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# **Way of the Discourse**

**Mixed-Sex Martial Arts and the Subversion of Gender**

*by*

**Alexander Guy Channon**

A Doctoral Thesis

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## ***Abstract***

This thesis examines the gender-subversive potential of mixed-sex martial arts. The research problem takes its significance from the well-documented linkages drawn within feminist research between combat sports and hierarchal gender differentiation. It is posited that from a feminist perspective, gender-subversive physical practices are desirable because they instigate a shift towards fairer and freer bodily discourse, and as such they are deserving of critical academic attention. Furthermore, sex-integrated sports have the potential to lead participants towards embodying and propagating such subversive gender discourses, and when these changes take place within highly 'masculinised' activities such as combat sports, the significance of this subversion is amplified. While existing literature has addressed these themes with reference to *women's* participation in these kinds of activities, there is a relative paucity of sociological work explicitly examining *mixed-sex* participation, which this thesis is intended to redress.

Using semi-structured interviewing, qualitative data were gathered from a group of male and female martial artists across the English East Midlands. The interviews were transcribed and then subjected to discourse analysis. Findings suggested that mixed-sex martial arts does involve gender subversion but that the practice also remains structured by dominant, hierarchal gender discourse in several significant ways. It is therefore suggested that mixed-sex training *can* present the possibility of gender subversion under particular conditions, such as: martial arts being accessible to both men and women at multiple levels of participation; a 'normalised' presence of women, particularly at higher levels such as being coaches and competitors; participants coming to share an identity as martial artists which is irrespective of sexual difference; and ultimately training being integrated as much as possible, particularly with regard to the more intensely physical, combative aspects, such as sparring. The participants indicated that under these conditions they were able to conceive of and practice their gender differently, in ways which portrayed little or no hierarchal distinction between the sexes, and as such is considered 'subversive'. Following these findings, the thesis ultimately concludes with a brief outline of some recommendations for good practice in martial arts clubs. In this way, the thesis contributes towards feminist understandings of the body and of physical culture, by highlighting one possible way in which to conceive of the sexed body differently from the prevailing norms of hierarchal sexual differentiation.

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## ***Table of Contents***

<b><i>Chapter 1</i></b>	<b><i>Introduction</i></b>	<b>1</b>
1.1	<b>The Research Problem</b>	1
1.2	<b>Vignette: Losing Consciousness/Raising Consciousness</b>	4
1.3	<b>Presentation of the Thesis</b>	9
<b><i>Chapter 2</i></b>	<b><i>Feminist Theory and Sport</i></b>	<b>12</b>
2.1	<b>Theorising Gender: Feminist Traditions and the Postmodern Turn</b>	12
2.1.1	Liberal Feminism: Structural Inequality, Social Reproduction, and the Struggle for Equal Rights	13
2.1.2	Radical Feminism: Women’s Bodies, Political Sexuality, and Separatist Feminist Revolution	18
2.1.3	Postmodern Feminism: Anti-Essentialism, Disciplined Performance, and the ‘Queer’ Value of Difference	26
2.2	<b>Sport and Patriarchy: ‘Male Preserves’ and the Reification of Gender</b>	38
2.2.1	The Development of Modern Sport as a Gendered/Gendering Practice	39
2.2.2	Patriarchal Sporting Binaries: Hegemonic Masculinity, Emphasised Femininity, and the Embodiment of Violent Potential	46
<b><i>Chapter 3</i></b>	<b><i>Sport, Gender and Subversion</i></b>	<b>53</b>
3.1	<b>Gender Subversion in Sport: Subversive Physical Cultures</b>	53
3.1.1	Different Men: ‘Alternative’ Masculinities and Homosexual Male Athletes	54
3.1.2	Mixed-Sex Sports: Playing Together and Challenging Gender Myths	60
3.2	<b>Women’s Combat Sports: Embodied Challenges to Patriarchy</b>	65
3.2.1	Women’s Fighting and the Embodiment of Masculinity: A Liberating Androgyny?	66
3.2.2	Women and the Redefinition of Combat: ‘Physical Feminism’ and Sexualisation	72
3.2.3	Women and the Performance of Femininity: What Martial Artists’ ‘Balancing Acts’ Say About Gender	78

<b>Chapter 4</b>	<b><i>Methodology</i></b>	<b>84</b>
<b>4.1</b>	<b>Epistemological Problems: Postmodernism, Subjects, Objects, Ethics, and the Politics of Knowledge</b>	<b>85</b>
4.1.1	Postmodernism: Epistemological Pluralism	86
4.1.2	Cultural Studies: Intellectuals as Political Advocates	93
4.1.3	Reconciling Theory and Practice: Methodological and Authorial Compromise	98
<b>4.2</b>	<b>Research Methods: The Semi-Structured Interview and ‘Dialogic’ Research</b>	<b>106</b>
4.2.1	Semi-Structured Interviewing: Dialogic Encounters with the ‘Other’	107
4.2.2	The Research Itself: Methodology in Practice	110
4.2.3	Data Analysis and Reporting	119
<b>Chapter 5</b>	<b><i>Access to Martial Arts: The (Ab)Normality of Mixed-Sex Training</i></b>	<b>124</b>
<b>5.1</b>	<b>Participants’ Entry into Martial Arts</b>	<b>125</b>
5.1.1	Initial Motivations	126
5.1.2	A ‘Man’s Sport’?	128
<b>5.2</b>	<b>Opportunities for Women Within Martial Arts</b>	<b>132</b>
5.2.1	Valuing Female Club Members	133
5.2.2	Opportunities for Female Competitors	136
5.2.3	Women as Coaches: Contesting the ‘Ownership’ of Martial Arts	140
<b>5.3</b>	<b>Sex Integration and Segregation in Martial Arts</b>	<b>144</b>
5.3.1	Integration and Segregation in Training	144
5.3.2	Mixed-Sex Competition: The Final Frontier for Integration?	150
<b>5.4</b>	<b>Discussion: Against the ‘Male Preserve’? The Possibility of Combat Sport as a Subversive Space</b>	<b>154</b>
<b>Chapter 6</b>	<b><i>Masculinities, Femininities, Sexualities: Martial Artists’ Gendered Identities</i></b>	<b>161</b>
<b>6.1</b>	<b>Male Martial Artists’ Engagement with Gender</b>	<b>162</b>
6.1.1	Martial Arts as a Site for Questioning ‘Masculinity’	163
6.1.2	Male Martial Artists and ‘Real’ Men	168
6.1.3	Constructing and Defending Idealised Masculine Norms	172
<b>6.2</b>	<b>Female Martial Artists’ Engagement with Gender</b>	<b>175</b>
6.2.1	Women, Masculinity, and the ‘Butch’ Stigma	176
6.2.2	‘Feminine Sides’: Legitimate and Illegitimate Femininities	180
6.2.3	Selective Femininity, Heterosexuality, and Being a ‘Normal’ Woman	185

<b>6.3</b>	<b>Discussion: Masculinity, Femininity, and Subversive Gender Performances</b>	<b>189</b>
<b>Chapter 7</b>	<b><i>Hitting, Touching, and Doing Gender: Mixed-Sex Martial Arts in Practice</i></b>	<b>199</b>
<b>7.1</b>	<b>The Benefits of Training Together: Diversity as Necessity for Martial Artists</b>	<b>200</b>
7.1.1	Women ‘Needing’ Male Partners	202
7.1.2	Men Learning Through Sparring Women	206
<b>7.2</b>	<b>Problems in Mixed-Sex Training: The Issue of Hitting</b>	<b>210</b>
7.2.1	‘Holding Back’: Male Honour as Sexism on the Mat	211
7.2.2	‘Hit Me!’: How Being Hit is Considered Beneficial for Women	216
<b>7.3</b>	<b>Lessons Learned Through Integration: Black Eyes, Changed Minds</b>	<b>222</b>
7.3.1	Learning About the Body, Through the Body	223
7.3.2	Reflexive Sensitivity and ‘Doing’ Gender Selectively	227
<b>7.4</b>	<b>Discussion: Embodied Learning and the Generation of Subversive Discourse</b>	<b>231</b>
<b>Chapter 8</b>	<b><i>Conclusion: Mixed-Sex Martial Arts and the Subversion of Gender</i></b>	<b>236</b>
<b>8.1</b>	<b>Answering the Question: Is Mixed-Sex Martial Arts ‘Subversive’?</b>	<b>236</b>
<b>8.2</b>	<b>Sampling Issues: Interviewee Biases and the Partial View</b>	<b>245</b>
<b>8.3</b>	<b>The Applicability of the Research: Locating the Audience</b>	<b>248</b>
<b>8.4</b>	<b>The Applicability of the Research: Recommendations for Practice</b>	<b>250</b>
	<b><i>References</i></b>	<b>255</b>
	<b><i>Appendices</i></b>	<b>267</b>
Appendix 1:	Interviewee Training Biographies	267
Appendix 2:	Example Interview Schedule	271
Appendix 3:	Sample Interview Transcripts	273



# 1

## ***Introduction***

This chapter consists of a brief introduction to the research presented in this thesis, including: a statement of the research question with an outline of the rationale underpinning its significance; an account of my own personal interest in undertaking this study; and a short summary of the thesis content.

### **1.1 *The Research Problem***

*The focus and goal of a post-structuralist sociology of sport... involves developing politically subversive readings of sport which seek to take it beyond – or post – the oppressive, symbolically violent and exclusionary vices of its modern incarnations. (Andrews, 2000: 116)*

In simple terms, this research project is concerned with how, as an effect of sports participation, people can come to alter their understanding of what it means to be male or female. Through the medium of qualitative research, I attempted to study how people involved in a particular sports culture offer accounts of sex, gender and sexuality which might significantly differ from 'mainstream', or 'normal' ways of thinking and acting, and how they suppose to have come to think and behave in such 'alternative' ways. The particular sports culture I investigated is martial arts, with a focus on any martial arts club/school which conducts training where both men and women are present in classes at the same time, and involves sex-integrated training practices in some shape or form. Thus, my research is concerned with people training in mixed-sex martial arts classes, and the ways in which their thoughts about and practices of gender have come to differ from 'mainstream' norms.

