culture that reinforces women's weakness and vulnerability to male violence. Dowling (2000) suggests that the end of the 'frailty myth' and women's fear of rape will come when "Physical equality…through self-defense courses that level the fighting field between people of unequal size and strength-puts an end to domination…By *making* themselves physically equal, women can at last make themselves free" (p. 259). Martial arts is one possible avenue for doing just that; it levels out the unequal power relations between men and women by teaching women how to defend themselves and showing men that not all women are weak and unable or unwilling to fight back.

This study makes several important contributions to the literature on violence against women. First, it demonstrates that martial arts training has the potential to impact how female martial artists view their own bodies and their self-defense abilities. Second, it also influences how male martial artists perceive their female counterparts. Third, martial arts can teach women necessary self-defense skills and increase their confidence in their ability to defend themselves. As a result of this, male martial artists may view women as strong and capable of fighting back. Although this study is an important step toward equalizing power relations between men and women through martial arts, there is more to be done.

There are several ways in which the current study can inform future research. Even though there are clear benefits to martial arts training for perceptions of women's safety, not everyone will want to join martial arts. As such, future studies should focus on additional sports such as hockey or lacrosse to understand how men and women in these sports perceive women's safety as a result of their training. In addition, because the current study focused on one moment in time to see how martial artist's perceptions of women's safety are influenced by societal norms and martial arts training simultaneously, future research should examine these perceptions over time to see how they change. For example, martial artists could be interviewed before they start their training and then periodically throughout to see how perceptions of women's safety evolve over time.

In conclusion, the answer to the question: "can martial arts un-do societal messages that perpetuate unequal power relations between men and

women?" is a qualified yes. Female martial artists were able to see how their bodies defied societal messages of feminine weakness and vulnerability. In addition, as a result of shared training the males saw less inequity between female martial artists and other men in terms of their ability to defend themselves. Martial arts can un-do societal views about women's safety by providing oppositional messages to the dominant norms. There are still underlying societal perceptions, however, regarding women's weakness and vulnerability in general. Changing these perceptions will take time, but martial arts takes us one step closer to achieving this goal.

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