

Fighting Scholars

Habitus and Ethnographies of Martial Arts and Combat Sports

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Chapter 7

‘DO YOU HIT GIRLS?’: SOME STRIKING MOMENTS IN THE CAREER OF A MALE MARTIAL ARTIST

Alex Channon

Introduction: ‘So... Do You Hit Girls?’

I am asked this question more times than any other when discussing the problems addressed by my research into mixed-sex martial arts.¹ Perhaps the most controversial aspect of the experience of mixed-sex training in combat sports, the ethical considerations and deliberations that surround the matter of *men hitting women* often present a personal conundrum for men involved in martial arts. For instance, is it wrong for a man to hit a woman while training? Or is it wrong for a man to think that hitting a woman while training is wrong? These questions are part of a broader study of the phenomenon of mixed-sex martial arts that I have been conducting over the past five years, and in this chapter I address these issues using a mix of auto-ethnographic storytelling, interview data and field notes, discussing how it is that training can affect the ‘habitus’ (that is, the ‘embodied history, internalized as second nature’ (Bourdieu 1990b, 56)) of participants in mixed-sex martial arts.

The rationale for asking such questions extends from an understanding of the ‘subversive’ significance of women’s participation in martial arts and related combat sports, which has been well documented by feminist scholars researching this phenomenon over the past two decades (e.g. De Welde 2003; Guthrie 1995; Hollander 2004; McCaughey 1997, 1998). Consistently positioned as a ‘masculine domain par excellence’ (Mennesson 2000, 28), martial arts and related combat sports are widely considered in the research literature to have historically lent ideological support to patriarchal notions of essential male physical power (e.g. Messner 1988, 1990). Ironically though, because of their important symbolic link with dominant codes of masculinity, they can also be a powerful site through which to challenge binary, hierarchal conceptions of gender. This is an argument also made with regard to so-called ‘masculine’ sports more generally (e.g. Heywood and Dworkin 2003; Roth and Basow 2004). The subversive value of women’s engagement in these activities is principally due to the fact that developing the ability to physically dominate an opponent is a key outcome of most (if not all) martial arts training cultures. And given that, ideologically, the physical domination of women

by men is an essential element of hierarchal gender discourse, and more specifically of what feminists have termed 'rape culture' (McCaughey 1997, 28), then women's development of this supposedly 'masculine' ability to physically dominate others poses a direct challenge to a key ideological site of male power. In learning the techniques of physical domination, and developing a body suited to physical combat, women can come to embody the feminist denial of the passivity, fragility and violability of the female body (Dowling 2000; Lenskyj 1986; McCaughey 1997), whilst concurrently appropriating one of the most potent signifiers of male 'superiority'. By becoming accomplished fighters, it is suggested that female martial artists can be the living expression of feminist resistance (Guthrie 1995; McCaughey 1998).

Such an argument has long concerned social historians of women's sport. With particular reference to the UK, the site of my present research, scholars such as Hargreaves (1994, 1997) have pointed out that British women have been actively engaging with ostensibly 'masculine' combat sports, such as boxing and wrestling, throughout the past century. It is also known that women have practised Eastern martial arts since their introduction to Britain in the early 1900s (Looser 2011; Wolf 2005). However, to date there has been no explicit attempt among sports historians to chart the specific emergence and development of mixed-sex training in such activities in Britain. It is possible that integrated training, along with competition, has taken place for as long as women have been participating in modern combat sports and martial arts; for instance, Wolf (2005) describes early female jiu-jitsu practitioner Edith Garrud (1872–1971) as having choreographed and performed public demonstrations of the art's effectiveness against male opponents during the early twentieth century. However, it is only relatively recently that scholars have begun investigating formal mixed-sex sports training environments, leaving the sociohistorical context of sex-integrated martial arts in the UK, along with other Western contexts, somewhat unknown at this point.

This is surprising as, theoretically speaking, within mixed-sex training the subversive value of women's involvement in martial arts is amplified, given that they are learning to fight with, against and alongside men. This rests upon the fact that segregated training settings all too easily give rise to dismissive and trivializing responses among men towards female success; being 'good' among other women invites the argument that a woman is only good 'for a girl', rather than just plain good (McDonagh and Pappano 2008). Such segregations provide support for typical conceptions of female physical inferiority, which have long kept women separate from men in sports, or out of sports altogether (Dowling 2000; Hargreaves 1994; Lenskyj 1986). Conversely, mixed and undifferentiated training can give rise to mutual understandings of the shared physical possibilities of the sexed body in ways that segregated training cannot (Anderson 2008). It also broadens women's training opportunities in what female martial artists often describe as 'male dominated' gyms, wherein few other sufficiently talented women train (e.g. Lafferty and McKay 2004). Other ethnographers have previously argued that the intensely physical (and often painful) exchanges of sparring form the principle way in which martial abilities are developed, as well as one way in which belonging within martial subcultures is established (Abramson and Modzelewski 2011; Green 2011; McCaughey 1997; Wacquant 2004a). It therefore stands to reason that women's attainment of physical equality with men, as

Figure 7.1. Mixed training: Alex in light sparring with junior member 'Gianna'.

