

CONTRIBUTOR

Maya Maor specializes in the sociology of the body, health, illness and social stigma; in the fields of fat identity and resistance to fat stigma, gender in the martial arts and social issues in gender and health.

FIGHTING GENDER STEREOTYPES

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE MARTIAL ARTS, PHYSICAL FEMINISM AND SOCIAL CHANGE

MAYA MAOR

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ABSTRACT

In the past, some scholars have assumed that women's empowerment through participation in sports, particularly male-identified sports, would result in a decrease in gender differences and performances of femininity. Recently, however, scholars have suggested that performances of femininity are not necessarily detrimental to gender empowerment, and furthermore that strategic use of them may be subversive. On the basis of my auto-ethnography and interviews with men and women who practice martial arts, I explicate the unique social conditions that make full-contact martial arts a fertile ground for gender subversive appropriation in terms of: 1. close and reciprocal bodily contact between men and women, 2. the need to learn new regimes of embodiment, and 3. the paradoxical effects of male dominance in the field. I then describe two specific mechanisms through which subversive appropriation takes place: formation of queer identities and male embodied nurturance. While the first mechanism relies on women's appropriation of performances of masculinity, the second relies on men's appropriation of performances of femininity.

GENDER AND THE MARTIAL ARTS

While women's involvement in many sports has the potential to challenge normative gender roles, martial arts is especially well-suited for studying how physical activity can change gender hierarchies [Kavoura, Ryba, and Chroni 2015; Channon, Quinney, Khomutova, and Matthews 2018]. First, in present-day Western societies, practicing martial arts is still considered a predominantly male activity.¹ While there have always been women who have insisted on participating in the martial arts or in combat sports, their participation, at least in recent Western history, has been restricted [Oppliger 2013; Jennings 2014; Quinney 2015].

For example, while women in the 18th century were occasionally allowed to wrestle at traveling circuses or carnival shows, they were portrayed as a sexualized spectacle or freak show. In the 19th century, Victorian-era women were repeatedly arrested for boxing [Oppliger 2013; Jennings 2014; Quinney 2015]. It was only in 1993 that USA Boxing allowed women to compete in amateur events, and women were not allowed to wrestle or box in the Olympics until very recently (2004 and 2012 respectively) [Quinney 2015]. Furthermore, the media and combat sports organizations like the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) continue to stigmatize women fighters and to frame women fighters in terms of attributes other than their athletic skills, such as their appearance or their sexuality [Quinney 2015; Channon, Quinney, Khomutova, and Matthews 2018].

However, the changes in modes of embodiment involved in participation in martial arts may alter women's relationships outside such training spaces. Practicing martial arts necessitates performing movements and actions that are strongly associated with masculinity in contemporary Western societies, such as fighting or initiating physical contact [Willey 1992; McNaughton 2012; Velija, Mierzwinski, and Fortune 2012; Channon 2013]. Beyond the need to cope with the psychological implications of practicing martial arts (such as fear of hurting another person or fear of becoming 'unfeminine'), women practitioners confront the normative gendered regimes of restricting movement and limiting physical potential – as powerfully described by Iris Marion Young [1980] – and incorporate modes of embodiment that deviate, at least to some extent, from these norms [Channon, Quinney, Khomutova, and Matthews 2018].

Despite the myriad ways that women's participation in the martial arts may have the potential to challenge gender roles and hierarchies, scholars disagree about whether, and, if so, in what ways, women's participation in the martial arts indeed leads to empowerment and social change [Velija, Mierzwinski, and Fortune 2012; Follo 2012; Channon and Phipps 2016].

Certainly, small and enclosed communities such as martial arts groups or classes reinforce and support members who display loyalty to the group's values and norms. In order to be able to practice martial arts on a regular basis, and in order to be accepted and promoted in a specific martial arts community, women and members of other marginalized groups (such as persons with disabilities or members of the LGTB community) are encouraged to join by means of 'simple inclusion', as 'male equivalents', adopting or conforming to practices and values that are strongly linked to violent patriarchal control of women [Lafferty and McKay 2004]. Nonetheless, even under these conditions, women who participate in the martial arts might still engage in forms of practice and representation that reinforce normative gender hierarchies [Hargreaves 1997; Paradis 2012; Channon and Jennings 2013; Weaving 2014].

Indeed, as long as women are a minority in most martial arts groups, it is likely that women practitioners may come to view themselves (and be seen by their male training partners) as exceptional women, or as 'honorary men' who are 'thereby dismissed from troubling symbolic constructions of male superiority' [Kavoura, Ryba, and Chroni 2015; Channon and Phipps 2016]. For example, many professional women judokas in Greece come to identify with the judo etiquette, i.e. viewing themselves as exceptional while identifying with the view that most women are inferior in sports [Kavoura, Ryba, and Chroni 2015]. In this scenario, as well as the previous one, gender hierarchies remain intact.