As is outlined at length in Chapter 2, the sociological significance of this research draws from the general consensus among social theorists, and post-structuralist feminist theorists in particular, that gender relations in contemporary society are ultimately relations of *power* (Connell, 1987; Butler, 2008). That is, the specific ways in which men and women are differentiated between, and the lives which they lead based upon these differentiations, are thought to imbue them with different power chances in several specific ways. Of particular relevance in this study are the effects of differential *sexed embodiment*, which lead men and women to actively construct a specific body type in accordance with what they believe their male or female body 'should' be like (Bordo, 2003). With regard to 'normal' sexual differentiations then, it is considered that male bodies are generally thought of as larger, stronger, more powerful, and ultimately therefore more capable of performing physical combat than female bodies (Dowling, 2000). This reasoning implies that 'normal' men are more physically powerful than 'normal' women, and is an ideology which has long been associated with a prevailing discourse of male superiority (Roth & Basow, 2004). It is also widely recognised among sports scholars and gender theorists that particularly 'masculine' sports cultures help to propagate this notion, by idealising images of the male body and conceptions of male character which value power and physical domination above all else (Messner, 1990a; Connell, 1995). Furthermore, participants in such sports are considered to be active in their pursuit of embodying these idealisations, to the point that involvement in sports is taken to help *produce* this type of 'masculine' man. It is also accepted that 'feminine' sports have contributed to this power differential between the sexes, by defining 'legitimate' female athleticism in ways which de-prioritise strength and physical dominance (Lenskyj, 1986; Hargreaves, 1994). Taken together, sex-segregated (male-only or female-only) and gender-differentiated (so-called 'masculine' and 'feminine') sports have helped to separate men and women from each other and to 'naturalise' the association of either sex with the ostensible 'contents' of either gender. And since 'masculine' embodiment is ultimately equated with the ability to physically dominate, this distinction helps to constitute a physical hierarchy between men and women which, importantly, lends itself easily to support the norms of what feminist researchers have called 'rape culture' (McCaughey, 1997). Therefore, sex-

segregated and gender-differentiated sports are implicated in the construction of a hierarchal power imbalance between men and women, making their study, and the study of alternatives, sociologically important (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003; McDonagh & Pappano, 2008).

What makes mixed-sex martial arts an interesting avenue of enquiry then, is that it gives an insight into a different type of sports culture from these distinctive and separate male/masculine and female/feminine variants, where men and women train together at an activity often considered highly 'masculine' (Mennesson, 2000). Since such 'combat sports' are implicated in leading individuals to embody a particular gender, participation which involves the production of different models of gender becomes an important possibility for study. And in terms of thinking about and 'doing' gender differently, this particular setting holds out the promise of showcasing such novel engagements with gender within a context where the ability of the (male *and* female) body to physically dominate an opponent is key. The production of such bodies, and abilities within these bodies, is central to martial arts training, and so the ways in which men and women conceive of maleness, femaleness, masculinity, and femininity is of interest inasmuch as it stands to be 'different' within one of the most important sites of hierarchal distinction – the ability to physically dominate (McCaughey, 2008). As far as such men and women differ from 'normal' discursive constructions of sexual difference, it can therefore be said that their differences may well be thought of as 'subversive', because their alternative conceptions and constructions of sexed bodies stand in opposition to those underpinning a hierarchal structure of power relations between the sexes.

Ultimately then, the research question derives from the theoretical presuppositions that: a) sex difference is produced through active gender embodiment and is imbued with unequal power relations; b) such differential, hierarchal embodiment is promoted and even naturalised through 'masculine' and 'feminine' sports cultures; and c) doing gender differently in these contexts can therefore hold out the possibility of 'subverting' the dominant norms of sexual difference. My research

question coalesces around this notion of subversion, and can be succinctly stated as follows:

In which ways and to what extent can mixed-sex martial arts training involve the subversion of gender?

## **1.2 Vignette: Losing Consciousness/Raising Consciousness**

*There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all. (Foucault, 1985: 8-9)*

Before giving a brief summary of the chapters which constitute this thesis and draw out my answer to this question, I offer a vignette to account for my own interest in asking it. The vignette details how it was that I became personally aware of the significance of mixed-sex training through my own lived experience of this phenomenon. This short story is intended to highlight two important themes of this thesis, including the difficulties facing inexperienced male martial artists as they engage with women in their schools and clubs, and the conceptual importance of *physically learning* in moving towards alternative, subversive ways of doing gender.

In 2004 I began something of a journey, joining my university's student kickboxing club as a first-year undergraduate, with no previous martial arts training to speak of. From the start, the experience of learning to fight was, in itself, both exciting and edifying. The joy of one's body in motion, the sense of power within each hit landing on the bag, the rush of competitive sparring and the strange thrill of taking hits all enthused me to pursue a longer training career, and within one week at the club I had signed up for the year. As with most of my male childhood friends, the physicality of combat had always been a key element of play, and infrequently confrontation, throughout my life. Drilling for the required fitness, rehearsing the

techniques, and practicing their application seemed to come naturally to me when I finally began to engage in formal training. Without wishing to overly romanticise, the first steps I took in martial arts were something of a realisation of boyhood dreams; the mock-fighting of contact sports were behind me, and what felt like the real terrain of physical combat lay ahead.

For the first few months, training was everything I had imagined. An exciting distraction from studies, I was gaining new insight into my own body and learning how to implement what I had long imagined to be my natural tendencies towards the kind of physicality needed for martial arts. I was proud to be told by a (male) senior club member that I looked as though I had done martial arts before, effectively confirming my belief that somehow this was already a part of me, something coded into my body, awaiting release rather than needing teaching. While I cannot boast to having been a prodigy, and I have certainly never thought of myself as being among the best, the sense of pride and self-realisation that I found through martial arts training have nevertheless since come to figure strongly in my identity, the way I see myself. From the very start of my training I felt not only the intrinsic pleasure of combat, but also a touch of destiny: this is what I am supposed to be doing; supposed, even, to be.

However, reflecting on those early days also raises an issue for which I felt far less clarity and dealt with (at the time) with much less assurance, and the issue which ultimately gives this story its meaning: the club I had joined was mixed-sex. While I had not been one to articulate it with any force or frequency, until my time at university began I had not been overly keen on women's involvement in the sports through which I, a young man, sought to identify myself. Having attended a boys' school, I was not used to mixed-sex settings and, with little education in gender issues or feminist politics, I felt little sympathy for the feminist movement (or rather, for the inevitably distorted form in which I understood it). The fact that the kickboxing club was mixed-sex therefore presented something of a quandary to me. As a

young, single, heterosexual man, the chance to meet girls was never something to be sniffed at, and especially not when I would have ample chance to demonstrate what I imagined to be my (suddenly flourishing) 'masculine' virtues (muscles, competitiveness, 'hardness', etc). Yet my views on the appropriateness of gender difference were destined to be challenged. It quickly became apparent that not all of the girls in the club had joined for the 'girlish' reasons I had initially assumed of them, such as an extension of the growing consumer craze for 'boxercise' aerobics, perhaps. I remember looking over at the more senior girls in the club, whose custom-fitted pads and gum-guards, hard expressions, ease of movement, speed, and technical proficiency clearly marked them out as different from the 'girly' crowd I had imagined. As I began to learn more about martial arts, and experience the hardships and limitations of learning to fight, I began to feel a sense of respect for those girls that was at first unsettling and difficult to comprehend. Nevertheless, in those early days I had little compulsion to engage with that difficulty, since at that time the structure of the club meant that junior members did not often directly train alongside seniors.

Since my coaches during this year tended to separate the junior members by sex in day-to-day practice, inter-sex sparring did not take place regularly. This, however, made the early experience all the more memorable. As I have observed with beginners since, my own initial strategy when sparring with girls was to hold everything back, pulling every punch short of impact and never kicking with force. When sparring with a female partner, it is usual for male martial artists to report that there is a real danger which lies not in defeat, but in the shame of a pointless, too-thoroughly accomplished victory over a 'weaker' opponent. In this way, sparring with a girl became something of a non-event for me, in that winning was socially risky and going on the defensive was the only honourable option. Believing that I was 'naturally' a fighter, and that women were not, bred an arrogance which I misrecognised as the natural order of things. Such an attitude was clearly problematic, invalidating the experience of sparring for both parties, but it seemed the

clearest way to navigate the dilemma of being a decent fighter as well as a decent man. As the year progressed I maintained this strategy, co-existing with the girls in the club but continuing to avoid the question of what to make of the more serious female kickboxers. This changed, however, when I was forced to see things differently.

It was late 2005, and I was in my second year of martial arts training. As something of an intermediate member of the club, 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. She was that year's club chair and held a black belt – outranking me socially as well as in skill, fitness, and experience. The outcome was to thrust my previous disquiet into the forefront of my reckoning of women's participation in martial arts. While I had sparred seriously with other senior members before, 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. Without wanting to embellish all the details of what happened next, our sparring session ended following a hit to my head which sent me to the floor. She had caught me on the ear with a roundhouse kick, which had snapped my head to the side, causing my brain to bounce against the inside of my skull, dazing me. The hit to the ear had also momentarily affected my ability to balance and to hear. 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.

The effects of this event are difficult to overstate. While it would be some time before I understood enough about feminist theory to adequately theorise my own situation, this forceful, direct, undeniable demonstration of female power had rocked my assumptions about the sexes and would remain with me for the rest of my training career. For while my initial reaction had been one of shame and, to no little extent, annoyance at myself, it was later

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. Forced to revise my view of women's physical abilities, and having become far more aware of the principle importance of hard work in enhancing what I had previously assumed to be these 'natural' abilities of mine, I eventually came to accept the normality of what had happened to me. As I carried on training in martial arts, I saw how my fighting prowess was not, after all, a fact of my 'masculine' nature, and my loss to a girl was therefore not anything to be ashamed of as I had no inherent advantage by simply being male. She, and those like her, had trained for much longer and, on observation, worked much harder than I in the sessions: of course she should be able to beat me! For as I came to understand, within the terms of the discursive meanings of martial arts there is nothing abnormal or unsettling about a woman being able to beat a man. In this reasoning, the abilities of both are ultimately determined not by some essential, natural, sexual destiny but rather by the effort they apply to studying sparring, thoroughly learning technique, and enhancing their strength, fitness and toughness. And there was no better way for me to initially realise this than through a direct, physical exchange, forcing this lesson (quite literally) right into my head.

As I progressed further within martial arts, eventually switching disciplines to train at shaolin kung fu (in which I now hold a black belt, have competed at a national level, and worked as an instructor), I saw more demonstrations of significant female physical power which further impressed upon me the efficacy of mixed-sex martial arts training in altering one's perceptions. I have been knocked off my feet by female sparring partners on many occasions, being thrown, choked, punched, elbowed and kicked, often with nasty bruises to show for it. I have also returned these 'favours', as it becomes a necessity to exchange like-for-like in sparring if oneself and one's partner are to effectively learn. I have thus realised a move past my previous avoidance strategies, coming to respect the ability of female martial artists on



the same terms as those of males. In the process, I have learned through the medium of my own body about the potential which lies within women's bodies, and the potential which their abilities hold to destabilise and replace the ideological reasoning supporting much of the hierarchal structure of sex difference which we live with today.

It must be said, however, that I have also trained with many women who were not able – or in some cases, apparently not willing – to push towards meeting this potential, and many men whose behaviours in training support and propagate the 'normative' hierarchal system. It is my intention, therefore, that through this study I can further explore and go on to highlight the possibilities which I have personally witnessed, yet often remain hidden. I mean to explain how it is that martial artists can come to think about, talk about, and ultimately 'do' their gender differently – as well as why this is not always the case.