Photo © Mustanir Ali.

well as their enfranchisement among the groups that help them develop such physicality, rests upon their opportunity to engage in similarly intense bouts of sparring as do their male counterparts. And, given the typical over-representation of men in (most) mixed-sex martial arts clubs, this means that women's development of martial abilities is often dependent upon hitting and being hit by men. Yet as suggested at the outset, hitting women is rarely a straightforward, unproblematic proposition for men within martial arts, particularly as one's habituated sense of gender propriety, or 'honour', can come to conflict strongly with the practical demands of mixed-sex training (Guérandel and Mennesson 2007).

When discussing the ways in which martial artists work around typically gendered expectations about rough physical contact between the sexes, my own narrative thus leads to an explication of integrated, mixed-sex martial arts as the antithesis of physical segregation and the hierarchal sex difference this both implies and helps to produce (Channon 2012; see also McDonagh and Pappano 2008). As such, I claim that hitting one another, regardless of sex, is a normal and necessary aspect of a successful training career for both male and female fighters and is, from a pro-feminist point of view, *good*. This is because hitting is fundamental in the training regimes of virtually all striking-based combat disciplines, making it essential for the realization of combative ability as martial artists learn how to cope with physical attacks and as their bodies become tougher and more inured to pain (Spencer 2009). Therefore, *men hitting women* can be, contextually speaking, a good thing for sex equality and a potentially important moment in the 'subversion' of gender (Channon 2010).

So, in discussing such matters whilst in fact being a martial artist myself, the question is often posed to me: do I 'hit girls'? For it is one thing to take a philosophical position in advocating something that appears quite extraordinary, lying beyond the remit of everyday sexual propriety, but quite another to *actually do it*. In keeping with this volume's principle concern with addressing how social research can be done *from* the body, this contribution outlines how the embodied experiences of men within martial arts training (including myself) can lead them to be able to answer 'yes' to this question. In so doing I draw attention to the transformative potential that mixed-sex training holds for men's attitudes towards women's bodies, based on data drawn from field notes, personal reflections and interviews with numerous martial artists with whom I have trained and/or met during my time 'on the mat'. In connecting the embodied realities of training with the broader social theme of gender relations, this work is intended to answer Crossley's (1995) call for a 'carnal sociology', positing that bodily practices are constitutive of social formations and play a key part in their ongoing reproduction and contestation.

The Research

As for the personal experiences that helped shaped my interest in (and form data for) this study, I originally began training in freestyle kickboxing in 2004, switching in 2006 to practising Shaolin kung fu, a discipline in which I have continued to train until the time of writing. I began researching the gendered phenomena involved with mixed-sex martial arts in 2007 as a postgraduate MSc student, continuing over the following years as I further developed both a scholarly interest and personal enthusiasm for martial arts. My work has been ethnographic in nature, involving a mixture of participant observation with formal, semi-structured interviewing of martial artists within and outside my own training environment.² These two approaches effectively facilitated each other as I became progressively more immersed in and familiar with the subculture of the club with which I trained, along with my growing appreciation of the wider identities, interests and experiences of martial artists in the UK today. In the course of my five years in kung fu, I have typically trained between 8 and 11 hours per week, whilst being involved at various different levels within the club and the wider institutional structure of the discipline. For instance, in addition to regular training, I attended several national-level competitions as competitor, coach and corner judge, and worked as assistant instructor at my gym until, upon earning my black belt, I began to work as a junior instructor, teaching full lessons in the absence of the club's *sifu* (head teacher). I also helped to organize and run free trial sessions and 'self-defence' courses for prospective members; I served for two years on the club's voluntary administrative committee; and during times of inactivity through injury I remained present as a passive observer in lessons. As mentioned by other martial arts ethnographers, this diverse engagement in the field enabled me to be both 'participant observer' and 'observant participant' (Abramson and Modzelewski 2011; Woodward 2008), which facilitated access to rich, 'insider' data through, on the one hand, buying credibility among my peers (who would later become my interviewees), but also through developing a deep, detailed insight through a wide and varied base of often personally felt experiences.

