



Girls and the Martial Arts:

Potentials for Strength, Power and Agency



Introduction

The martial arts, as a set of social practices, provide a venue for self-definition and transformation. While this process can allow female practitioners the opportunity to explore ways of being that are often denied them in our society (in relation to strength, power and physical agency), this does not happen necessarily or without being influenced by ideologies and practices that often position women in subordinate and limited roles. **Women's participation in strength related activities (such as sports and the martial arts) can both challenge and strengthen patterns of male domination.** (Brown 2006)

My dissertation explored how girls actively perform who they are within the framework of training in the martial arts, emphasizing the martial arts as a transformative tool-mediated activity. Three main frameworks informed my work:

- * **Activity Theory:** embodied identity and gendered bodies as emergent property of cultural and historical activity that is mediated by symbolic and material tools
- * **Life Stories:** writing/telling life stories as a cultural process for creating identity (Eakin 1999)
- * **Action Research:** goal is not to simply observe identity, but to introduce new ways of constructing it

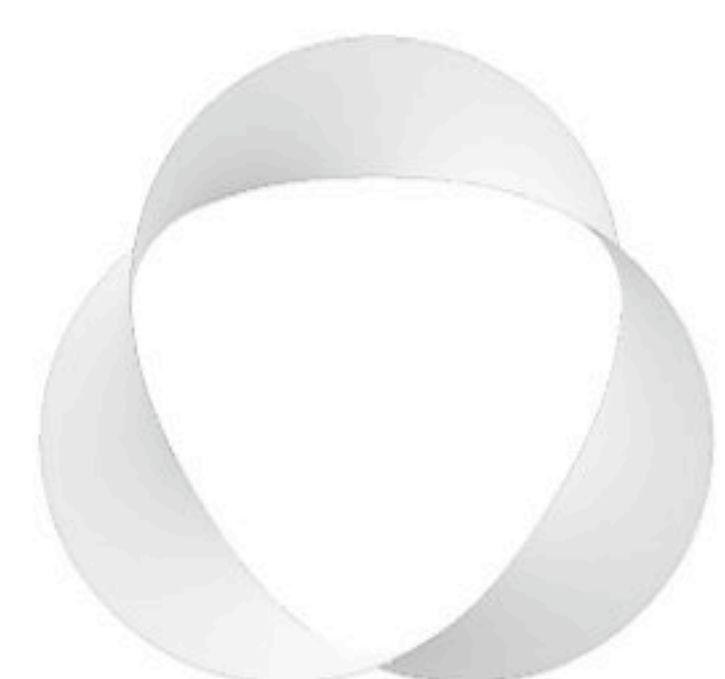
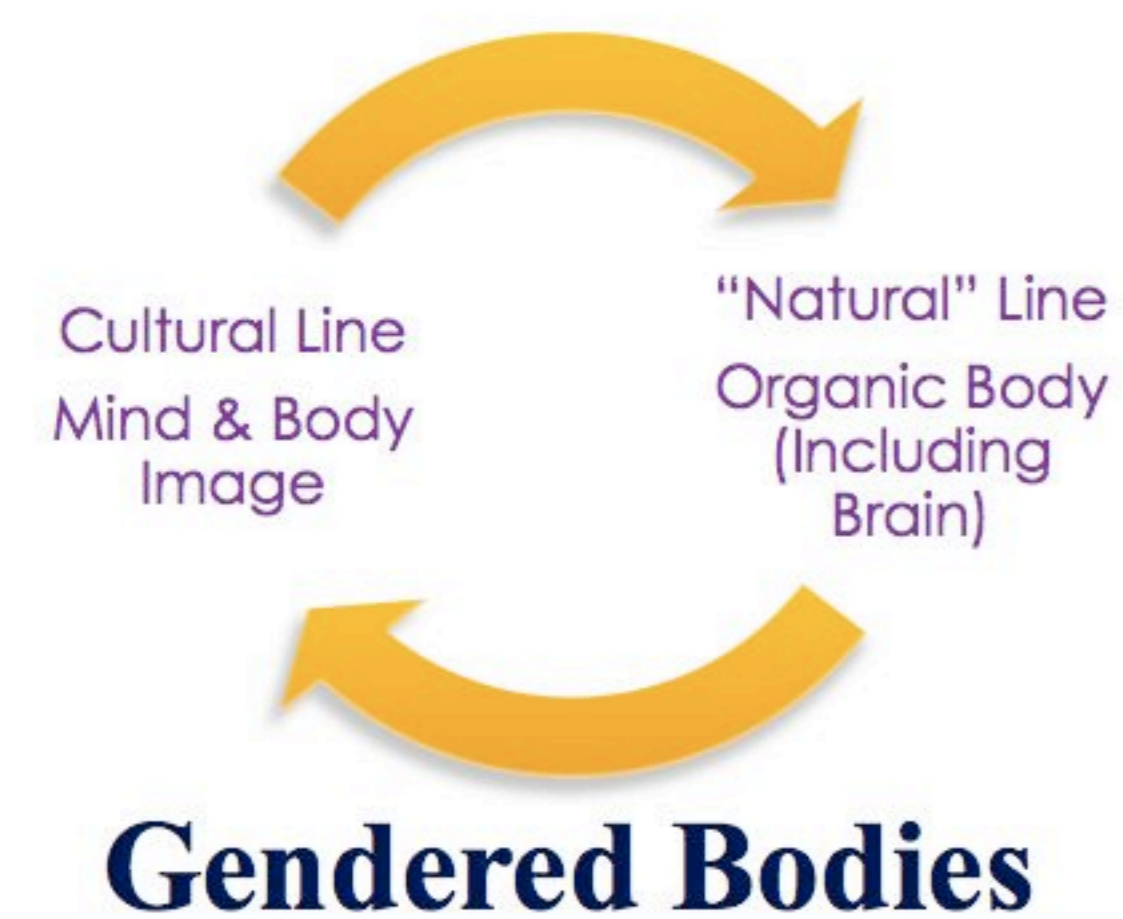