### **1.3 *Presentation of the Thesis***

In Chapter 2, I discuss the literature on feminist theory which has informed my understanding of sex, gender, sexuality, and the ideas of power, hierarchy, naturalisation, and subversion as outlined above. The chapter also deals with the sociology of sport literature regarding the gendered character and gendering purpose of early modern sport, seen to emerge as a 'bastion of masculinity' in the face of rapidly modernising Western civilisation. I argue that sport, and particularly masculine combat sport, has long operated as a vehicle for the propagation of dominant, traditional gender discourse.

In Chapter 3, I go on to discuss the literature which addresses ways in which sports cultures have also been sites of challenge against such discourses, outlining how physical culture can engender resistive, subversive forms of embodiment. These forms of embodiment in turn generate new ways of thinking about the body and

sexual difference, and new ways of 'doing' gender. They can therefore be said to help generate alternative, even subversive gender discourses. Particular attention is paid in this chapter to the research on women's participation in martial arts, and the meanings ascribed to it by various feminist scholars.

Chapter 4 is devoted to giving an account of the philosophical and methodological underpinnings of my research. The chapter begins by addressing the epistemological position which I occupy, outlining the contradictory natures of the two paradigms within which I locate myself as a researcher, namely postmodern epistemology and (feminist) cultural studies. I attempt to reconcile the contradiction posed by 'marrying up' these two approaches by accounting for my personal biases in ways which reduce my 'authority', locating the research text as one possible and ultimately partial view of the matter in question. I then go on to outline the practical steps taken in the research process, such as my use of semi-structured interviewing, snowball sampling, and discourse analysis.

In Chapter 5 I present my first set of findings, which are largely concerned with equality of access and opportunity within martial arts. I suggest that while women's presence in martial arts clubs is largely considered 'normal' by my interviewees, most clubs appear to be more accessible to men and to offer them easier progression into competition and coaching roles. These biases in favour of men reduce women's chances within martial arts, and thus can stunt the subversive potential of the activity by reaffirming the association of superior combat ability with men. I go on to argue that it is nevertheless apparent that many women (and men) within martial arts are contesting this, pushing for greater equality of access and opportunity between the sexes.

Chapter 6 is concerned with exploring how the interviewees experienced gender as a personal identity, including an account of the male interviewees' thoughts about their own and others' masculinities, the female interviewees' thoughts about femininity and masculinity, and matters relating to interviewees' sexualities. In this chapter I report on the constitution of difference which the interviewees made

between themselves and 'others', such as non-martial artists or other martial artists who they thought of as 'the wrong types'. I suggest that while both men and women practice alternative, even subversive forms of gender embodiment, they often simultaneously perpetuate a scheme of hierarchy and exclusion which is targeted towards vilifying these 'others' and preventing them from fully participating in martial arts.

Chapter 7 provides an account of the embodied aspects of training, wherein I foreground the importance of physical engagement in mixed-sex martial arts for the generation of subversive gender discourse. I detail how men and women value training with each other, although their reasons sometimes extend from stereotypical conceptions of sex difference. I also outline the difficulties faced through integrated training, particularly with regard to some men's reluctance to hit women in sparring, and the ways in which such difficulties are overcome. The chapter ends with a discussion of the role of physical engagements in the process of learning about the potentials within one's own and others' bodies, and thus the paramount importance of physicality to the subversive potential of mixed-sex martial arts.

Finally, in Chapter 8 I conclude the thesis by summarising the key findings and presenting an answer to the initial question posed above. I also outline some of the methodological issues faced during the study which impacted on the direction of my findings, before finishing with a few comments on the applicability of the study, both inside and outside academia.

## 2

### ***Feminist Theory and Sport***

This chapter offers an account of the existing literature concerning feminist theory and its application in understanding the social significance of sport. My aim is to outline firstly the development of feminist thought toward what might be called a 'postmodern'/'queer' theory of sex and gender, and secondly to apply the theoretical language of this 'queer' feminist account to an understanding of the emergence of modern sport, as illustrated within the research literature from the sociology of sport and other disciplines. In so doing, I will construct a contextual framework for my own study, demonstrating how my work fits with and builds upon pre-existing research and how such research helps in the construction of a theory of gender embodiment and cultural resistance built upon the principles of postmodern feminism.

#### **2.1 *Theorising Gender: Feminist Traditions and the Postmodern Turn***

*Theorising is to do with struggling over values which should be made explicit. The process of critical assessment can clarify problems and help to formulate alternatives. (Hargreaves, 1994: 26)*

I will begin with a necessarily brief discussion of the connections drawn between sex differences and power by scholars of differing theoretical persuasions in the recent history of feminist thought. Key to this discussion, I believe, are the divergences and controversies which characterise the fundamental differences between these schools of feminism, principally concerning how feminists of differing opinions have portrayed sexual power relations, how they have described the origins and the perpetuation of 'gender' which underpins those relations, and the prescriptions they have made for changing them. For whilst "all feminists share an assumption that

women are oppressed within patriarchy and a commitment to change those conditions" (Birrell, 2000: 62), not all feminists view the problem in the same way, understand it to stem from the same source, or recommend the same programme for resistance and change. On this latter point in fact, feminists have differed widely. For the purposes of this review, and mainly in order to contextualise my use of postmodern feminism in this thesis, I will briefly outline the key characteristics of liberal, radical, and postmodern feminism, highlighting some of the key controversies which postmodern theorists have inherited and attempted to answer. It is important to note that, owing to the constraints of space and the need to focus on the most prescient issues for the development of my thesis, this review of theoretical work is necessarily omissive of certain authors or lines of argument which may be considered useful or instructive within the categories listed. However, those chosen for review are intended to best represent the particular controversies that inform the question of the subversive potential of mixed-sex martial arts. Thus, this review of theory should be read as an effort to provide theoretical context for the present study, rather than an exhaustive account of the development of different strands of feminist thought.

### ***2.1.1 Liberal Feminism: Structural Inequality, Social Reproduction, and the Struggle for Equal Rights***

Liberal feminism predates other contemporary feminisms, with roots in the work of 18<sup>th</sup> century writer Mary Wollstonecraft and 19<sup>th</sup> century authors John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor, among others (Tong, 1989). With liberal feminism essentially being a brand of egalitarian liberalism, of central concern to these early feminists was the reform of men's and women's unequal access to education, work, and participation within the process of civil society. Fundamental inequalities between the sexes are seen to begin with women's lack of education, which effectively denied women the development of reason and the critical faculties necessary to be considered in any sense the equals of men (Wollstonecraft, 1982). This manifested in women's dependence upon men, their lack of personal realisation and, ultimately,

their status as a perpetual underclass in sexist societies (Tong, 1989). Without access to the development of reason that a 'proper' – that is, man's – education allowed, women were significantly disadvantaged compared to men, forming a silent, housebound underclass whose existence was to serve as the "toy of man, his rattle" (Wollstonecraft, 1982: 34). Women were effectively second-class people, denied a sense of true or complete citizenship by their exclusion from the operations of the market and the state, whilst being expected simply to meet the private, domestic needs of men and leave production, trade, voting, governing, and all other non-domestic work to their more 'rational' sexual 'superiors'. The liberal feminist critique began as a political reformist movement, campaigning against this inequity and pressing for women's rights to the same education as men (Weedon, 1999). By the nineteenth century, liberal feminists (such as Mill and Taylor) were also arguing that women (which in these early analyses was admittedly a category largely limited to white, middle class women) ought to have equal rights to work and vote, as well as access to the same education (Tong, 1989). From here, the notion that men and women ought to be treated equally in everything has come to centrally define the liberal feminist outlook: there should be no institutional obstructions based on sex which prevent people from following any life course that they please, so that any individual can participate fully in the workings of society and therein realise their own personal potential.

Liberal feminism thereby portrays gender as a matter of cultural segregations maintained through structural inequities in society at large, and which individual men and women share responsibility for reproducing or challenging (Tong, 1989). Gender stereotyping, and the confusion of biologically-determined sex for culturally-constructed gender behaviour, is to blame for people's unthinking reproduction of this structural inequality, which is otherwise incompatible with the prevailing liberal ideals of contemporary Western ideology. Liberal feminists thus draw distinctions between *natural biology* and *cultural personality*, and stress "the humanist ontological position that men and women are more alike than different" (Birrell, 2000: 64). The social (re)production of men's and women's masculine and feminine characters is seen as a principle problem which progressive feminist politics should

aim to overcome, and this is done by arguing that “sexual difference should not determine how one is regarded as a human being” (Weedon, 1999: 15). In order to equalise access to voting rights, jobs, and so on, liberal feminists see it as necessary to iron out the confusion of culturally-imposed gender for biologically-imposed sex; sexual characteristics need not determine gender character, which *does* determine one’s suitability for participation in occupational/civil society. As such, contemporary liberal feminist thinking has advocated the usefulness of ‘androgyny’ as a conceptual rallying point for women (and men) who want to escape the traditional confines of gender roles (Tong, 1989). By learning and combining elements of masculinity and femininity, women and men are better able to become rounded human beings, suited to all number of tasks and ready for any number of experiences, which in the past might have been only accessible to men.

In the liberal tradition, this recommendation for change is twofold: firstly, sexist structures like unequal access to education must be changed; secondly, individual men and women must take up the cause and make the most of the opportunities they have been given. In this sense, liberal feminism replicates liberalism, wherein ideal individuals are imagined to be able to make their own destinies within relatively constraint-free societies. Thus liberal feminism celebrates egalitarianism and, being “largely pragmatic” (Hargreaves, 1994: 27), it principally targets the institutional barriers that prevent the realisation of its idealised vision of equality. Inasmuch as liberal feminist thought depicts gender as a cultural phenomenon without necessary links to biological nature, its proponents contend that with adequate socialisation we might change the way that males and females become men and women respectively, perhaps towards some idealised, androgynous, shared identity which is conducive to greater equality in the economic/cultural/political world (Tong, 1989). Following this, it is up to the individual woman whether or not they pursue a life of new horizons as ‘liberated’ women, remain within a traditional housewife role, try to combine the two, etc. Essentially, if liberal feminist visions of fairness and equality were to be realised, feminism would eventually become another type of humanism (Tong, 1989), as it would have surpassed the need for itself by annihilating institutional gender inequity and engineering a world of shared

opportunities, devoid of sexual discrimination. There would thereby be no more need to campaign for 'women's rights' as distinct from 'human rights' in general.