Throughout this process, and thanks to my ongoing education in sociology, I maintained a sociological consciousness as a lens through which to view these experiences. As Mills (1959) would suggest, I was using my 'sociological imagination' to make sense of what I saw, did and felt; not only was I an immersed and engaged participant, but also a scholar with an interest in '(grasping) what is going on in the world, and (understanding) what is happening (within myself) as minute points of the intersections of biography and history within society' (Mills 1959, 7). My degree of personal 'involvement' and scholarly 'detachment', to borrow Elias's (1987) terms, shifted at various stages of the research, as my immersion within the cultural milieu of mixed-sex martial arts fed this 'sociological imagination', while the rigorous demands of my academic engagements simultaneously drove me back to theory. This process enabled me to develop an ethnographic study rooted in the 'close-up', embodied experiences of the martial artist, yet firmly attached to the abstract narratives of social theory ('going native armed', as Wacquant (2011) suggests). I thus locate my work within the context of the simultaneously theoretical yet 'hands-on' tradition of recent combat sports ethnographers (e.g. Abramson and Modzelewski 2011; Butryn and deGaris 2008; Green 2011; Spencer 2009; Wacquant 2004a), being justified by the oft-cited assertion among ethnographers more generally that 'distance does not guarantee objectivity, it merely guarantees distance' (Scriven 1967, in Silk 2005, 73).

In this presentation of my research, the 'close-up' nature of participant observation becomes the focal point for understanding the experiences of men and women involved in mixed-sex training. While discussing the narratives and actions of others, I also foreground my own thoughts, feelings and ultimately, *transformations* as a method for discussing the embodied phenomenon of mixed-sex martial arts. This 'auto-ethnography' allows me to highlight what is in essence a personal journey of change, taking as evidence many of my own memories, formally recorded or not, of participating in this activity. As Butryn and deGaris (2008, 339–40) point out, 'this raises the question of when research begins and ends in any type of qualitative research', as scholars open up a space for informal, even 'accidental' discoveries in the social world to coexist alongside deliberately gathered 'scientific' data. Therefore, combined with excerpts from field notes and interview transcripts, aspects of my personal history (both in and out of martial arts) are offered in order to give a fairly typical, although in this case highly personalized, version of a specific transformative process that men may face when engaging in mixed-sex combat sports. Transformation through training is often a significant aspect of martial arts narratives, in both popular literature (e.g. Twigger 1999) and academic studies (e.g. Jennings 2010), and I propose that such transformations can be fruitfully examined through the deeply personal representational method of auto-ethnography.

Principle to the value of this method is its explicit emphasis on the location of the researcher within the research. Indeed, by its very nature such work cannot be divorced from the personality of its author, whose habitus neatly contextualizes interpretive data as specifically situated knowledge. For instance, in this case it is the very fact of my maleness that actually gives my account its relevance for debates over the transformative potential of martial arts training regarding the 'subversion' of gender. As Woodward (2008, 557) argues:

Reflection upon the gender identity and positioning of the researcher helps to cast light on the representation of masculinities that emerge from the research process.

This is not to devalue the research, but to situate the knowledge so produced and acknowledge its partiality.

The work I present in this chapter is centred on producing such a partial view of martial arts training, which is principally concerned with the subjective transformations experienced by male martial artists as they train with and alongside women. In the following sections, I outline the specifics of the transformation, which I personally experienced, alongside the accounts of others,³ to give a sense of how mixed-sex training can effect changes of this kind. This account begins with a brief personal history in order to better contextualize my story.

Refusing to Hit: Masculine Habitus, ‘Holding Back’ and Women’s Frustration

Before I took up martial arts, my thoughts and expectations about fighting had been heavily structured by prevailing patriarchal discourses of gender, physicality and power. As a schoolboy attending a boys’ school, I had frequently enjoyed bouts of play-fighting on the playing field, engaging my male friends in what were often chaotic and sometimes injurious wrestling free-for-alls. Having played rough contact sports throughout my life, I was enthused by the physical thrill of mock combat, and while I rarely fought ‘for real’ in aggressive confrontations, I nevertheless took great pleasure in these activities. In terms of the experiences of young boys in Western culture more generally, it is clear that I am not alone in having grown up with a taste for combative physicality (Connell 1995), and it is fair to say that my single-sex education had resulted in a more or less exclusive association in my mind between fighting, men and ideals of masculinity (see, for instance, Messner 1990).

In addition, and as was the case for several of my research participants, my only point of contact with female martial artists from the time before I began training revolved around the mass media; principally this involved television shows, movies, video games and professional wrestling. The surreal action sequences of Chinese cinema, along with the buxom, stilettoed heroines of Hollywood blockbusters and martial arts video games, failed to provide me with what I could consider a ‘realistic’ sense of women’s physicality, as did the female personalities in pro-wrestling while they pouted, screeched and stripped one another in sexualized spectacles, performing, as Scambler and Jennings (1998) put it, ‘on the periphery of the sex industry’ (see also Hargreaves 1997). While there has nevertheless been a proliferation of images of physically ‘empowered’ women in the media since the 1990s, which has seen its share of celebration among feminist scholars over the past decade (e.g. Inness 2004; McCaughey and King 2001), such imagery had little impact on my own habituated association between ‘real’ combat, men and masculinity. My ideas about sex difference and fighting thus remained tied to prevailing, dominant representations of male action heroes, wrestlers and prizefighters – all far more visible and far more ‘real’, to my young male mind, than their (misrepresented) female equivalents.