Furthermore, the optimistic views held by proponents of women's participation in martial arts do not take into consideration girls and women, as well as members of other groups deviating from hegemonic masculinity, who could not conform to the way martial arts are organized today, who have been hurt or injured and have had to leave these spaces, giving up on the possibility of practicing martial arts. By definition, women who could not or would not conform to the atmosphere in martial arts groups cannot be represented in studies that examine women's participation in the martial arts.

1 While there are no formal statistics regarding gender disparities in participation in the field, Harwood, Lavidor, and Rassovsky [2017] note that very few studies examined the effects of martial art participation on female youth and that this may be due to the 'male dominated nature of the sport' [98].

PHYSICAL FEMINISM AND PERFORMANCES OF FEMININITY

The concept of 'physical feminism' is pivotal for understanding the possibilities and conditions under which women's participation in the martial arts may lead to personal empowerment and wider social change. Broadly speaking, physical feminism refers to empowerment through physical activities [Roth and Basow 2004; Noel 2009; Quinney 2015]. Its rise is connected to the second wave feminism self-defense movement, which viewed self-defense for women as representing 'a way for women to physically express their independence and [as] part of a larger feminist movement to combat violence and achieve self-determination for women' [Rouse 2014: 472].² However, what are the social and psychological processes through which empowerment is achieved?

Many scholars who use the term, including those who coined it, seem to use it to articulate a negative relationship between performances of femininity, or gender differences, and empowerment. According to their view, as more women participate in 'masculine' sports, gender differences will decrease. This hypothesis rests on two assumptions regarding gender in present-day Western societies: First, that notions of widespread differences between men and women are mostly fictitious ideological representations, and, second, that in patriarchal societies performances of femininity are basically ideological means to subordinate women. Therefore, women's empowerment, and especially empowerment through participation in a male-identified sport, seems to imply the abandoning of performances of femininity.³

One of the first authors to use the term illustrates this view. McCaughey [1997] asserts that, 'as more women become trained, physical differences between men and women will probably become less obvious, and the nature of those differences, if any, will become clearer' [84]. She also asserts that physical training will make '[women's] aggression, and the femininity that prevents it, conscious' [McCaughey 1998: 281]. Similarly, Roth and Basow treat gender body differences as a myth: 'Often women are not weaker than men ... yet the myth of women's weakness often goes unchallenged even by feminists' [Roth and Basow 2004: 246]. In fact, tensions between performances of or identification with femininity have been a reoccurring theme in many studies of women in the martial arts [e.g. Mennesson 2000; Sisjord and Kristiansen 2009].

2 For a historical discussion of the links between physical training and self-defense for women and social and political empowerment in first wave feminism, see Rouse [2014].

3 Performing 'femininity' is often not entirely voluntary, as women pay dear social costs for failing to approximate the feminine ideal in various arenas [Kavoura, Ryba, and Chroni 2015].

When applied to the study of gender and sport, the hypothesized negative relationship between empowerment and performances of femininity leads scholars to view performances of femininity as blocking or countering the subversive potential of women's involvement in 'masculine' sports. Thus, female athletes who exhibit performances of femininity outside of sport settings are judged to be compensating for their nonconformity or 'selling out' to patriarchy [Follo 2012; Channon and Phipps 2016]. These authors fail to recognize the potentially subversive value of performances of femininity in different contexts: for instance, when combined with performances of masculinity (e.g. queer or hybrid identities), or when employed strategically. Some second wave feminists, such as Carol Gilligan [1982], have also shown that sometimes performances of femininity have a singular value, as they offer a more ethical alternative to practices associated with masculinity, such as the 'ethics of care', encouraging women to develop a sensitivity and responsibility for the well-being of others [Gilligan 1982].

Drawing on performative understandings [Butler 1990; West and Zimmerman 1987] of performances of femininity as 'culturally specific, dynamic and internally diverse constructs' that can also be 'understood or experienced as a source of resistance against male-centered gender order', Channon and Phipps [2016: 26] suggest that empowerment and social change through women's participation in martial arts need not involve the relinquishment of performances of femininity. Indeed, they found that many women who enjoyed training in 'hard', full-contact martial arts did not perceive it as compromising their femininity and actively chose to engage in certain performances of femininity. They focus on instances in which women strategically use performances of femininity to weaken the perceived link between masculinity and martial arts and to show that martial arts are not necessarily 'masculine'.

However, they do not relate to other social mechanisms that can explain social change and empowerment through the performative approach, such as subversive appropriation. Understanding these mechanisms is crucial considering that empowerment through learning to fight is not self-evident but is contingent on specific circumstances [Channon and Matthews 2015; Channon, Quinney, Khomutova, and Matthews 2018]. Specifically, Butler [1990] discusses how employing gender performances in unconventional contexts and manners can lead to subversive and socially liberating effects, a process she refers to as 'subversive appropriation'. Through parody, exaggeration, or in combination with other practices, women's entry into martial arts can destabilize the meanings of both performances of masculinity and performances of femininity.