Figure 1. Grosz's (1994) use of the "mobius strip" as a metaphor highlights that "[b]odies and minds are not two distinct substances or two kinds of attributes of a single substance but somewhere in between these two alternatives" (xii).

Embodied Identity

- Avoid the dichotomy between mind and body that occurs when we posit the body as a predetermined "natural" object or as a passive space for cultural inscription.
- "cultural development does not create anything over and above that which potentially exists in the natural development in ... behaviour... Culture ... transforms nature to suit the ends of man" (Vygotski 1929)



- "the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time. From a feminist point of view, one might try to reconceive the gendered body as the legacy of sedimented acts rather than a predetermined or foreclosed structure, essence or fact, whether natural, cultural, or linguistic" (Butler 1988, p. 523)

Kim Rybacki, PhD

Graduate Center, CUNY

Research Objectives

1. To explore the development of embodied identities before and during the research process
 - within the context of the TKD school, focusing on the school as an activity system
 - at the individual and group level
2. To identify categories/themes that are important elements of training in the martial arts, in order to connect the stories of the girls with the stories of other female athletes/martial artists
3. To contribute to
 1. an understanding of sex/gender that recognizes the historical construction of bodies, actions, ideologies, and psychologies, and thus recognizes and makes room for difference within and across genders, and
 2. a vision of how martial arts (and sports) can play a role as spaces for learning and development (i.e., the transformative possibilities of the activity)