My early engagement with mixed training was thus structured by the learned dispositions of a lifetime saturated with experiences and images of male physical

prowess, with a concurrent, default belief in relative female 'frailty' (Dowling 2000). Further to this, a crucial aspect of my masculine habitus – that is, my socially conditioned, 'second nature' – was a strong sense of honour regarding the necessity of treating 'weak', feminine women 'correctly'. My earliest recollection of the importance of 'honourable' masculine conduct was from fighting with my younger sister as children, and the unforgettable reprimand my father once gave me after I had punched her during an argument. *Never, ever hit girls*, I was told, and this lesson had stayed with me from that point on. The underlying message of the code of honour implied in my father's lesson was simple: men's bodies are strong, women's are not, and so men hitting women is fundamentally unfair. This sentiment is echoed in the reasoning behind what McDonagh and Pappano (2008) call the 'coercive sex segregation' of mainstream, single-sex sports: boys and girls should not play together because boys are strong and girls are weak. In the course of my research, many male martial artists similarly recalled the moral importance of not hitting girls as having been taught from their early years onwards, whilst highlighting how this could make their martial arts training problematic:

I know that I shouldn't [avoid hitting women during martial arts practice] but as we grow up that's how we're designed to act... It's part of the programming from when you're a kid. Being gentlemanly, that kind of thing. (Interview, Ed, 29)

The importance of treating women in such a 'gentlemanly' fashion, employing paternalistic conceptions of correct conduct as a standard against which to judge their gendered training behaviours, was a common theme amongst the men with whom I trained, and would frequently emerge as a problem in the context of mixed training. Such a standard was certainly something that I had held myself to when I first started martial arts; when I was eventually confronted with the unnerving prospect of physically hitting a woman, I had little idea about what exactly I ought to do. I recall the very first time I engaged with mixed-sex sparring, as a junior member of my kickboxing gym, completely bewildered and hesitant to the point of inaction. In this first exchange, I did as many inexperienced, supposedly 'chivalrous' young men do, keeping my fists to myself while my female opponent knocked me around the ring.

What was particularly pertinent about my own and other men's reluctance to hit women, however, was that it was felt as a *visceral* aversion – a deep-seated discomfort which can be felt at the level of one's body. As I became increasingly sensitized to the embodied anxiety that hitting women posed for such men as myself, I began to see this kind of hesitation surface time and again amongst others as well. I recorded the following account of a sparring bout at a kung fu training session, between Nico, a relatively inexperienced newcomer, and Beth, a more seasoned martial artist:

Nico spars Beth. He can't get it. She says hit me, he says okay, does nothing. Been like this for the full two mins. I call time, they stop, he's not hit her once but she hits him good maybe five/six times. He bows and won't make eye contact.

Body language said it all, doesn't wanna fight, doesn't wanna be there. Everyone switches partners; he fights Steve, goes in hard and heavy like always. Must've seen this a hundred times now with these types of lads. (Field notes, kung fu training, 2009)

Talking with Nico after the session, I questioned him on why he approached sparring Beth and Steve so differently, and as he explained his actions he described being *physically unable*, let alone unwilling, to hit his female partner:

Nico: It's just not in me, man, to hit a woman, it's like I know I won't be able to do it even if I wanted to, like my hands just won't do it.

Alex: But your hands hit Steve fine.

Nico: I can do that 'cause he's a man. I can't hit Beth 'cause she's a woman, I can't do it. (Field notes, post-training, 2009)

Drawing on this recognition of the deep-seated nature of men's hesitations, I later asked my male interviewees to discuss their feelings and experiences of fighting women:

I feel really uncomfortable that I could hurt a woman in that way, even if she's asking me to do it I feel really uncomfortable, you know, physically uncomfortable with doing that. (Interview, Steve, 30)

When I was in the young categories... I had to fight a girl [at a tournament] and I just couldn't hit her, I just stood there and let her beat me. I was in tears afterwards. (Interview, Andy, 30)

That these men should describe feeling *physical* discomfort, or go so far as to experience an *inability* to hit women, is telling. For both Andy and Steve, as with Nico and indeed, myself, the habituated lessons of gender propriety affected them physically, evoking a sense of unease *at the level of the body*, which prevented them from engaging in effective training or competitive sparring with women.