The present study addresses this gap. Since in order to participate in martial arts women need to perform actions that are considered

performances of masculinity, subversive appropriation is a useful mechanism that can explain how the entrance of women into full-contact martial arts may lead to empowerment and social change. I draw on the particularities of my experience as an adult woman who began to practice a full-contact, grappling-based martial art (Brazilian jiu-jitsu) and excerpts from interviews with women participating in full-contact martial arts to explicate the specific structural conditions that make mixed-gender martial art practice a particularly fertile ground for subversive appropriation of gender performances.

At the same time, I argue that subversive gender appropriation is not unidirectional. The entrance of women into a male dominated field changes the gender organization of the field itself and the available gender expressions of the men who train with women. Despite differences in class, race, and sexuality, many adult women who enter the field have experienced socialization differently and have different relationships to and experiences with violence and physical fighting than men. For an optimal training experience to occur between men and women under these circumstances, many men need to adjust and change the way they usually train. In the course of this article, I will explicate the distinct structural conditions and the expression of the changes in men's practices within mixed-gender training, which I term 'men's embodied nurturance'. To clarify, the goals of the present study are twofold:

1. Analyzing the structural conditions that make mixed-gender full-contact martial arts, as practiced in present-day Western societies, a fertile ground for subversive appropriation of gender performances.
2. Analyzing two social mechanisms of subversive appropriation within martial arts settings, where women are the primary agents of the first mechanism and men are the primary agents of the second one:
 - a. Formation of queer identities that are not centered on sexuality (women's appropriation of masculine performances).
 - b. Men's embodied nurturance (men's appropriation of feminine performances).

METHODOLOGY

The wider research study that I conducted included over 60 in-depth interviews with men and women who practice and teach different martial arts in Israel and in the U.S., an auto-ethnography of my experiences as a woman who practiced several types of martial arts over five years, and a content analysis of discussions on various online platforms of women and men who practice martial arts as well as promotional materials.

The present article is primarily based on my auto-ethnography. I have been interested in becoming physically stronger and being able to protect myself for most of my adult life. After weight training for several years, I became convinced that developing the size and strength of my muscles alone would not significantly enhance my ability to defend myself against a physical attack by someone stronger.

The thought of practicing a full-contact sport in a mostly male group was at first inconceivable to me. As a fat child, gym classes and the presence of others during physical activity became associated with teasing and embarrassment for me. Close physical contact with men seemed intimidating and uncomfortable as well. However, five years of 4-7 training sessions a week in a Brazilian jiu-jitsu class, a grappling-based martial art (that perhaps involves the greatest degree of physical contact between participants of all martial arts) has significantly changed my own experience of gender embodiment.

First, I have learned to feel comfortable with close physical contact with the men in my group. The group is a space for forging physical relationships between men and women that are not based on sexuality or motherhood. Second, practicing martial arts has allowed me to utilize my body (e.g. wide and forceful movements) and express my personality (e.g. competitiveness and assertiveness) in ways that are not compatible with gender norms. Third, I have learned, and am still learning, to accept my body's limitations, usually through pain and injuries. Pain, I have come to learn, is one of the most difficult experiences for me to write about in ethnography. In the following pages, I elaborate on some of these insights.

RESULTS

The conditions that make martial arts a context for subversive appropriation

Co-ed training of men and women in full-contact martial arts is characterized by three conditions that challenge gender roles: 1. Close bodily contact between men and women that is reciprocal and not based on sexuality or familial relationships. 2. The need to unlearn previous modes of embodiment and channel corporeal knowledge (such as instincts) to new regimes of 'being in one's body'. 3. The scarcity of female trainees in general, and especially among senior trainees, instructors, and key persons in the administration and organization of martial art groups, creates a socially acceptable opportunity for novice female trainees to identify with male bodies.

Close bodily contact that is not based on parenthood or sexuality

In present-day Western societies, bodily relationships between men and women are constructed as complimentary and socially viable in one of three major contexts: sexual, parental, and medical/therapeutic. Unlike professional sports, men and women are not segregated and train together in many amateur martial arts groups. Co-ed training between men and women, specifically in full-contact martial arts, can serve as a new and unique social venue for bodily relationships between men and women that differ substantively from and that can potentially challenge the normative gendered assumptions inherent in the three more common contexts for such relationships [Paradis 2012; Channon 2014].

Quinney [2015] argues that, like transgender individuals, female martial artists challenge the alleged immutability of gender norms. The combination of joint physical contact, in a differently gendered social context, has the potential to produce gender identities that do not correspond to a male/female dichotomy.

Relearning embodiment

In her seminal work 'Throwing Like a Girl' [1982], philosopher Iris Marion Young provides a phenomenological account of how women learn to shape their movements and limit their physical and bodily potential according to gendered regimes of knowledge. By choosing to practice martial arts, women incorporate modes of embodiment that deviate, at least to some extent, from the normative modes of gender embodiment embedded in these regimes.