Within the sociology of sport literature, the most oft-cited example of the achievements of liberal feminism is the United States' 1972 'Title IX' legislation (Birrell, 2000), which effectively changed the face of US sports by forcing collegiate athletics departments to distribute their funding more equitably between the sexes. Whilst doubtlessly improving women's access to sports (arguably a field of exclusively male, masculine socialisation, a type of homo-social education conducive to certain types of male privilege – which will be discussed later), the intervention itself did not have solely positive consequences regarding sexual equality (Lenskyj, 1990). According to Hargreaves (1994: 179), post-Title IX collegiate sport experienced a “devastating drop in the percentage of women's programmes headed by women”, as physical education departments merged and men “reaffirmed their dominance... by taking the most powerful positions”. Thus, in spite of huge increases in the number of American women playing sport from the mid-1970s onwards, there was a proportional decrease in the number of women in control of sport, as women's sport became subsumed as a subcategory within men's, subject to male definitions of performance and evaluation within unchanged, sexist frames of reference which invariably trivialised and ridiculed female athletics (Lenskyj, 1990; Theberge & Birrell, 1994). Through reference to similar legislative efforts to change gender discrimination in the UK, Hargreaves states that “the idea that it is simple to use legislation to equalise relationships of power between different groups is misleading” (1994: 176) and “state intervention is not necessarily progressive in its effects on gender relations” (177). Whilst intending to undo the symbolic violence of sexual discrimination against women, legislative efforts to effect change skip over the root causes of those institutional discriminatory practices: metaphorically, they patch up the wounds rather than end the infliction of violence. Although such changes afford women a chance to engage in alternative modes of gender socialisation – in keeping with the liberal agenda of opening up opportunities for androgynous engendering – they cannot guarantee deeper or lasting change because they are not necessarily bound to do anything more. Whilst women may



legally have the ability to play men's sports, they must still contend with men's overt or subtle hostility towards their presence (Lenskyj, 1990; Hargreaves, 1994), and must overcome relatively well-entrenched gender ideologies which make their participation in 'manly' sports a matter of difficult compromise and sacrifice (Halbert, 1997; Hargreaves, 1997; Mennesson, 2000; Heywood & Dworkin, 2003).

Herein lies a fundamental criticism of liberal feminism. By targeting institutional sites of inequality, and enacting anti-discrimination laws, feminists can only hope to achieve so much, and may inadvertently invite or lend strength to conservative reactionary movements by forcing changes upon people whose dispositions make them unprepared to accept them (Lenskyj, 1990). This focus on effecting institutional change fails to account for the interconnected, multi-dimensional nature of social life: changing laws does not guarantee changes in the ways people think, how they act towards one another, and the choices they make about what kind of life to lead. That is to say that this type of feminist agenda for change does not overtly recognise that 'the personal is political'; that everything a man or woman thinks or does has implications for their participation in, and reproduction of, the political structure of gender relations (Thornham, 2000). Therefore, meaningful and lasting change must take place at multiple levels (Theberge, 1987), not simply in legislation. Imposing new equality laws onto a sexist culture is likely to generate a reaction on that culture's terms, which may end up meaning that the ground gained through political campaigning is quickly lost once again.

At a more theoretical level, a further drawback of the liberal feminist approach lies in its disassociating biological sex from cultural gender as a means to show how women can be just as 'masculine' as men, and making women's pursuit of men's positions and behaviours a key criteria for social change. Whilst de-naturalising the conditions for women's oppression is not necessarily a weakness for a progressive feminist approach, by overstating the flexibility of gender and advocating women's entry into men's culture, liberal feminists are always in danger of engaging in "the kind of social engineering and behaviour modification that is incompatible with... liberal law" (Tong, 1989: 33). Many women do not want to be like men, regardless of where

'original' gender differences come from, and regardless of what opportunities they might have to change those differences. While gender may be a product of cultural relations and not nature, this does not mean that it is eminently pliable given the chance for reform. Furthermore, advocating women's access to men's socialisation/education and their replication of men's behaviour as key to political change risks restating the hierarchical distinction between 'superior' masculinity and 'inferior' femininity, as it is not considered as politically important that men should replicate women's behaviour, given that the male/masculine realm is the one associated with greater power and prestige. In this sense, androgyny in practice begets a world where men continue to be masculine whilst women must attempt to be both masculine *and* feminine – such as in balancing a career in 'masculine' workplaces with traditional marriage and motherhood – often with unhappy consequences (Tong, 1989), not least of all in regard to women's entry into (specifically combat-oriented) sports (Halbert, 1997). To many feminists – and particularly radical feminists – leaving the privileged status of masculinity intact is certainly not in the best interests of most women.

Despite these weaknesses, contemporary feminism owes much to the liberal tradition, both in terms of its theoretical legacy and in the political victories won by feminists from the early reformists onwards, which have facilitated the development of other feminisms through women's access to academia, politics, and so on (Tong, 1989). Whilst large-scale institutional/legal reform is not alone sufficient to change the condition of women in patriarchal societies, it is certainly a necessary element. As Hargreaves puts it, "because liberal strategies have been successful, they may pave the way for more radical changes in the future" (1994: 29).

### ***2.1.2 Radical Feminism: Women's Bodies, Political Sexuality, and Separatist Feminist Revolution***

Partly as a response to the limited successes of liberal feminism, and out of the same activist milieu as many of the left-wing political movements of the time, radical

feminism emerged in the late 1960s as a part of the 'second wave' of the women's movement (Thornham, 2000). No longer focussed on simply attaining equal rights for women as individuals, the radical feminists sought to connect all women as a communal group and inspire a revolutionary shift in gender relations. Part of this shift was to theorise physical, bodily differences as a fundamental element of women's oppression by men; another was to open up sexuality to feminist analysis. Unlike earlier, liberal feminist work, in radical feminism the natural, sexual body is seen as a hugely important source of difference (Weedon, 1999), and sexuality is not seen as a private matter but as fundamental to the sexual politics of patriarchy (Tong, 1989). Thus, radical feminism focuses significantly on connecting the private conditions and experiences of individual women to large-scale structures of gender inequity, and thus the radical feminist mantra, 'the personal is political'. In this model, differentiating between the individual, or the private sphere, and the social/political system is a counter-productive practice which undermines the progressive potential of institutional changes by ignoring a key site of women's oppression. Indeed, "the very concept of a separate realm of 'the personal' which is *outside* politics serves political and ideological purposes" (Thornham, 2000: 46, original emphasis), disguising the deep operations of patriarchy as the work of individuals' natural dispositions and autonomous choice.

Key to understanding the personal-political focus of radical feminism is the foregrounding of the female body in radical thought. Rather than considering that the problem of gender inequity begins with education and socialisation – i.e. the confinement of relatively autonomous individuals to restricted social spaces – radical feminists argue that patriarchal power systems operate via men's culturally institutionalised control of women's bodies, and they have done so throughout history (Weedon, 1999). That is to say that patriarchy is not simply the product of particular social structures, moulding individuals into particularly gendered beings, but rather of men (as a group) historically having dominated women (as a group), through their 'colonization' of women's bodies. By holding the power to define the meanings and control the practices of women's bodies, men (in the authoritative capacity of fathers, husbands, priests, doctors, pornographers, pimps and so on)

have succeeded in constructing women as a universal underclass, whose subjugated bodies are a key element in the condition of their ongoing subjugation (Tong, 1989). In this sense, women's rights to have access to well-paid professions, or participate in civil society, etc, does not herald much real change so long as women's bodies continue to be objectified and understood in the terms constructed by men – that is, while they continue to be understood as biologically inferior to men's bodies. In other words, patriarchy exists because of women's disempowerment within and alienation from their bodies (Morgan, 1993); an inability to determine the very thing that constitutes them as women within a system that holds them as inferior based on it.

Turning attention to the body as a central site of patriarchal control gives rise to some important conceptual differences between radical feminism and its liberal predecessor, revealing the distinctive features of a radical feminist conception of gender. Firstly, while liberal feminists focussed attention on women's rights as abstract individuals devoid of any specifically inherent embodied characteristics, the radical position foregrounds issues of women's embodiment as a key site of sexual difference, and something which should be highlighted as a valuable philosophical and political resource in the women's movement (Tong, 1989). Rather than view the female body as something which ought to be transcended in the move towards greater rationality (i.e., the cultivation of the mind), radical feminist writing involves a recovery and celebration of the female body, and the embodied experience of female subjectivity, as a matter of central importance to women's liberation (Weedon, 1999). And "since patriarchy has consistently defined and moulded women's bodies and minds in the interests of men" (Weedon, 1999: 29) it is seen as necessary to recover the 'true' meanings of femininity and the female body in order to liberate women. Such efforts necessitate a turn to the body in theory, and a type of advocacy based on purposeful engagement with bodies as key sites of sexual difference. To attempt to change the condition of women without addressing the facts of women's embodied reality is, in the radical critique, to concede to the patriarchal efforts to annihilate female identity as something meaningful and powerful in its own right.

While radical feminists have turned their analysis of a body-centred patriarchy to many different facets of women's history and contemporary experience, the exploration of sexuality has been one of the most important and 'radical' features of the second-wave movement (Tong, 1989). Rather than treating sexuality as a matter of personal choice consigned to the private sphere, radical feminists recognise that sexual practices are heavily implicated in gender power relations. Specifically, "heterosexuality... is seen as the cornerstone of patriarchy. The heterosexual organisation of female sexuality and reproduction guarantees male control of women" (Weedon, 1999: 43), by enforcing their dependence on a male partner, urging them to adopt restrictive cultural norms of motherhood, and distancing them from a possible revolutionary orientation gained through the female solidarity of lesbianism. Hetero-sexism, and the stigmatisation and fear of lesbians, are seen as key components of men's control over women's bodies via the construction of heterosexuality as a *patriarchal institution*, into which women are manipulated by men and a male-defined culture (Rich, 1980). Women's (and men's) sexuality is therefore key to understanding the conflict involved within gender relations in patriarchal societies, and not something which can be dismissed as a 'private' matter.

Secondly, the privileging of women's embodied experiences sets radical feminism in a position whereby the binary difference between men and women as biologically distinct social groups is defended, primarily in the interests of solidarity among women; the creation of a 'sisterhood', "through which women everywhere could unite in the struggle against patriarchy" (Weedon, 1999: 26). Radical feminism therefore presents a degree of opposition to women's entry into previously male-only forms of socialisation, which is understood as women's co-optation by masculine culture, an endorsement of male values and, most importantly, considered to confuse those male values for universally 'human' values by assuming that both men and women ought to aspire to and benefit from them. Those same values (objective rationality, competitiveness, ruthlessness, and the pursuit of power and influence) are identified primarily with sexual oppression and violence, but also with warmongering, colonialism, and the destruction of the environment (Tong,

1989; McCaughey, 1997), all of which are targets of radical political criticism. Instead, “in radical feminist discourse, traditional female traits and values are given a new and positive status which challenges the supremacy of traditionally male traits” (Weedon, 1999: 30), asserting the strength and dignity of women *as women*, who are liberated not in the sense of escaping the confines of a cheapened and degraded femininity, but by realising the inherent advantages of their female selves and re-defining womanhood as positive and strong. Thus, radical feminists view men and women as two essentially different groups, and advocate the political organisation of the women’s movement based on this fact. With varying degrees of emphasis, radical movements have advocated a gendered separatism, the most radical being the political lesbianism movement which held that since heterosexuality was the cornerstone of patriarchy, “a heterosexual lifestyle was... incompatible with feminism. To relate sexually to men was to consort with the enemy” (Weedon, 1999: 36). Removing oneself from all aspects of the ‘heterosexist’, dominating, oppressive male culture is considered to be the essence of a radical liberation for women. This revolution ought to begin, as with liberal feminist strategies, with an education (or ‘consciousness-raising’), but is considered to culminate in a very different transformative movement.