The idea that men should approach sparring differently based on the sex of their partners has previously been reported by Guérandel and Mennesson (2007), who similarly discussed men's gendered sense of honour as structuring their approach to judo practice with female opponents.⁴ While Guérandel and Mennesson's (2007) research was among relatively experienced practitioners, finding that men in fact employed a mix of *deliberate* gendered strategies as they negotiated their interactions with women, my findings suggest that men were adhering to an almost *involuntary*, habituated ideology of masculine honour. However, concurrent with my own experience, my findings also suggest that this tends to be principally a concern among younger, less experienced martial artists. As one of my female interviewees described it:

It's always the new guys, the ones who never saw a woman fighting before, they're the ones with the problem really... you sort of have to prove yourself to them before they'll spar you with any kind of commitment. (Interview, Marie, 30)

Locating this problem principally among inexperienced, younger male martial artists can be explained with recourse to men's gendered life histories, and the generation of habitus through the specific social formations of those histories (Bourdieu 1990b), as with my own example above. For men such as myself, and particularly prior to engaging in mixed-sex training, understandings of fighting, physicality and embodied sex differences are often firmly rooted in traditional, patriarchal notions of gender, which celebrate male physical prowess and overlook or trivialize women's abilities. As a multitude of sports scholars have attested, women's physical potential is too often lost among men (as well as among many women themselves), owing to the prevalence of essentialist beliefs about the sexual division of physical power, the trivializing of female athletes in the mass media and the tendency for women to be prevented from training to develop their strength to begin with (Hargreaves 1994; Heywood and Dworkin 2003; Lenskyj 1986; Theberge 2000). Combining this lack of appreciation of women's abilities with the moral imperative of gentlemanly honour, which is described as being habituated throughout one's lifetime and can affect men most profoundly, generates a masculine habitus that emphasizes the necessity of the special treatment of 'weak' women. This habitus then surfaces in mixed-sex training through men's refusal to hit their female sparring partners.

Whenever I broached the topic with my female interviewees, it quickly became clear that men's habitual unwillingness (or indeed, inability) to hit them was a source of significant frustration for women involved in martial arts, especially, although not exclusively, among those who had trained for long periods of time or were engaged in competitive participation. Indeed, many women interpreted men's excessive 'holding back' as unhelpful, patronizing and frustrating. In their own words:

I get so annoyed when it gets to the point where they just won't spar with me properly, it's really annoying because they don't think I'm strong enough just because I'm a girl. (Interview, Keeley, 26)

It gets so frustrating... Sometimes I just feel like saying, 'will you fucking hit me, for once?' Because otherwise it's pointless me being here. (Interview, Beth, 24)

Women typically described men's 'holding back' as being harmful to their development as competitive fighters, since for the majority of the women I spoke to, their gyms (including my own) had so few high-level female members that training with men was a practical necessity most of the time. According to competitive kickboxer Helen, being hit was central to her development as a fighter, which was stunted whenever a male partner refused to strike her:

That's one thing that does annoy me when I spar with guys, that sometimes they'll hold back too much, because I need to get used to being hit, and especially when I'm preparing to fight [competitively]... I just need someone to be able to hit me, that's the only way you learn how to keep your defence tight, if you get hit in the face. (Interview, Helen, 29)

Figure 7.2. Mixed training: ‘Ben’ and ‘Joanne’ in a pushing exercise; ‘Ben’ dumps his partner head-first to the mat upon the instructor’s command to ‘take down’.



Photos © Mustanir Ali.

Kickboxing coach Sara asked how women could even be considered to be martial artists if they were never physically tested, suggesting that the legitimacy of one’s identity as a fighter hinges on the ‘authenticity’ of one’s training experiences:

Sometimes [holding back] is good if you’re just beginning, but for me, well I’m like, ‘come on, hit me’, you know? I can take it, it’ll push me harder, and I’ll learn more from it. There’s no point in me calling myself a kickboxer if I’ve never been kicked!
(Interview, Sara, 23)

For Sara and Helen, as with many other women like them, men’s refusal to hit in training presents a roadblock for the development of their fighting abilities, whilst also threatening to cheapen and degrade their status as martial artists. And as Beth

and Keeley both describe, men's hesitation is often experienced as a patronizing annoyance, reflecting what McCaughey (1997, 79) describes as the 'condescending or embarrassing atmosphere' of male-centred mixed training environments. As such, men's excessive 'holding back' could become a significant problem for women in mixed-sex martial arts.