Since fighting and the bodily movements entailed therein are strongly associated, culturally and historically, with masculinity [Channon, Quinney, Khomutova, and Matthews 2018], women must expand

their embodied repertoire in order to practice martial arts. Beginning to learn a martial art often brings relatively long periods of frustration and an inability to perform some of the most basic and rudimentary motor functions in the system of the specific martial art. In many ways, the gender re-socialization for women in the martial arts is like their original socialization as infants. Feelings of helplessness and the effort to learn to be able to take part anchor the new trainee full force in her body. The need to learn basic forms of movement and actions is especially transformative as an adult. Unlike the relative 'clean slate' mode of infancy, the adult mind or consciousness often resists these changes in embodiment and looks at the body that 'fails to perform' from the outside, passing painful judgment.

The paradox of men's dominance: identifying with performances of masculinity

In all of the martial arts groups that I participated in or observed, men made up the majority. Culturally, martial arts are also associated with masculinity. When I first started training, I was either the only woman or sometimes just one of two. The bodies that I aspired to mimic and to learn from were bodies of men. Even in the process of theoretical learning, it is hard to separate the body of the teacher from the pedagogical process [Tirosh 2006]. Just as we assign gender and race to the texts we read [Tirosh 2006], we also assign bodies to activities. In physical training, the body of the teacher/instructor is all the more significant.

First, in sports and fitness fields, investing time and energy in the body becomes a way of gaining credibility and corporeal capital. Fitness instructors often receive the message (e.g. from clients, superiors, etc.) that they are expected to display a fit and toned body that conveys the values of contemporary sport culture [Fernández-Balboa and González-Calvo 2018]. Likewise, women in semi-combat roles in the Israeli army describe how they learned, through their training, to adopt their (male) superiors' styles of walking, talking (e.g. lowering tones), and dress codes (e.g. wearing the belt lower on the hips). This is because part of their credibility and authority stems from displaying an embodiment of the values associated with military combat training [Sasson-levy 2003]. I have often encountered this in martial arts settings, where senior ranked trainee women or women instructors lowered their voices on the mats and adopted a somewhat less emotional expression. This reinforces the hypothesis that in male focused social environments, the adoption of male associated embodiment by women is partly encouraged and rewarded.

In this context, to learn martial arts from a teacher means, at least in some respects, to want to embody the teacher's body. So, paradoxically,

men's dominance as instructors and in filling out the highest ranks in martial arts makes it a field in which it is legitimate for women to want to embody performances of masculinity.

The need to perform the movements and embodiment style of men (concrete men who are instructors or high rank students) coincides with performing fighting related movements that are considered masculine in contemporary Western societies. When training in contemporary martial arts groups in Western societies, women need to learn to perform the same movements, to execute the same techniques, as men. In pairs training, women need to experience and learn how to do the technique both as the active initiator and the passive recipient. One of the strongest gender dichotomies in the West, equating femininity with passivity and activity with masculinity, is thereby subverted.

Repeating the same physical movements and actions, men and women working together creates a consciousness of 'undoing gender' [Butler 1990]. Through martial arts training, I have challenged, with my own movements, some of the principles of normative feminine socialization. While I was practicing martial arts, I was also conveying certain messages:

- There is nothing that you are allowed to do to me because you are a man which I am not allowed to do to you.
- There is no specific manner in which you are allowed to carry yourself which is forbidden to me.
- There is no action that you are allowed to want or to perform as a man which is forbidden to me to want or to perform as a woman.

My growing sense of embodied identification with masculinity was also fraught with envy and feelings of not belonging. I did not experience myself as becoming more like men, but as a woman struggling to expand her embodiment.

This excerpt from my field notes demonstrates the complex negotiation of gender roles and identity within martial arts spaces through a case study of learning how to tie my belt:

I am one of four women in one of my Brazilian Jiu Jitsu (BJJ) groups. One is a very skilled veteran and another two are novices. The veteran wears the belt low-slung on her hips. The two novices tie the belt high on their waist. In one class, a guy asked one of the novices why she wears the belt high on her waist, saying that it 'makes her look like a geisha'. The woman replied that it makes her feel feminine. She said that entering

the training space, taking off her clothes and putting on the gi (the uniform) makes her feel less feminine as it is. Tying the belt high on her waist was her way to distinguish herself and resist pressures to become 'man-like' in the training space.

When I first started practicing BJJ and was one of a small number of women in a mostly male group, I noticed that the men who trained with me tied their belts lower on their hips, while the women tended to tie theirs higher on their waist. I wanted to tie my belt like the men, lower on my hips. The first instructor who introduced me to BJJ and kept encouraging and supporting me when I felt that I could not cope assumed an important role in my life. I wanted to tie my belt like he did.

It took me about half a year to learn how to tie my belt. I wanted to do it perfectly, just like my coach tied it, where the two stripes of the belt lie one underneath the other so that they look like one strip, and the knot is diamond-shaped. The diamond knot is supposed to sustain the intensive friction of ground fighting in BJJ.

For more than six months, three to four times a week, I could not manage to tie my belt. I used to approach my instructor, embarrassed, and ask him to tie it for me. Usually, he would tie it on my waist. I once read that tying the belt at the hips makes it harder to control the opponent by gripping the belt.