Applying radical feminist theory to sports involves this kind of radical transformation, although in practice the kind of separatism argued for by radical sports scholars has shared much in common with traditionally gender-differentiated sports culture, if for different reasons (Hargreaves, 1994). Hargreaves (1994) identifies two distinctive approaches to separatism advocated by feminists. The first of these falls relatively in line with the ‘equal opportunities’ focus of liberal feminism wherein women’s sporting organisations are established independently of men’s control to provide for women to engage in ‘male’ sports on their own terms. This solution is based on the assumption that women’s interests are not well served by having their sports administered and controlled by men, but that women still deserve the right to engage in the sports which men play. Such organisations also provide a space for women to socialise exclusively with other women, engaging in female bonding in relatively novel settings, whilst also being able to engage in physical activity away

from the influence or the gaze of (heterosexual) men (Linskyj, 1990; Hargreaves, 1994). This potentially offers women a chance to identify with their bodies outside of the usual dictates of compulsory heterosexuality. In the more radical separatist position, a critical stance is taken, arguing against women's endorsement of men's sports cultures and advocating instead the founding of "alternative models which are intrinsically more humane and liberating" (Hargreaves, 1994: 31). Just as masculine sports educate men in male values, feminists can craft activities which help to educate women in female values, which are considered inherently superior to the destructive impulses of hyper-competitive masculinity. Otherwise, women's involvement with male sports – and particularly sports involving direct physical combat – is something to be suspicious of (McCaughey, 1997). In this reasoning, 'masculinised' female athletes are seen as "a tangible sign of a blind internalisation of masculine norms and the success of those norms in colonising women's imaginations" (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003: 57). The same stance is evident here as in the political lesbianism movement: the personal preferences of women in sport are considered a political choice and ought to be used to articulate a commitment to undermining patriarchy in all its forms (Hargreaves, 1994). Unless women's sports represent a radical resistance to and departure from men's sports, the revolutionary impact of women in sport will be minimal.

The problems with gender separatism of all kinds lie in their ultimate collusion with the traditional, dominant model of segregation, lending ideological support to the key notion that men and women engage in different sports because of intractable biological differences between them. As will be discussed later, this natural essentialist, bio-determinist argument is fundamentally important in shoring up male privilege in sport and maintaining a system which is difficult to envisage as being advantageous to women in undoing the symbolic violence of patriarchy. It also helps to construct those differences between the sexes as natural and inevitable, denying the potentially positive aspects of androgynous sports/gender practices (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003). While radical feminists may be keen to emphasise women's positive differences from men, and be committed to providing opportunities for women to realise and enjoy them, it is easy for men to trivialise these characteristics and re-

affirm their own possession of superior qualities so long as the contents of the traditional binaries are left unchallenged. As Hargreaves puts it, “ironically, if it is claimed that women have uniquely different characteristics from men, there is implicit support of the image of power invested in the male body” (1994: 31).

In this way, since it tends to “leave old binary oppositions intact” (Weedon, 1999: 31), radical feminism is open to several major critiques. Firstly, in the radical feminist model of patriarchy, “men and masculinity figure as an undifferentiated oppressor” (Weedon, 1999: 33), wherein all women are imagined to be united as the victims of all (heterosexual) men. Male complicity in the workings of patriarchy is simply assumed, and so all men are characterised as the enemy of the women’s movement, which may not be the case (Tong, 1989). Viewing men as an ‘undifferentiated oppressor’ blurs the many ways in which men differ from one another, and obscures the fact that many men are also disadvantaged or outright oppressed by sexist culture, and might benefit from feminist advocacy one way or another (Messner & Sabo, 1994). Further, understanding patriarchy as a total structure of domination in this sense has also resulted in the tendency to see women’s practice of and embodiment of traditional (i.e. patriarchal) values – such as heterosexuality – as complicity with male domination: “Heterosexuality is seen only as a tool of patriarchy and in consequence heterosexual women are by definition its colonized subjects” (Weedon, 1999: 44). While this does not necessarily ring true of all radical feminist approaches, controversial notions such as this polarize feminists and risk alienating heterosexual women from the women’s movement, since accepting this critique of heterosexuality is “an immense step to take if you consider yourself freely and ‘innately’ heterosexual... (and) will call for a special quality of courage in heterosexually identified feminists” (Rich, 1980: 648) – a quality which may not be desirable to those heterosexual feminists who enjoy and find fulfilment in non-lesbian sexuality (or ‘male’ sports, for that matter). While many lesbian feminists may readily identify with this critique, to assume that it stands true for all women is clearly problematic, raising difficult questions regarding radical feminists’ broader quest to recover the ‘true’ meaning of ‘woman’ from the clutches of



patriarchy. After all, who gets to decide what counts as 'true' femininity? Whose vision and identity does this represent, and whose does it exclude?

These essentialist tendencies of radical feminism invite further critique. Seeing patriarchy as "the *primary* form of human oppression" (Thornham, 2000: 50, original emphasis) necessitates privileging gender as a source of social division over and above race, class, religion, caste, and so on – something which Marxist/socialist feminists in particular have long contested (Weedon, 1999; Birrell, 2000). Such a reductive analysis may not be applicable in all social contexts or enable all oppressed peoples to make adequate sense of their condition. While much of the early radical feminist writing suffered from a tendency to universalise the problems of white, middle-class, European/American women and dealt inadequately with other women's specific problems, radical feminism is not necessarily incompatible with broader perspectives: "(an) ideological commitment to inclusiveness has been an important feature of radical feminist politics since its inception" (Weedon, 1999: 40). Nevertheless, attempting to establish a global sisterhood united by patriarchy's oppression is problematic when women feel different forms of oppression as more prescient (including poverty, racism, etc) and identify themselves as women in different ways to those represented in much radical feminist literature. Postmodern feminists in particular have seized upon these criticisms, arguing that identity politics and the nature of women's oppression are fragmented in such a way that any universalising narratives claiming to represent the interests of *all* women are open to "charges of gross misrepresentation" (Butler, 2008: 7), and can in fact be politically damaging to the women's movement.

Yet in spite of these many criticisms, the theoretical innovations made by radical feminists have drastically changed the face of contemporary social theory, as well as having profound effects on contemporary society itself (Weedon, 1999). In particular, feminist cultural studies and postmodern feminism both owe a debt to radical feminism through its analysis of women's personal lives as political; for its overt focus on the operation of power as a fundamental characteristic of gender relations; and for its direct attention to the body and sexuality as key sites of study.

### **2.1.3 Postmodern Feminism: Anti-Essentialism, Disciplined Performance, and the 'Queer' Value of Difference**

From the late 1960s onwards, the development of postmodernism as a form of social theory, philosophy, scientific criticism and political advocacy has led to the emergence of a divergent body of theoretical statements concerning the human condition, broadly defined in contrast with certain schools of thought by way of the prefix 'post-' (i.e. modernism, etc). Principally, the postmodern movement in the social sciences is concerned with rejecting the modernist tendency to search for empirically-grounded universal truths upon which to base programmes of social development, an "incredulity towards metanarratives" (Lyotard, 1984: 27), and a departure from the teleological aspirations of 'progressive' modernist science. Postmodern scholars working in various disciplines have been critical of the positivism of mainstream social science, arguing that the complexity of the social world is beyond the explanatory power of any single reductive theory, and that such "global, totalitarian theories" (Foucault, 1972: 40, original emphasis) obstruct social research by (at best) over-simplifying things or (at worst) deliberately erasing the identities of distinct groups of people through the practice of a colonial form of scientific authority (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). As Bauman writes, "humanity is not captured in common denominators – it sinks and vanishes there" (2008: 144). The postmodern approach (in its various forms) instead centres on exploring the differences between people, examining and attempting to deconstruct the terms upon which these differences are founded (this epistemological basis of postmodern theory will be explored in more depth in Chapter 4). Postmodern feminists have followed the tendency within postmodernism to respect and celebrate such difference (Weedon, 1999: 13), exploring the phenomenon of gender relations in several novel ways.

As with radical feminism, postmodern feminists foreground issues relating to the body, and sexuality, in their analyses of gender (e.g. Butler, 2008; Grosz, 1994), yet broadly argue against the notion of the existence of essential feminine characteristics. Further, agreeing that gender relations are centrally relations of

power, postmodernists nevertheless differ from radical feminists in that they refuse to see power as emanating foundationally from 'patriarchy' – an idea which they criticise for being a reductive and oversimplified metanarrative. In common with liberal feminists, postmodernists promote a view of gender as a culturally constructed phenomenon, but avoid dichotomies that draw distinctions between culture (or 'the mind') and the body, arguing that "the body is not opposed to culture... it is itself a cultural, *the* cultural, product" (Grosz, 1994: 23, original emphasis). Postmodern feminists are concerned with how cultural configurations of gender arise around the historically discursive construction of the sexed body; how those gender discourses are produced and circulated in contemporary consumer-capitalist society; and how disparate groups of men and women understand themselves as gender-bearing subjects within a context of multiple other historically-specific political identifications – such as class, race, and sexuality. A theme common to much postmodern feminism is therefore the diversity, flexibility and fluidity of gender categories (Weedon, 1999), wherein the body is considered "a problematic and uncontainable term" (Grosz, 1994: 62), difficult to define with much certainty and thereby eluding simplistic categorisations.

Suggesting that the gendered body is so changeable and uncertain reveals a defining feature of postmodern feminism: anti-essentialism. Going beyond the disembodied cultural construction implied in liberal feminist analysis, and in direct contrast to the reification of the feminine seen in radical feminism, postmodern theorists attempt to deconstruct 'nature' and 'culture' as discrete, oppositional categories, arguing that the meanings of both are produced through the discourses intent on describing them (Thornham, 2000: 173). Adhering to the key poststructuralist tenet that "language does not reflect reality but gives it meaning" (Weedon, 1999: 102) – that language "*generates* reality in the inescapable context of power" (Haraway, 1991a: 78, original emphasis) – postmodern feminists have argued that gender, as the supposed *cultural articulation* of natural/biological sexual differences, has in fact constructed our knowledge of those differences via its articulations of them. Judith Butler states that:

gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which 'sexed nature' or 'a natural sex' is produced and established as 'prediscursive', prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts... This production of sex as the prediscursive ought to be understood as the effect of the apparatus of cultural construction designated by *gender*. (2008: 10, original emphasis)

Whilst gender is understood as a cultural practice (in common with both liberal and radical feminism), the postmodern position is that there is no real, natural essence of 'sex' that exists outside the realm of culture, untouched by discourse. Believing that there is such a primary, natural realm is a feature of the culture itself, and the widespread practice of such beliefs helps to constitute the appearance of naturalness. Therefore, rather than trying to establish how natural, universal sexual differences do or do not figure in the construction of gender, postmodern feminists turn to asking questions of how it is that certain visions of naturalness come to be accepted, and what kinds of consequences such ideas have on the lived experience of being a man or woman. In this way, "cause and effect have been reversed" (Dworkin, 2001: 333), and "sex, by definition, will be shown to have been gender all along" (Butler, 2008: 11).