Kick or be Kicked: How Women Force Men to Reckon with Them on the Mat

In order to address the problems posed by men's reluctance to hit, the women in my research invariably employed the most simple of strategies: when men continually held back, the women pushed forward. The following field journal excerpt describes a sparring bout between Jenny, a senior gym member, and Gavin, an intermediate member. Evelyn, one of the junior instructors, is trying to encourage them:

Jenny's got the upper hand and, with everyone watching, Gavin's stepping it up a bit, but not enough. Evelyn shouts to Jenny to 'make him work, kick him in the chops', and she catches him neatly with a roundhouse. You can hear the slapping sound of her instep on his cheek as it echoes around the hall. Classic, everyone gasps, then laughs. He's alright but red faced in more ways than one. He steps up the level, can see he wants revenge. Evelyn applauds the change in pace. (Field notes, kung fu training, 2010)

In order for Gavin to engage in the sparring session at a satisfactory level for the instructor Evelyn, it was first necessary for Jenny to shock him into action by showing him her strength – and his own vulnerability. In a later interview, Evelyn described her own approach to sparring reluctant men:

If [men have] seriously got a problem that they don't wanna hurt me then well that's their problem and not mine, I'm still gonna go at them... I've been kicked in the head and punched and stuff, like anyone. And I think they see that they can do it to me after I do it to them a few times. (Interview, Evelyn, 24)

In recognizing that the strategy of physically pushing men into action was the most successful, Evelyn neatly summarizes the feelings of the majority of experienced female martial artists with whom I have trained and spoken throughout the course of my research. Their example highlights the necessity of confronting men's *embodied* aversions to hitting at *the level of the body*. In this regard, my own experience is also telling, and reflecting upon it highlights how women's potential for violent physicality can destabilize the habituated 'chivalry' of inexperienced male martial artists. Expanding upon the earlier mention of my first experience of sparring against a woman, the following passage, written in 2010 for the opening section of my PhD thesis, demonstrates how I began to change my approach towards mixed-sex training, and is indicative of the centrality of hitting or, more accurately, being hit, which is shared in the narratives of other men in similar

situations. This account is of a time from before I formally began researching martial arts, and so is presented as a vignette based on my best ability to recollect:⁵

It was 2005, and I had been training for little under a year. Despite being relatively inexperienced, I was more or less obliged to accept when, during free practice, one of the senior girls asked me to demonstrate semi-contact sparring to some of the newer members. The outcome was to thrust my previous disquiet regarding the presence of girls in the gym into the forefront of my reckoning of women's participation in martial arts. While I had sparred seriously with other senior members before, I hadn't fought against any of the women, and had more or less successfully avoided practising with girls at my own level by sticking to a small number of male sparring partners. But now I had no option, and the prospect of fighting her immediately foregrounded the contradictions inherent in my understanding of gender and martial arts. I remember the trepidation well: I was stepping into the unknown as I squared up to what suddenly felt like my first 'real' fight with a girl. Typically, I found myself hesitating to attack, withholding all power and retreating rather than blocking and countering. Our sparring session eventually ended following a hit to my head which sent me to the floor. She had caught me on the ear with a roundhouse kick, and while not entirely powerful, it was at a sufficient angle and pace to snap my head to the side, dazing me and causing me to fall. I remember feeling stunned as she checked me, knowing that I would be unable to continue. I had just been 'knocked out' by a girl.

While it would be some time before I understood enough about social theory to adequately analyse the significance of the situation, this forceful, direct and undeniable demonstration of female power had rocked my assumptions about the sexes and would remain with me for the rest of my training career. Indeed, it eventually became apparent that I had experienced first-hand the kind of 'consciousness-raising' moment which, five years later, I would be discussing at length in my PhD thesis. And there was no better way for me to initially begin this intellectual journey than through a direct, physical exchange, forcing this transformative knowledge (quite literally) right into my head.

According to Roth and Basow (2004, 245), it is commonly thought that 'women are not just weaker [than men] but are just plain weak'. Yet female martial artists openly defy this patriarchal ideology with their fists and their feet, and by *physically* demonstrating their own strength they destabilize the grounds upon which men's paternalism is based, providing new embodied realities with which men must then contend. When Messner described the significance of male combat sports in supporting ideologies of masculine superiority, he commented on the 'dramatic symbolic proof' (1988, 200) that male athletes provided of men's inherent fighting advantages over women. I would suggest that in similar ways, men being punched, kicked, thrown and choked by female martial artists goes some way to providing the kind of 'dramatic symbolic proof' needed to challenge this idea and the sexual hierarchy it supports. A later example from my

field notes indicates how my default approach to physically engaging with women had changed in the years since the above incident:

Freestyle sparring, showing off our other styles. Evelyn's trying out jiu-jitsu moves. We're on the ground and she got me in a triangle hold, squeezed my neck so hard I thought my eyes would pop out. We reset and she tried it again but I countered, lifted and slammed her on the mat. Wouldn't have ever done that a few years ago, but I'm in a different place now, I do this stuff without even thinking about it. I know she'll try to get me back next week and I'm already looking forward to the challenge. (Field notes, kung fu training, 2010)