In the first class that I tied my belt lower on my hips, I did not dare look at myself in the mirror. I felt that I looked just like a man. By the second class, when I dared to look, I was shocked. I looked like a man. For the third class, I went back to tying my belt higher around my waist. However, by the next class, I returned to tying my belt lower on my hips and I continue to do so to this day.

I now feel that I do not look 'man-like' with my belt tied down around my hips. My somewhat different body form than the average man trainee is still visible, and I continue to carry my body in ways that reflect my personal interpretations of feminine norms. In the days that preceded my receiving my blue belt, and a few weeks before beginning the basic instructors' course, I tied my belt low on my hips without thinking, and I often teach novices (men and women) how to tie their belt low on the hips by demonstrating.

My initial decision to tie my belt around my hips was an intentional one. In my view, I was not tying my belt like the men who train with me because I was like them; I wanted to create something different with my body. I saw tying my belt the 'masculine' way as a way to resist my feminine socialization. This is an excerpt from my field notes around my first months of training:

Recently my belt got untied during class. One of the male trainees helped me to tie it again, tying it around my waist. For the rest of the class, I was acutely aware of how the belt shapes my body into the wrong form and I felt uncomfortable.

If I can choose between the feminine way or the masculine way to occupy space, I definitely choose the masculine way. I want to be the active, strong, powerful, self-asserting body. Not the frail, to-be-looked-at body.

First mechanism of gender subversion: Acquiring a queer identity

The more I participate in reciprocal embodied interactions with men who treat me as a training partner and not as a (sexual) object, the more I feel a new sense of confidence in and ownership of my body and space. I expand the contours of my body in space, I expand the limitations I previously imposed on my bodily functions. I am able to overcome my fear of losing my balance. I am able to express my intelligence through my body, to become a transcendent subject with my body for the first time in my life.

These changes are not limited to the gym. I stretch up further when reaching for an object on a high shelf. I feel more comfortable sitting with my legs relatively spread apart in public. Ever since adolescence, men have allowed themselves to comment on my 'masculine' or 'sporty' walking style, or to say that I stand like a football player. At the same time, I was always told that I have a very traditionally feminine communication style. Martial arts classes were the first place where I felt that my personal combination of feminine and masculine performance was accepted. For example, only after beginning to train did I let myself cut my hair very short. At the same time, I am also very attuned to the well-being of my partner and use my socialization to an ethics of care to be critical of practices in martial arts that I consider to be reflective of unnecessary uses of authority and power. My grappling style is always centered on an ethics of care, and this shapes the techniques I choose during sparring. For example, I never perform 'air' chokes (which block/crush the trachea) because I believe that they are unnecessarily painful. Instead, I apply 'blood' chokes (which block the carotid arteries) which is not painful. I avoid rapid movement and the use of techniques that necessitate explosive force because I believe that they increase the risk for injury. I prefer 'giving up' a submission if I worry my partner will get injured, even if he or she did not tap to signal a secured submission.

One of the most important things for me is to be able to fight while always being attuned to my partner. Hearing my partner say 'it was fun rolling with you' fills me with more satisfaction than hearing that I made technical progress.

Sometimes, I wear a top with a low neckline in a no-gi class or even underneath my gi. However, I feel very self-conscious, even though many men feel comfortable training with no shirt at all under the gi. Their body, the male body, is just a human body. It matters what that body does, not what that body arouses in others. Women in Israel wear a high-necked shirt⁴ under the gi most of the time and long pants under their shorts in no-gi classes. Men rarely wear tights under the gi. Women's bodies being conceived of as sexual objects always seems to be prevalent, even if in the background.

The words of a Greek judoka elucidate how sometimes merely becoming a fighter is connected to exclusion from the gender binary: 'Because you have chosen this particular sport, you might acquire specific characteristics. When you are an athlete that fights, you cannot be the ethereal creature that moves like dancing. You might acquire a specific athletic-type posture, and men usually do not like that in a woman' [quoted in Kavoura, Ryba, and Chroni 2015: 94].

Once, after BJJ training, I overheard one of the instructors say to a friend that 'the women who train with us? Well, they are not *really* women'. Elinor, a 30-year-old BJJ blue belt told me that she was surprised to learn that her testosterone level is relatively low, as she was sure that somehow her enjoyment of martial arts indicated high testosterone levels.

The queer identities adopted by women when training in the martial arts do not constitute being man-like, but produce something different. Furthermore, sometimes women's participation in mixed-gender training can even *increase* their awareness of differences between men and women, especially in 'hard', full-contact martial arts. Before I started martial arts training, I did strength training at the gym for a couple of years. Slowly increasing the weights that I could lift, seeing visible changes in the size of my muscles, I felt increasingly confident that gendered bodily differences were commonly exaggerated. However, as I started grappling with men, I realized that the average man could toss me to the other side of the room on brute strength alone. Moreover, he could do it so fast that I would not realize what had happened.