The discursive construction of sex as an element of gender thus calls into question the political implications of, and interests served through, various attempts to spell out the 'natural' underlying differences between the sexes. For while postmodernists do not believe that nothing about gender is 'real', they do contest that nothing about gender is essentially fixed in nature (Weedon, 1999). For postmodernists, nature is an important point of reference for substantiating the authority of a specific discourse, even though nature itself "is constructed, constituted historically, not discovered naked in a fossil bed or a tropical forest. Nature is contested" (Haraway, 1991a: 106). Any attempt to describe 'the real' in terms of 'the natural' is therefore seen as a power play; a contestable attempt to legitimate political systems (such as patriarchy) through de-politicising them under the guise of some form of unbiased, natural inevitability (Butler, 2008). As such, dominant structures of gender relations "consolidate and augment their hegemony

through that felicitous self-naturalisation” implied through appearing as ‘real’ within a discursive system that seeks out and privileges ‘the natural’ as something eternal, outside of politics, insulated against political criticism (Butler, 2008: 45). In other words, holding to the notion that there exists some essence of manhood or womanhood beyond the schemes of intelligibility through which we can know about them means that we are always at risk of reifying ideas, and defending institutional practices, which normalise certain expressions of gender whilst stigmatising others as immoral or unnatural aberrations. Postmodern feminists thereby hold to the belief that while challenging the chauvinism of traditional patriarchal ideology is important, “feminism ought to be careful not to idealise certain expressions of gender that, in turn, produce new forms of hierarchy and exclusion” (Butler, 2008: viii) – the kind of critique levelled against radical, lesbian-separatist feminists, for example. “The feminist dream of a common language, like all dreams for a perfectly true language... is a totalising and imperialist one” (Haraway, 1991b: 291), shutting out the perspectives of those who differ in the name of a ‘truth’ which cannot, therefore, represent them. Essentialism in all its guises (as found in patriarchal pseudo-science, Eurocentric liberal ideology, revolutionary separatist feminism or otherwise) is criticised for perpetuating the form, if not the content, of hierarchical differentiation between different types of gendered subjectivity. Postmodernists view the preservation and proliferation of such differences as a vitally important outcome of the scholarly investigation of gender, and so consider recourse to ‘the natural’ as a dangerous political illusion (Bordo, 2003).

However, the multiple articulations of gendered subjectivity which postmodern feminism points to – a great variety of ways in which to experience one’s embodied identity, which defy simple categorisation due to the locally-specific intersections of ‘sex’, ‘sexuality’, ‘race’, ‘class’, and so on – nevertheless take place within dominant cultural configurations which delineate between men and women in particularly rigid ways. Postmodern feminists, particularly those informed by Foucauldian theory, understand the ongoing proliferation of traditional sexual binaries as a combination of *performative* and *punitive* practices. In Butler’s (2008) analysis, “gendered subjectivity is acquired through the repeated performance by the individual of

discourses of gender” (Weedon, 1999: 122), such that “our identities, gendered and otherwise, do not express some authentic ‘core’ self but are the dramatic *effect* (rather than the cause) of our performances” (Bordo, 2003: 289, original emphasis). The continuous repetition of gender constitutes gender reality with an appearance of stability, owing to the illusion of an “interior and organising gender core” which sustains our identity over time (Butler, 2008: 136). Gender is therefore a construction resulting from the very acts which it is supposedly the cause of; without those acts, it would not exist. Further, the performance of gender takes place within a context of insidious, hegemonic power relations of a kind which construct and protect certain sanctioned norms. As such, gender becomes

a strategy of survival... a performance with clearly punitive consequences. Discrete genders are part of what ‘humanizes’ individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right. (Butler, 2008: 190)

The punitive aspects of gender relations extend beyond socially-imposed sanctions for deviance against (heterosexist/patriarchal) norms. Postmodern feminists, following Foucault (1977a), perceive power to operate in both the institutional, ‘juridical’ sense, but also simultaneously in a ‘productive’ sense. Rather than simply disciplining individuals into conformity, or deceiving them with a false consciousness, discursive power regimes actually *produce* individuals through encouraging certain types of subjectivity and embodiment (e.g. Foucault, 1977a: 194; Weedon, 1999: 116). In this analysis, culture takes a “direct grip... on our bodies, through the practices and bodily habits of everyday life” (Bordo, 2003: 16), which become so routine and habitual that they take on the flavour of natural dispositions – a flavour recognisable thanks to the prevailing discursive construction of ‘the natural’ as a comfortable and reliable point of reference. Thanks in part to the widespread proliferation of consumer capitalism and its media-borne ‘Empire of Images’ (Bordo, 2003), specific forms of embodiment are constructed as not simply ideal, but *normative*, and men’s and women’s pursuit of these ‘normal’, gendered bodies, through ceaselessly self-regulated performance, is celebrated as natural and appropriate. Foucault’s (1977a) conception of *panopticism* (based on Jeremy

Bentham's architecturally ideal 'Panopticon' prison) is often used to describe this subtle and insidious presence of productive (patriarchal) power within the individual. So used to being under the evaluative gaze of a society obsessed with 'normal' images and appearances, women and men do not require overt, physical coercion in order to be disciplined into conformity with hegemonic cultural ideals about femininity or masculinity. Instead, "through individual self-surveillance and self-correction to norms" (Bordo, 2003: 27), they internalise the logic of normality projected through these relentlessly repeated performances and representations of the dominant gender code. This widespread acceptance and practice of normative gender embodiment ensures that "the judges of normality are present everywhere" (Foucault, 1977a: 304), as broad, cultural complicity with a narrow and exclusive ideal helps to reify certain abstractions of gender and cement their status as natural, normal ways of being a man or a woman. In this sense, the 'punitive' aspect of gender/power manifests itself not simply in social exclusion, repression, coercion, or in physical or symbolic violence, but most often in self-appointed discipline and regulation, such as the maintenance of exercise regimes or adherence to gender-appropriate careers or lifestyles, whilst also manifesting in identity crises, self-inflicted harm such as eating disorders, or related psychological traumas. Postmodern feminists have theorised such conditions as normal constitutive elements of contemporary culture (Bordo, 2003); a by-product of the normalisation of *one* way of being thus interpreted as *the* way of being. Such social pathologies therefore become normalised cultural performances of gender. For postmodernists, the exercise of power by, through and upon individuals is fundamental to the ongoing perpetuation, and normalisation, of specific forms of gender, as the individual "assumes responsibility for the constraints of power" (Foucault, 1977a: 202), disciplining themselves into conformity with the dictates of official gender discourse(s).

However, while repeat performance, representation, and self-discipline are identified by postmodernists as key to the perpetuation of essentialist and patriarchal conceptions of sex and gender, ironically they are also considered to be potent grounds for cultural resistance, particularly within the 'queer' tradition of

postmodern feminism (e.g. Caudwell, 2003). If it is true that there is no “space beyond power from which to act” (Weedon, 1999: 123), that “there is no possibility of agency or reality outside of the discursive practices that give those terms the intelligibility that they have” (Butler, 2008: 202), then postmodern strategies for transformation must be located within those structures of meaning that have produced and encompass the resistant individual. In Butler’s analysis, individual agency resides only within the parameters of pre-existing discursive structures; gender is performed ‘subversively’ only “*within* the practices of repetitive signifying” (2008: 199, original emphasis). What makes a particular performance ‘subversive’ is not necessarily the content of that performance, but the implicit recognition of the fact that it *is* a performance. To that end, repetitions involving subtle variations, such as the appropriation of one type of identity by an individual otherwise identified or socially defined, provides a particularly useful way of making such a recognition:

Hence, the strange, the incoherent, that which falls ‘outside’, gives us a way of understanding the taken-for-granted world of sexual categorisation as a constructed one, indeed, as one that might well be constructed differently. (Butler, 2008: 149)

Butler uses the example of drag acts to illustrate how parodic repetitions – playful variations on a theme – can destabilise the essential/natural status of the categories within which they perform. Such categories are articulated around the binary oppositions between male/female, masculine/feminine, and hetero-/homosexual (Caudwell, 2003), linkages between which are fundamentally disturbed when, for example, a male individual embodies femininity and remains heterosexual. In this way, drag provides for a “recognition of the radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of causal unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary” (Butler, 2008: 187). From a position increasingly sensitised to the invertible relationship between ostensibly ‘natural’ sexes and their correlative genders and sexualities, eventually “little or no distinction can be drawn between drag and so-called ‘normal’ femininity” (Weedon,



1999: 74), as the imitative masquerade of drag performance reveals the culturally-constructed character of the original which it parodies.

The ironic representations presented by inverted performances of gender can thus profoundly alter the landscape of gender ideology, since so-called 'gender-bending', in varied manifestations, accomplishes the de-naturalisation of certain sexual characteristics by deconstructing dominant cultural discourses *from within*: "although the gender meanings taken up in these parodic styles are clearly part of hegemonic, misogynist culture, they are nevertheless denaturalised and mobilised through their parodic recontextualisation" (Butler, 2008: 188). Characteristic of certain postmodern approaches, this resistance from the inside exists via the capacity for discursive systems to produce not only the agents of their own perpetuation, but also simultaneously the agents of their undoing. Ironic, pleasurable and playful re-appropriations of patriarchal culture can therefore actually undermine the foundational ideology upon which the continuation of its hierarchical structure is justified and perpetuated. The actual contents of that culture (including practices which have proven controversial for feminists, such as pornography, violence, sado-masochism, etc) can be turned against it, stripped of their particular oppressive connotations, as the normal boundaries governing their expression within the terms of naturalistic sex discourse are transgressed. This transgressive potential rests upon the individual's dawning recognition that:

'Objects' (such as 'man' or 'woman') do not pre-exist as such. Objects are boundary projects. But boundaries shift from within; boundaries are very tricky. What boundaries provisionally contain remains generative, productive of meanings and bodies. (Haraway, 1988: 595)

In this sense, experimenting with re-interpretations of the culture within which one finds oneself, with a view to seeking out pleasurable difference without necessarily adhering to the official parameters of 'normality', defines 'queer' postmodern agency. *Overtly and reflexively performing gender* becomes the means of its deconstruction, an embodied strategy of resistance which ultimately reveals the inadequacy of essentialist, natural-determinist models of sexual difference upon

which much of the oppressive character of misogynistic, patriarchal culture – with its basic hierarchies of man above woman, masculinity above femininity, and hetero-above homosexual – rests. Herein lies the intrinsic value of difference to postmodernists: the visibility of eminently flexible differences between individuals and groups undermines the efforts of totalising narratives and common denominators aimed at defining, and hierarchally ordering, discrete categories of people. By recycling and repackaging cultural practices of gender, we are able to instigate the “disruption of normative sexuality and the dislocation of the regime of heterosexuality” (Caudwell, 2006: 145) to craft a great many different identities which make a mockery of any limited, binary model rooted in undeniable and inevitable sexual natures – the kind of structure through which much gender-based oppression is perpetuated.