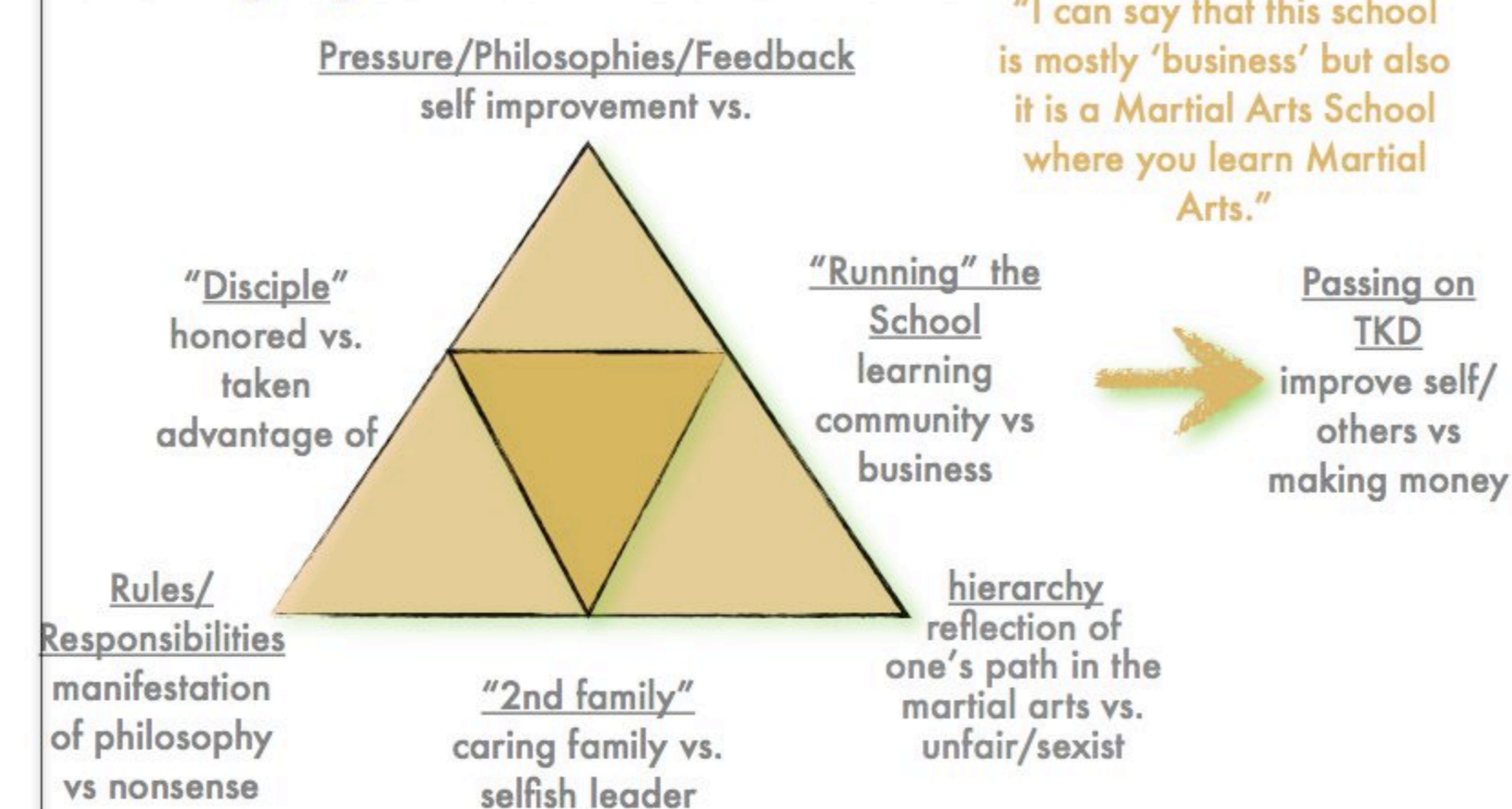
Methods

- **Participatory Ethnography:** Institutional Practices, Discourse
- **Groupwork:** Work with 5 "Jr Instructors" at the school. 13 - 17 yrs old, using the practice of writing, reading, watching and discussing stories/narratives in order to develop a list of suggestions for the school.
- **Individual Semi-Structured Interviews:** Elaborate on tools of identity and important moments for individual girls

Results - Institution

The rituals and discourse of the school, based on hierarchy, structure and tradition, placed the girls in a subordinate position. The emphasis on respect and discipline, in a system where most of the highest ranking were male, resulted in a reinforcement of traditional power relations. The organization of bodies within the school further emphasized differences between males and females. The philosophies of the school, emphasizing individual effort, dedication, and humility, did not allow for critical evaluation of the school.

Activity System of the TKD School



Results - GroupWork

Gender discrimination was not seen as a problem, yet the girls did discuss differences in how males and females trained, which were ascribed to either **individual differences** (gender as invisible) or **"natural"** gender differences (gender as handicap).

Naturalization

"legitimizes a relationship of domination by embedding it in a biological nature that is itself a naturalized social construction"

(Bourdieu 2001, p. 23)

Gender as Invisible

That never actually goes to, into like, in my mind, now that I think about it. I never think about it, just because I'm a girl I can't do it. I just like, I just say to myself I can't do it cause I know I can't do it. But just cause you know my body, I don't know, I feel like my body's weak, but not because I'm a girl.