Besides differences in speed and strength, the average man enters martial arts spaces with more experience with/proclivities for fighting and has more self-confidence with regards to physical learning with his body. Many of my interviewees recounted how sparring with men increased their awareness of the extent of physical differences between men and women, even after years of training. In the next excerpt, a woman BJJ blue belt describes how constantly sparring with men may give women false negative feedback on their technical skill because of gendered body differences:

⁴ During my fieldwork in the U.S., I encountered many women who feel comfortable only wearing a training bra underneath the gi.

I realize that with someone my size ... I'm not that bad. [T]his is what I get from the ladies' class, because when ... when you learn [with] people who are all so much stronger than you [men], you don't know how good you are. Because a lot of techniques, you think you don't know them well, you think you aren't doing them well just because they [the male opponents] are resisting strongly. When you have someone with your strength, you realize, 'Ha, I know this technique and, on someone my size, it does work', like, I'm doing it well. But when you're with a guy who weighs 20 kilos more than you, and he's stronger ... [then it] doesn't work. And it's not because you're doing it wrong, sometimes it's just because... they are using ... [their speed/strength advantages] ... with males I'm only playing defense...because I know if I get on the bottom... on the bottom of the mount [where the opponent sits on top of you with their hips around your torso], or on side control [when the opponent pins your back to the ground chest-to-chest], I'm not getting out of it. Both because it's harder to do the technique on them, and because I'm claustrophobic, so sometimes I would tap out before I was forced to submit so I could breath. I won't put myself in danger, trying new things [with men]. I won't...so I won't work [i.e. develop my technique] that much. So you know that's the thing...I feel like I'm bad and I don't improve... [Arin, 39, a BJJ blue belt with experience in other martial arts]

Some of the men and women I interviewed discussed how men need to learn how to grapple using mostly technique, thereby moderating their use of strength, in order to provide a safe learning environment for them. This led me to theorize another mechanism through which physical feminism develops. While in the first mechanism, the formation of a queer identity, women take the active role, in the second mechanism it is the men who train with women who take the active role.

Men's embodied nurturance

The entry of adult women with no previous experience in the martial arts into full-contact martial arts poses challenges – and opportunities – for mental and physical growth, and for men as well as for women. Adult women usually have less experience (if at all) with physical fighting and are usually slower and weaker than the average man, regardless of the origin of these differences (whether they are purely the result of gender socialization, i.e. of a lack of opportunities to develop, or whether they have a biological component). Women also tend to have a different personal history regarding fighting and violence. Therefore, men have to adjust and provide women who train with them a physically and emotionally safe space to develop and experiment

with their fighting skills. Developing the ability to moderate and control their strength, speed, and emotional aggressiveness also benefits men in their own development as martial artists. As Hélio Gracie himself learned nearly a century ago, brute force will not help a man when he is on the mat with a bigger/stronger/faster/younger male partner. In fact, through learning how to fight with female novices, men can perfect their use of technique, the function of which is precisely to compensate for/counteract weight, strength, and speed discrepancies.

A male instructor teaching a female student exemplifies what I refer to as 'men's embodied nurturance', even more than those men who develop skills to optimize sparring/training with women. Similar to the paradoxical effect of men's dominance in martial arts providing a legitimate context for women to incorporate performances of masculinity, men's dominance in the field has unintended and surprising potential for social change. In martial arts groups that I participated in and the ones I observed, most teachers, instructors, and senior trainees are men. At the same time, teaching is mostly embodied or bodily in the martial arts. In fact, teaching can be viewed as a form of physical and emotional nurturance. Instructors and senior trainees' bodies provide a fecundity of knowledge and skills; they also 'contain' and transform the students' (including female students') bodily fears and frustrations into commonly shared embodied knowledge and skills.

Men's embodied nurturance, as a mechanism of social change, challenges embodied relationships between men and women in at least two ways. First, it changes the patriarchal concept of women's bodies as 'giving' and men's bodies as 'taking'.

In contemporary Western societies, embodied relationships between men and women are still generally not constructed as reciprocal. Women's bodies are constructed as 'nurturing' or as a dwelling place, while men's bodies are constructed as 'taking' from women's bodies. Women's bodies and sexuality are constructed as an object to be given to or sold between men. The derogatory term 'a woman that puts out' demonstrates this relationship. Furthermore, it is not just in relation to sexuality, but in philosophy [e.g. Irigaray 1985] and medicine, as well, that women's bodies are thought of merely as a space given to the fetus of the man: for example, the common conception of the vagina enveloping the penis, or the uterus as the first 'place' of the male fetus. Women's bodies are understood not in relation to herself but in relation to another subject which it is supposed to envelop, nourish, and contain [Irigaray 1985; Martin 1991].

Ironically, the dominance of men in martial arts provides the opportunity to challenge this normative gender construction. Most women's bodies are taking (at least during their first years of training), while the bodies that give and nurture are men's.

However, martial arts spaces are not immune to the patriarchal concept of a woman who puts out.⁵ For example, Linda, a BJJ black belt and instructor recounted an instance early in her career in which she executed a triangle choke (a choke in which the opponent's head lies somewhat between the legs of his or her partner), at which point she heard some other trainee laughingly comment in the background that it was probably the best moment of her opponent's life. The trainee positioned her as a woman 'who puts out', whose body is there to provide pleasure. Linda immediately stopped sparring and approached him, saying 'don't ever talk to me like that again'.