Pronger states that in postmodern cultures, such “transgressive strategies are best understood in terms of complicitous critique” (1998: 281). Holding positions as complicit critics – advocating unfettered freedom of choice and participation in the de-regulated consumption offered by an increasingly diverse marketplace – means that postmodern/queer feminists are neither totally ‘for’ nor totally ‘against’ the cultures that they inhabit, but are simply interested in making space for re-interpreting and re-inventing them in ways which allow for the legitimisation of an increasing number of alternative forms of gendered expression (e.g. Caudwell, 2006). This is true of the stance which many queer feminist theorists have taken within the sociology of sport literature, who have examined sports cultures as expressions of “fractured, diverse, and disassociated understandings of women’s sporting experiences and identities” (Hargreaves, 2004: 191). Queer conceptions of identity have emphasised the “post-structural critique of a stable, unified humanist identity” (Sykes, 2006: 15), shifting theoretical focus towards individuals’ situated subjectivities, which are flexible and open to change (Birrell, 2000). Studies of sport from this perspective have been both critical and celebratory, highlighting the inconsistencies and contradictions resulting from this postmodern de-centring of the essentialist, humanist ‘self’, the erosion of ‘natural’ boundaries, and the processes of commodification and hyper-consumption that characterise contemporary society

(Rail, 1998). Tending to avoid moralistic questions about domination and equality in favour of revealing and elaborating on men's and women's lifestyles and aesthetic values, and the technological implications which sport has for the body, postmodern feminist analyses of sport have attempted to address the ways in which men and women invest in their bodies, and adopt changing subjectivities, through the consumption of sport and physical activity (Hargreaves, 2004).

"The worked-on body as a metaphor for an improved life" (Hargreaves, 2004: 191) is a central feature of this line of inquiry, and in the case of women's athletic embodiment, has been endorsed for its personally liberating and ideologically transgressive potential (e.g. Caudwell, 2003; Heywood & Dworkin, 2003). For instance, the possibilities for de-stabilising the supposedly natural connection between men's bodies and the power to dominate has been recognised by feminists studying women's athletic cultures where the cultivation of a large or muscular body – and more specifically, a body capable of fighting – is central (McCaughey, 1997). By identifying the body, and embodied power, as key elements of patriarchal discourse about the inevitability of masculine domination, postmodern/queer feminists can make good use of examples of *female* power (drawn from the boundary-blurring practices of women's athletic embodiment) to uncouple the exclusive linking of men, masculinity, and physical domination. For example, McCaughey states that women training at self-defence "enact the de-construction of femininity", and learn "a new bodily comportment" (1998: 281) which disturbs the exclusive male ownership of violence and aggression – or in the terms of queer theory, the ostensibly natural connection between sex (men) and gender (masculinity). These assertions have been supported by research into women's boxing (e.g. Hargreaves, 1997), rugby (e.g. Wright & Clarke, 1999), and ice hockey (e.g. Theberge, 2000a). However, the research literature also shows that women training in combat or heavy contact sports such as boxing (Halbert, 1997; Mennesson, 2000), or in other highly 'masculine' activities such as bodybuilding (Dworkin, 2001), have been labelled as 'butch' lesbians or have worried that they will be perceived thus, and so engaged in traditionally 'feminine' identity construction "in order to present a body that is read as woman" (Caudwell, 2006: 152). As well as

compensating with feminine dress or behaviours outside of the sports themselves, this has involved the development of specific versions of these activities which maintain the usual connections of female-feminine-heterosexual, such as the practice of 'softer' martial arts which adhere more closely to middle-class/white articulations of femininity (Mennesson, 2000); sexualised performances of female combat (Hargreaves, 1997; Scambler & Jennings, 1998); and different judging criteria for women's bodybuilding contests that place value on feminine aesthetics such as hairstyles, makeup and breasts (Thornham, 2000).

From a postmodern/queer perspective however, such re-assertions of traditional femininity are not necessarily conservative. For Caudwell (2006), criticising the 'femme' performance of women in so-called 'masculine' sports has often prematurely dismissed this form of femininity as evidence of patriarchal coercion. What really matters, she suggests, is not that women are still being feminine, but that the "femme-ininity" is being consciously chosen, strategically deployed within a visibly regulatory discursive system. In this way, traditionally feminine behaviour holds the potential for a "potent disturbance to heteronormativity" (2006: 147) because of the obviousness of its performative nature, and since it can also generate new categories of sex-gender-sexuality. In Caudwell's research for instance, the 'femme' identity of lesbian footballers challenges the cultural stereotypes of "woman-masculine-lesbian *and* woman-feminine-heterosexual" (2006: 153, original emphasis). Particularly 'gendered' sports are therefore considered to be important arenas for the articulation and performance of sex, gender and sexuality, ways of learning about and exhibiting temporarily embodied identities, and potential sites for the exploration and deconstruction of the norms of compulsory heterosexuality.

However, by focussing on the potential ideological consequences of women's engagement with physical activity, and tending to romanticise the somewhat abstract theoretical discourse of Butler's (among others) notions of performativity, drag, subversion and so on, postmodern/queer sports feminists have been criticised for failing to account for the material constraints standing in the way of many women's (and men's) participation in such liberating practices (Hargreaves, 2004).

Also, overstating the degree to which ‘subversive’ gender performance actually challenges the deeply-entrenched norms of heterosexism and patriarchy in the lives of all men and women is a risk that postmodernists take when they attempt to generalise beyond the direct context of the athletic subcultures they study, meaning that their focus on fragmented, disparate forms of embodied identity inherently weakens the applicability of postmodern analysis to any broader ‘women’s movement’. In this sense, it is not clear whether the finite, local focus of postmodern analysis can really be described as ‘feminist’ in the same way as can liberal or radical work. The disconnected and de-centred nature of postmodern feminism is a criticism made of the field more generally, which “has produced a ‘retreat from utopia’ within feminism” (Benhabib, 2008: 161), undermining the political aspirations of feminists interested in bringing about revolutionary change. To many feminists, the view that “there is nothing about being ‘female’ that naturally binds women” (Haraway, 1991b: 276) is a step too far, effectively denouncing the myriad political gains made by first- and second-wave feminists whose politics depend upon the certainty that ‘woman’ exists as a category and that women as a group are (and long have been) oppressed. De-centring ‘women’ from their research, and calling the concept of woman as a subject into question (Butler, 2008), means that postmodern feminists are always at risk of alienating themselves from the wider feminist community for whom these terms and concepts are firmly rooted in a material reality – and one which requires urgent theoretical and practical intervention. Further, the postmodern predilection for criticism through complicity is regarded by some feminists as simply complicity, as “part of the growing backlash against feminism” (Weedon, 1999: 76), or as an intellectually pessimistic “idea without value, associated with privileged academics in the West for whom it represents above all symbolic and career capital” (Hargreaves, 2004: 190). In this way, the hyper-intellectual excesses of postmodern theory have led to the criticism that “some postmodern feminists write simply to spin theory as an art form” (Tong, 1989: 218), focussing on aesthetics and subcultural peculiarities whilst neglecting the operation of large-scale systems of power fundamental in other forms of social analysis. The postmodern rejection of truth-claims, objectivity, and progression in favour of deconstruction, irony and the celebration of diversity means that

postmodern feminism is located on the borders of the women's movement, occupying controversial terrain.

It is at this complex juncture that my present study is located. Drawing on the theoretical insights of postmodern/queer feminism, and with a clear desire to identify the subversive potential(s) of mixed-sex martial arts, this project is intended to illustrate the usefulness of an approach sensitized to the discursive regulation of the normality and 'naturalness' of structures of sex-gender-desire (Caudwell, 2003: 376) and the intrinsic value of physical culture in offering examples for its deconstruction. The liberal and radical feminist traditions, conceived of as "originating categories" (Birrell, 2000: 64) of feminist thought, are used as points of reference, but in the following section and also in Chapter 3, postmodern/queer feminism (and the aspects of Foucauldian theory upon which many queer theorists have drawn) is primarily used to make sense of the historical constitution of sport as a site for the construction and reification of patriarchy and its attendant norms of masculinity and femininity. Attention then turns directly to the matter of the subversive potential of sports cultures, and in particular, women's practice of (mixed-sex) martial arts.

## **2.2 Sport and Patriarchy: 'Male Preserves' and the Reification of Gender**

*The physical basis of domination (in sport) is supported by the social practice of exclusion, which denies women the means to develop their athletic skills and, when barriers to women's participation are surmounted, views this involvement as illegitimate. (Theberge, 1987: 389)*

In this section, I outline how feminist sports scholars have made sense of the emergence of modern sport as a gendered and gendering phenomenon. I also discuss the typical visions of masculinity and femininity which are associated with traditional conceptions of sports/gender propriety, and how these normalised types contribute to the maintenance of a gender hierarchy strongly bound up in

naturalistic discourse in spite of the socially constructed nature of sports-based embodiment.

### ***2.2.1 The Development of Modern Sport as a Gendered/Gendering Practice***

The historical development of modern sport has been explained in various ways by scholars of different theoretical persuasions. To contextualise what would be described as a feminist account, it may help to begin by outlining some alternative perspectives. Firstly, Marxist explanations (which characterised the early works in the sociology of sport) have emphasised the development of sport in its modern forms in terms of the extension of capitalist power relations and the reproduction of capitalist ideology (Brohm, 1978; Rigauer, 1981). Sport arose in its modern incarnation “as a consequence of the developing material conditions of capitalist society” (Hoch, 1972: 12) in order to consolidate and protect the interests of the economically powerful. The often scathing analysis offered by early Marxist interpretations positioned modern, competitive, institutionalised sport as the tool of global capital and as a potent vehicle for duping ‘the masses’, with a false consciousness obscuring material inequality and dissolving international working-class solidarity (Hoch, 1972). Sport, in this Marxist analysis, is conceived of as a harmful, alienating, profit-driven ‘opiate’, devised and developed to cement capitalist domination over the lower classes.

Hegemony theorists, drawing on neo-Marxist/Gramscian theory, similarly characterise sport as having developed alongside the growth of capitalism in the West, although their analyses foreground issues of contestation and struggle as pre-modern pastimes became institutionalised within modernising economic nation-states (e.g. Gruneau, 1983). Sports are identified as key sites for the operation of hegemonic power – not in the strictly deterministic sense of classical Marxism, but with regard to the careful maintenance of the precarious power balances between socio-economic, racial, and generational groups. Sports became a useful site for

diffusing class antagonism, but could also offer opportunities for class concerns to come to the fore (Rowe, 2004).