Gender as Handicap

But I must admit that I partially believe in this way of thinking as well. Sometimes I would think that these activities are more suited for males and biologically, they are more inclined to be 'naturally good' at this stuff ... But I do confess that I use the thought of 'boys being better at this' at times, perhaps as a justification for my disability of performing a certain kick or another skill.

Sociocultural Construction of the Body (Becoming Female)

"Like when I'm doing push-ups or sit-ups ... after you do it like you feel good. But then, after I do it, I kind of like regret for doing, trying so hard and doing it. Cause then I know that I'm gonna gain the muscles that I don't want ... I start thinking more like, oh, man I'm gonna gain muscle again. Like I just keep thinking like, oh man, I should not do this."

"You know some, like, uh, certain kicks right, we never like officially learned how to do, like no one really taught us. They're just like, oh, you do it like this. So then we try to follow as best we can, but then, nobody really tells us like how to do it. You know?"

Positioning, Marginalization, and Objectification

- Girls as "other"
 - "Like I know, you know J----? When he spars guys he's all out but when he spars girls he's like gentler, he controls. He's good."
- Girls as "marginalized"
 - No, I think Instructor James prefers girls more because they do more of the business work instead of actually training inside the dojang.
- Girls as "objectified"
 - "... a sense of embodiment may be achieved only when there is a lack of awareness of the body part in question" (MacLachlan 2004, p. 173)

Conclusions

In order to realize the potential of sports/martial arts as spaces for the development of embodied identities that challenge traditional gender dichotomy, gendered bodies must become an explicit object of activity.

- Avoid becoming too "business oriented."
- Redefine the role of "higher ranking" individuals so that they are caring without getting rid of discipline and respect.
- Provide students opportunities to participate in decision making.
- Create a more collaborative environment, where power structures are not strictly hierarchical.
- Redefine rules and the discourse of the school so that they are flexible tools rather than established and inflexible structures.
- Assure that divisions of responsibilities are fair, and not divided based on gender.
- Assure that activities in the class are structured so that all students, regardless of gender, are allowed and encouraged to participate in all activities with a variety of partners.
- Involve students in the development of short and long-term objectives, and assure that staff members are aware of these objectives.
- Create situations for analysis, assessment and transformation of school practices.

Further suggestions involve the creation of educational practices that would institutionalize reflective practices in order to further female practitioners' development within the martial arts:

- Such practices should be continuous and collaborative, involving discussions on issues such as gender, aggression and violence, and philosophy.
- Integrate school and martial arts philosophy more explicitly into their requirements
- Use resources such as texts, videos, and guest speakers to model the writing process and to provide different perspectives

Within martial arts practices, performance and progress must be seen not as a factor solely of individuals, but of the social activity, which necessarily is affected by the ways in which sex and gender have been and continue to be constructed. Based on the work with this group of girls, for example, several issues emerge as needing to be addressed.

- setting and communication of higher expectations for female students,
- need for more female role models (i.e., who can perform advanced techniques),
- emphasis on physical training as important for females and spaces where they feel comfortable developing physical competencies,
- need for gender equality regarding time/space/responsibilities,
- emphasis on the aspects and characteristics that we want females to develop (power, strength, agency), including an understanding of what is necessary for these to develop and what obstacles exist,
- an evaluation of school practices (such as division of labor, discourse, and organization of students in class) to see how gender is constructed within the school.

References

Bourdieu, P. (2001). *Masculine domination*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
 Butler, J. (1988). Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory. *Theatre Journal*, 40(4), 519-531.
 Brown, D. (2006). Pierre Bourdieu's "Masculine Domination" thesis and the gendered body in sport and physical culture. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 2006, 23, 162-188.
 Eakin, P. (1999). *How our lives become stories: Making selves*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell.
 Grosz, E. (1994). *Volatile bodies: Toward a corporeal feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
 MacLachlan, M. (2004). *Embodiment: Clinical, Critical & Cultural Perspectives on Health & Illness*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
 Vygotski, L. S. (1929). *The problem of the cultural development of the child II*. *Journal of Genetic Psychology*, 36, 415-32.