I have heard many similar stories from the women whom I interviewed, and I experienced it myself. During one aikido class in which I participated for a year, I was called 'the collective tatami' (tatami is the Japanese word for the training mat; the collective mattress is a misogynist derogatory term in Israeli slang for a woman who serves as a secretary in a mostly male military unit and is presumably promiscuous) and other comments of a sexual nature by senior trainees.

While these attempts to impose the normative interpretation of male-female relationships into the martial arts context are prevalent and common, men's embodied nurturance, as described earlier, is a newly conceived institutionalized context that is emerging in which men provide embodied nurturance to women on grounds of reciprocity.

Second, the realm of martial arts challenges the nature of men's embodied nurturance in patriarchal societies. While in patriarchal societies men's embodied nurturance usually emphasizes differences between women and men, in the martial arts, men's nurturance decreases the differences.

Men's embodied nurturance in the field of martial arts is significantly different than the ways we think of men's nurturance or protection in terms of the 'patriarchal bargain' [Kandiyoti 1988]. In the patriarchal bargain, women provide domestic, sexual, and childrearing services while men provide protection from other men of different ethnic groups (war) or of the same group (police). Men's bodies come into contact with other men's bodies, and women's bodies remain protected behind the scenes. In the context of men's embodied nurturance in the martial arts, men's bodies encounter women's bodies as two subjects and the purpose of the contact is to increase similarity between the two bodies rather than emphasize their differences, particularly along the lines of those that need to be protected and those that protect. In fact,

5 For a discussion of the mediatized sexualization of female athletes, see Channon, Quinney, Khomutova, and Matthews [2018].

some women who choose to train in the martial arts explicitly defy their role in the patriarchal bargain [Lawler 2002].

This comparison stresses the difference between a woman's body that contains the body of a man or receives protection from a man and a woman's body that 'takes' knowledge from men's bodies. To receive protection means remaining the passive object of the actions of men. To take skills and knowledge, on the other hand, means to learn to adapt and appropriate behaviors and skills learned from an interaction with another body. When receiving protection, gendered differences are accentuated. In receiving skills, gender differences change their meaning.

This next excerpt from my fieldnotes demonstrates further what I mean by men's embodied nurturance:

I knew I had to overcome my fear of performing the 'double leg' takedown on someone else and of being thrown myself before my blue belt test. In BJJ, most of the time you're on the ground, and there I feel safe. I have always felt uncomfortable with throws and takedowns, especially high throws or throws where your opponent grabs your legs. Just feeling someone touching my legs knowing that he or she wants to perform the throw gave me chills ... I approached one of the instructors after one of the classes and asked him to help me learn how to do the takedown. He told me to put my weight on him, but whenever he started to lift me, I panicked, hardened my body and resisted the lift, trying to regain my upright posture.

The instructor remained patient and tried to figure out how to help me overcome my fear without trying to yell at me, or push me, or 'break' me, which I had experienced with other instructors and which had only increased my fear. He asked one of the other instructors that was sitting nearby to help us. He explained that he wanted the other instructor to do the takedown on him very slowly and gently, so that I could watch and see that it was safe. Afterwards, I was a bit calmer.

I explained to the instructor that I feel panicked when I'm being lifted off my feet and my head tilts down towards the ground. He reassured me that even if someone would want to hurt someone else, he would not smash his head into the ground but would throw him and then grapple with him on the ground. He repeatedly told me that I shouldn't worry about my head smashing into the ground. His genuine interest and patience made me verbally articulate why I was particularly afraid of double leg takedowns [more than other throws] for the first time. Talking about fear is a taboo in many martial arts settings and just being able to talk about it helps. He then

told me that if I was still afraid I could hug him when he lifted me up. I did so and he lifted me off my feet and laid me gently on the ground. I felt a new sense of confidence and, after a few more times, and after throwing him too, I felt comfortable enough to perform the throw and be thrown myself for my test.

Specifically, because martial art training is one of the most popular sports activities among adolescents in the West [Gubbels et al. 2016], learning how to teach and guide, through one's body, developing an ethics of care (in which helping others develop skills is a central goal) can significantly and positively calibrate masculinity. Martial arts can serve as an arena in which certain forms of touch can be interpreted as reassuring, or part of a learning experience, etc., rather than as sexual, or arousing, or homophobic, etc.