Similar transformations take place among other men, as illustrated through the concluding part of Andy's tale about his competitive engagements with female opponents. Recalling a more recent championship fight, this time in a mixed-sex grappling tournament, Andy described his behaviour as radically different from before:

She was so good, if I'd taken the pressure off her for a second she would've submitted me, she was world class... I knew she's probably one of the best grapplers in the UK, if not Europe. And she submitted every guy in my category, so I had to go in and batter her, and I did! (Interview, Andy, 30)

Describing his opponent not as a 'girl' or a 'woman', but rather as a 'great athlete', Andy revealed that his experience had taught him to see his opponent as fellow competitor first and female second. In doing so, he could take pride in his victory, boasting about 'battering' one of the best grapplers in the UK. Jack, a senior instructor in kung fu, echoes this changing definition of the female sparring partner as he recalls the events of his earlier training career:

Because of the context that we were in, doing martial arts, I just didn't see it as hitting a girl, you see it as hitting another martial artist... Once I'd learned about [women's] abilities it was different. I fought against a girl I knew and it didn't make any difference to me personally that she was female because I knew what she was capable of. If I didn't take her seriously, treat her the same, she'd kick me in the head, she'd hurt me... [This experience] forces you to look at women differently. (Interview, Jack, 34)

Ultimately, then, treating women as 'the same' as male opponents would result from men's exposure to the abilities of female training partners and competitors, and through a concurrent realization that 'even if women are not as strong as men in absolute terms, they can still be formidable opponents' (Roth and Basow 2004, 254). A signal moment in the 'subversive' value of mixed-sex sport, this replacement of the primary indentifying label of 'female' with that of 'martial artist' signifies the disassociation of the exclusive links between masculinity, men and fighting prowess, showing that men are beginning to see women as potential physical equals in the context of physical combat

(McDonagh and Pappano 2008). Hitting women follows from this, and in light of these changing subjectivities and reworkings of gender propriety, it takes on a completely different set of meanings to those implied by male chivalry and paternalism. Hitting women, then, becomes the physical expression of men's reworked gender habitus, forged through the shared histories of men and women learning how to fight together, and therein learning to engage with one another outside of the bounds of typical, patriarchal gender norms.

Concluding Thoughts: Theorizing Habitus, Subversion and Reflexivity in Martial Arts

Given these examples, I would suggest that it is principally through the process of 'up-close' exposure to the abilities of female fighters that I, along with many of the men I have trained among and spoken to, have come to 'unlearn' the deeply ingrained lessons of masculine chivalry and come to practise gender differently in this respect. As female martial artists present their strength, toughness and fighting skills to men in direct and undeniable fashion, the essentialist, patriarchal logic at the root of this particular problem is challenged as men are simultaneously pressed to take action outside of the discursive bounds it once set them in. This ultimately improves women's chances to become ever tougher and more skilful martial artists through expanding their training opportunities among more willing male partners, whilst simultaneously opening up spaces within which men and women can better learn about the many shared potentials of one another's bodies, rather than remaining fixated on typical, socially constructed, binary and hierarchal differences (Halberstam 1998).

In theorizing such a change, the fact that this lesson must be learned *physically*, and not just visually or discursively, highlights the usefulness of the concept of habitus for making sense of the depth at which inequitable gender ideology is often held. As Wacquant deftly puts it, the habitus is 'a social competency that is an embodied competency, transmitted through a silent pedagogy of organisms in action' (2011, 5). This 'silent pedagogy' may at once also be a vocal one, yet the deep mechanisms through which it does its most effective work lie in the unwritten, unspoken logics taught to acting subjects as they move through their socially structured lives (Bourdieu 1990b), ultimately becoming written into their very bodies. Particularly, as they rehearse dominant codes of prevailing gender logic, the patriarchal discourses of masculine 'superiority' and feminine 'weakness' become embodied, being normalized and 'naturalized' through the disciplined, repeated bodily performances of their everyday lives, as suggested by Butler (1990). Bourdieu, writing of the paradoxical character of such 'naturalized' gender, suggested that to challenge this sexual inequity in its normalized, naturalized state, it would be necessary to '(dismantle) the processes responsible for this transformation of history into nature, of cultural arbitrariness into the *natural*' (2001, 2, original emphasis). That is to say that the subversion of gender, and of patriarchy in particular, requires finding ways for individuals to reflexively recognize the socially constructed nature of their 'sexually characterized habitus' (2001, 3), revealing the cultural – and not 'natural' – roots of sex difference more broadly.