CONCLUSION

Drawing on performative understandings of social change and gender, this article contributes to the work of Channon and Phipps [2016] by analyzing the conditions that make mixed-gender martial arts training a fertile ground for the destabilization of gender hierarchies by expanding the theorization of 'physical feminism' in two ways. First, Channon and Phipps have pointed out [2016] that, unlike previous interpretations of physical feminism, empowerment and social change does not necessitate abandoning performances of femininity but can include a strategic use of feminine performances. I show how by creatively and strategically combining performances of femininity and masculinity female martial artists can form queer identities that are not based on sexuality. The cultural association of martial arts with masculinity offers women an arena distinct from that of sexuality to experiment with and adopt various performances of masculinity (e.g. wide movement in space, expressing physical aggression, etc.). Thus, the subversive effects of women's participation in the martial arts may not lie in diminishing (previously learned) performances of femininity but in combining them with newer performances of masculinity, forming new, non-binary queer identities that are not based in sexuality:

They treat you like a different kind of species. You are neither a man, nor a woman. You are something strange for the rest of the people. Sometimes, when you are younger, it makes you wonder: What is it that they find so strange? What makes them see you as something very different?
[A professional female judoka interviewed by Kavoura, Ryba, and Chroni 2015: 95].

Secondly, studies thus far have addressed the role of women in relation to physical feminism [e.g. Roth and Basow 2004; Noel 2009; Quinney 2015]. The present article explores the role of men in facilitating physical feminism in mixed-gender environments. Previous works studied how men cope with the social taboo of hitting women in the context of mixed-gender martial arts [e.g. Channon and Jennings 2013]. They showed the adjustments men make in order to treat female participants like they treat the male ones. But many women who begin to train as adults are not 'like men' in that they enter the field with different sets of physical as well as psychological capabilities, acquired through different processes of socialization and different life experiences as women.

The average woman beginning martial arts training is far more likely than the average man to have experienced some degree of sexual violence inflicted by men. Furthermore, the average woman is far less likely to have experimented with physical fighting involved in play with peers. Therefore, women are not like men – particularly adult women who enter mostly male groups. In order for average, and not necessarily athletic, adult women to be able to train in full-contact martial arts with men, men need to adjust the way they train, specifically by adopting performances of femininity such as an 'ethics of care' [Gilligan 1982]. Examples include moderating force and speed to enable women to work on and express themselves through applying techniques in co-ed sparring, mentoring female novices, and helping women feel comfortable in a male-dominated environment.

In a masculine-identified field in which men comprise a numerical majority and are often high-ranked trainees or instructors, participating with women often takes the form of mentoring and nurturing. Therefore, I term men's positive attitude toward the entrance of women to martial arts 'men's embodied nurturance'. In this mode of behavior, men often behave in ways (encouragement, gentle touch, etc.) that are culturally labeled as 'feminine'. Particularly in a masculine-identified field, these behaviors can be thought of as subversive appropriations of performances of femininity. Like gender performances in general, subversive appropriation is not necessarily conscious, and its effects can be unpredictable [Butler 1990].

At first glance, nurturing in the context of martial arts is an act of giving extended from men to women, as often men occupy the positions of instructors or senior trainees, and men often have to adjust their use of brute strength. However, accommodating the needs of 'atypical' trainees such as women expands the repertoire of modes of training and sparring and can benefit the development of men themselves. I have occasionally heard instructors say things like, 'There will always be someone stronger than you, more athletic than you, more flexible

than you – relying on brute force will not help you then’, in order to encourage more relaxed and technique-oriented training styles.

Theorizing the characteristics and implications of men’s embodied nurturance can also help us to theorize the relationship of gender and sports beyond approaches of ‘equity’ or ‘differences’, in terms of changing gender relationships. The paradoxical effects of women’s marginality in the field and men’s dominance in it gives rise to new and unique gender relationships:

[I]n sport there are numerous, different male/female relationships and situations where sex and sexuality, as well as, for example, ethnicity, class and age are unimportant. In some contexts women are unequivocally subordinated in their relationships with men, in other situations women collude in apparently subordinate roles, in some spheres women share power with men and have greater autonomy than in the past, and in a limited number of situations women wield power over men.

[Hargreaves 1990: 294]

The many potentials of gender empowerment and destabilization of old gender hierarchies are not always realized, and martial arts spaces in the West significantly diverge in the degree and the extent to which they are open to the entrance of women and to transforming gender roles. Instances of harassment or of simply being taunted for ‘being a girl in a male sport’ are common and well-documented in the literature [e.g. Kavoura, Ryba, and Chroni 2015]. In many of the martial arts classes that I have participated in or observed (such as aikido, kung fu, and Brazilian jiu-jitsu), I have encountered social environments in which toughness was assigned positive value while verbal communication was devalued, policed, or even prohibited. Emotional detachment – including, for example, avoiding smiling – was encouraged and idealized at the expense of other coping mechanisms [Maor, in press]. Encouragement of such social sentiments associated with traditional masculinity can also lead to unnecessary harmful repercussions specific to martial arts training, such as dehydration due to weight cuts before competitions or blurring the line between mutual engagement and assault [Channon and Matthews 2018].

While an exhaustive discussion of the reasons for this divergence is beyond the scope of the present article, possible factors that influence openness to gender diversity may include: type of martial art, openness to ‘outside’ influences, and numbers of female trainees and instructors. Future studies should explore such factors, as well as interventions that lead to greater social inclusivity among martial art spaces.

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