To express these ideas in more explicitly feminist terms, Bourdieu's position here is remarkably similar to Butler's (1990) poststructural feminist analysis, wherein the subversion of the patriarchal system of gender is a key concern. For Butler, this

subversion is said to occur when individuals bend existing codes of propriety within the discursive spaces available to them, exposing the faulty logic of essentialism supporting the ideologies which otherwise structure 'normal' gendered categories. This principally occurs when radical, new performances destabilize existing gender codes through their inherent shock value, whilst simultaneously revealing the constructed character of the default categories that are otherwise assumed to occur naturally. Central to this strategy for subversion is the recognition that:

The strange, the incoherent, that which falls 'outside', gives us a way of understanding the taken-for-granted world of sexual categorization as a constructed one, indeed, as one that might well be constructed differently. (Butler 1990, 149)

I would certainly argue that the normalization of a practice that values men hitting women as a way to substantiate greater sexual equity 'falls outside' of this taken-for-granted world, making mixed-sex training a powerful arena for contesting the naturalization of hierarchical sex difference and concurrently producing different sexually characterized habitus (Bourdieu 2001). The pedagogical outcomes of such 'strange' and 'incoherent' gendered encounters, drawn from perhaps the 'dramatic symbolic proof' (Messner 1988, 200) of women's otherwise hidden combative abilities, are what drive (specifically male) martial artists to a point where they must reconsider and challenge their own previous patterns of behaviour. That is to say, it requires them to develop a certain degree of *reflexivity* about their ideological understanding of the world and of their gendered selves (Bourdieu 2001). The Bourdieusian reading of *habitus* offered by Wacquant (above) similarly leaves open the door for flexibility and change in our gendered selves, being a set of '*acquired dispositions*' (Wacquant 2011, 5, original emphasis) that a person picks up as they move through their life, and is thus inherently open to alteration as their life course changes direction. More specifically, 'the socially constituted conative and cognitive structures that make up habitus are malleable and transmissible because they result from *pedagogical work*' (2011, 6, original emphasis), the likes of which clearly takes place in mixed-sex sparring.

Commenting on such pedagogical work, male and female martial artists alike stressed the transformative nature of the lessons of sparring and hinted at the wider significance that they held for challenging conceptions of gender difference and encouraging reflexive examination of their own attitudes, past and present. When linking men's discovery of women's physical potential with wider social patterns of gender relations, one of my female interviewees stated that:

I think it's quite important to do this as a mixed group, because one of the things it does do is it helps develop a certain amount of respect between men and women, and what men's and women's bodies can do... And so [the men] hopefully will start to realize that women aren't just the weaker sex, we can hold our own, and that's quite important. (Interview, Beth, 24)

Speaking personally, I can only reaffirm this statement, and suggest that my interest in researching this phenomenon came following such a reflexive turn, brought on via the

embodied pedagogy of mixed-sex hitting. Of course, my own personal journey in this regard has clearly been aided by the theoretical insights gathered through an education in sociology, but this should not downplay the importance of the *physical* in shaping my subjectivity. Even without the help of such philosophical frameworks, men and women training at martial arts are becoming physically familiar with the abilities of either sex, coming to understand the shared potential for developing martial competencies that lie within both male and female bodies. The discourses that typically circulate within martial arts subcultures explain the body's developing aptitude for combat as being principally the product of training, rather than participants' (sexed) natures, and by drawing on these explanations, alternative gendered discourses can arise which in turn help to shape the bodies of those involved. As one consequence of this, we can see the emergence of a reworked habitus among men who have particularly profound experiences of training alongside women in martial arts. Whilst there are other ways in which the phenomenon of mixed-sex training can instigate 'subversive' gender behaviour (including, for instance, the emergence of 'female masculinities' (Halberstam 1998) and female martial artists' negotiation, retention and reinvention of both 'subversive' and traditional styles of femininity (e.g. De Welde 2003)), I would suggest that these changes in men's habitus provide a compelling point of departure for scholars interested in exploring such things.

Notes

- 1 Not to be confused with 'mixed martial arts' (MMA), I use this term to denote any and all practices of martial arts that are undertaken in sex-integrated, or 'co-ed' training environments.
- 2 I conducted formal semi-structured interviews with martial artists (n=34) drawn from several different disciplines (including kung fu, karate, kickboxing, MMA, tae kwon do and others) from around the English East Midlands, where my own training also took place. These interviews were in addition to the many informal conversations held with martial artists during training, at competitions, conventions, social events, etc.
- 3 Note that whenever names are used in conjunction with interview quotations or field notes, they are pseudonyms, self-selected by my research participants in order to protect their anonymity. Participants' ages are also provided to partly contextualize data.
- 4 Discourses based around male strength and female weakness have also been reported to structure players' conduct in other mixed-sex sports, such as softball (Wachs 2002) and soccer (Henry and Comeaux 1999).
- 5 As others with similar experiences will no doubt be able to attest, events such as this are not quickly forgotten!