Figurational theorists, notably Elias and Dunning (1986), explained the emergence of modern sport in terms of Elias' (2000) theory of the civilising process, which postulated that in Western societies since the middle ages, social standards concerning displays of emotion, bodily functions, and violence have become increasingly stricter (Dunning, 1993). Under the conditions of increasingly 'civilised' society, individuals are expected to contain their bodily, affective, and particularly violent impulses to a much greater degree than in previous historical eras. Owing to the 'emotional staleness' that such tightly self-regulated lives can lead to, argue Elias and Dunning (1986), modern sport arose as part of a 'quest for excitement', a site for the "controlled de-controlling of emotions" (Maguire, 1991: 283) where individuals could engage in relatively de-regulated (although never entirely uncontrolled) physical activity. In this way, sports act as a 'sibling' form of more violent confrontation, and appear to give the experience of freedom and emotional self-realisation, but only within the context of the rules of the game and the norms of sportsmanship which reflect the prevailing tenets of 'civilised' behaviour. Sheard and Dunning (1973) thereby suggested that sports could act as 'male preserves', through affording men the opportunity to engage in what Elias and Dunning (1986) termed 'mimetic' violence within such increasingly regulated, civilising societies, and thus offering the chance to engage in an otherwise disappearing form of powerful and dominating masculinity (this idea will be returned to shortly).

Foucauldian theorists have established similar explanations for the emergence of modern sport, with a focus on modern forms of power exerted over the body (i.e. 'bio-power') and the institutionalisation of panoptic 'governmentality' and the production of 'docile bodies' (Markula & Pringle, 2006) in sporting spaces. As in the figurational analysis, Foucauldian sociologists of sport consider modern sport to promote the internalisation of discipline (Rail & Harvey, 1995), and the practice by individuals of 'technologies of the self' which confirm an individual's agency as taking place within the existing discursive structures of society (Markula, 2003). Sports, like



institutions such as the school, the clinic, and ultimately the prison, serve as sites for the normalisation and punitive regulation of acceptable forms of behaviour and embodiment (Andrews, 2000; Markula & Pringle, 2006). Essentially, modern sports forms emerged as very modern re-articulations of older pastimes, becoming constitutive elements of increasingly de-centralised and embodied power relations – ways for people to actively ‘make’ themselves ‘right’.

Feminist theorists investigating the emergence and development of modern sport have contributed accounts which relate to these others whilst directing attention to sport’s fundamentally gendered and gendering character. Of primary importance in the feminist interpretation is an understanding of the changes in relations between the sexes that were taking place during modern sport’s formative era in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in Britain and North America. As discussed above, it was during this time that the liberal feminist movement was gathering pace and achieving victories for women’s enfranchisement within public life (Tong, 1989). The movement of women into the paid workforce, their access to higher education, and the right to vote, involved “a direct challenge to the ideology of separate, and gendered, spheres” (Theberge, 2000b: 322-3) as public life was no longer the exclusive domain of men. This “conscious agency of women provided a direct threat to the ideology of male superiority” (Messner, 1990a: 60), instigating something of a crisis in masculine identity, as men’s principle sources of difference from women began to disappear. In addition, the changing social conditions of employment posed by the development of industrial capitalism, along with the ‘civilising turn’ represented by the growth of bourgeois public morality (Dunning, 1993), meant that men’s own lives offered them fewer chances to behave in ‘masculine’ ways: work itself was becoming less physical; men were expected to be less violent and had far fewer opportunities to fight; and in the urbanisation of industry, they became more removed from the home and thus from raising their sons (Theberge, 2000b). These changes meant that “with no frontier to conquer, with physical strength becoming less relevant to work, and with urban males being raised by women, it was feared that males were becoming ‘soft’, that society was becoming feminised” (Messner, 1992: 14). In this context, feminists argue that the institution of modern sport

“emerged as a male response to social changes which undermined many of the bases of men’s traditional patriarchal power, authority, and identity” (Messner, 1990a: 60). Sport is thus conceived of as a backlash against feminist advancements and as a conservative effort to find some ground upon which to build ‘masculine’ identities in the absence of traditional alternatives.

According to Theberge (2000b: 323), “the early years of the twentieth century were crucial for the development of sport and the construction of gender ideologies”. During this time,

sport was a male-created homosocial cultural sphere which provided... men with psychological separation from the perceived feminisation of society, while also providing dramatic symbolic proof of the ‘natural superiority’ of men over women. (Messner, 1988: 200)

The ‘dramatic symbolic proof’ of men’s superiority is clearly tied to the *embodied* nature of sports, and the direct link between physical strength, skill, and toughness with particularly valued kinds of sporting success. Men’s assumed ‘natural’ propensity for aggression, along with their bodies’ “in-built fighting advantages” (Dunning, 1986: 80), could be showcased in an exclusively male arena, not to mention inculcated into younger generations of boys. Effectively, in the face of (liberal) feminist gains in breaking down barriers to women’s participation in the privilege-granting education received by boys, men were able to fall back on a type of education/socialisation from which women were still excluded. Sports – and specifically those which most closely mimicked combat – guaranteed the continuation of at least one aspect of men’s favourable distinction from women. As “modern sport naturalised the equation of maleness with violence” (Messner, 1990a: 61), it reified masculinity as aggressive, powerful, dominating, and superior, defined by “size, muscle power and the courage to pit body against body” (Dowling, 2000: 23). However, given the need for an ‘other’ against which to define this particular masculine identity (Sykes, 2006), the exclusive linkage between the male body and physical power which sport provided continued to depend on the exclusion of women from equal participation (Theberge, 1987). This was accomplished, and to

some extent continues to be so, through the establishment of exclusively male sports and sport settings, and the concurrent development of exclusively female variants.

Initially, this meant that men and women participated in totally different sports, with women's exclusion from strenuous (and especially, violent) athletics defended by a medical discourse that "provided a supposedly 'factual' or 'objective', but in effect conservative, legitimisation of patriarchal relations" (Hargreaves, 1994: 44). Certain essential feminine qualities – not least among them the long-assumed myth of female frailty (Dowling, 2000) – were presented within bio-medical and psychoanalytic discourses that argued women's health, and in particular their childbearing capacity, along with women's intrinsic moral qualities, were at risk if they were to engage in 'masculine' sports (McDonagh & Pappano, 2008). For radical feminists, this is hardly surprising given the authority that the medical profession held over women's lives at this time: "this dominance may be understood as yet another instance of medical control over women's lives in general, and over reproduction in particular" (Lenskyj, 1986: 17). Women's avoidance of strenuous activity was considered a necessity for "the good of the race" (Dowling, 2000: 22), to ensure that fertility rates among privileged whites (the subjects of 'official' gender discourse) remained high. Ironically, the same suggestions were soon to be used by reformists who saw particular forms of light physical activity as being beneficial to women's (reproductive) health (Hargreaves, 1994: 48), although the intrinsic biological differences between men and women continued to be stressed, and the dominant model of femininity – based on the lives of white, middle-class women – certainly did not include participation in competitive, 'masculine', combat sport. This is not to say that women did not take part in such sports at all; for instance, Hargreaves has shown that women's boxing (1997) and wrestling (1994) were both common activities among the lower classes in Britain from at least the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. But given the classist (and racist) connotations of 'official' gender discourse – that is, what counted as a 'real' woman and a 'real' man – these experiences were discounted as aberrant, evidence not of women's physical potential but rather of the depravity of the lower classes: "because these women

were outside conventional female sporting circles, they were ignored by the ideologues of female sports, including members of the medical profession” (Hargreaves, 1994: 143).

As the twentieth century unfolded however, the strict limitations placed on women’s involvement in sport (and the continuing gender segregations in the workplace) were dealt a blow following further social upheavals, not least among them the radicalising experiences of women during wartime. “Because the labour market needed strong, healthy women, the (US) government supported competitive fitness programs. The War Department itself backed competitive sport, producing elite-calibre female athletes as well as male” (Dowling, 2000: 33). Similar state-sponsored, war-inspired changes were taking place in Britain as well (Hargreaves, 1994: 137). Further, in addition to the state responses to the two World Wars, women’s increasing presence in higher education, and notably their entry into the medical profession, further undermined the male-defined reading of the female body as ‘too weak’ for sport (Dowling, 2000). Coupled with the growth of post-war liberalism in the West, the proliferation of the type of equality-based legislation such as Title IX has meant that the structural barriers to women’s participation in sport have been continually eroded as the ‘official’ image of femininity and gender propriety in Western discourse have changed (Hargreaves, 1997). But despite these altering perceptions of the female body, men’s and women’s sport continues to be highly demarcated, reflecting the original gendered bias – and gendering purpose – of modern sport.

An explanation for this is that aside from fears over women’s health outcomes, the question of female sexuality has also been raised as a potent (although unofficial) barrier to women’s participation (Lenskyj, 1986; Hargreaves, 1994; Theberge & Birrell, 1994). The insistence that women be ‘feminine’ in the sense that they do not act like or look like men serves “to validate male identity and both individual and collective male power” (Lenskyj, 1986: 56). Since (combat) sports and idealised visions of masculinity have long been closely linked, and remain as one of the few supports for the contemporary ideology of natural male superiority (Messner,

1990a), women's participation in such activities presents a direct challenge to male hegemony by threatening to undermine men's distinctiveness from women, as women refuse to be the weak and passive 'other' against which embodied masculine power can be measured (Dowling, 2000). Thus, women's attempts to enter men's exclusive sports fields has involved not the re-definition of the activities themselves, but rather the questioning of the woman's gender – and by extension, sexuality (Caudwell, 2003). That is to say, if a woman wants to behave like a man, then perhaps she is not a 'real' woman after all, and is probably 'butch' and/or a lesbian. In the radical feminist critique, the institution of compulsory heterosexuality thereby acts as a "legitimising force" (Lenskyj, 1986: 57) in the division of men and women in sport, as any kind of non-conformity to heteronormative gender is interpreted as an unnatural/immoral abnormality, something to be disregarded or punished. Queer theorists have pointed out that "female masculinity is generally received by hetero- and homo-normative cultures as a pathological sign of misidentification and maladjustment" (Halberstam, 1998: 9), reflecting the modernist tendency in Western ideology to rationalise, objectify and categorise normal and abnormal types of people (Markula & Pringle, 2006). Disruptions to the heteronormative system of sports therefore result in the stigmatisation of those women – or indeed, men – who cross the boundaries of normal acceptability. They are separated out as inherently and dangerously different – as 'other'. This kind of "homophobia acts as a means of social control, which not only keeps women out... of sport but also invokes a fear of association that separates women from one another" (Theberge & Birrell, 1994: 338). In this way, the heterosexist norms associated with 'masculine' and 'feminine' types of sport have helped to *construct* the differences between men and women, and heterosexuals and homosexuals, as well as maintain them.

It is these features of modern sport that have lead sociologists, feminist and otherwise, to describe sport as a 'male preserve' (Sheard & Dunning, 1973; Dunning, 1986). Firstly, sport arose as a response to the changing social contexts and power relations between the sexes in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in order to shore up faltering ideologies of male superiority. They did so by providing men with a homosocial environment in which to learn masculine character and develop physical strength, a

key characteristic in the discursive construction of 'hegemonic', that is dominant and dominating, masculinity (Connell, 1995). They provided sites for the clear demonstration of masculine power and domination, by showcasing men's physical power and aptitude for combat, whilst women were excluded because of their supposed lack of physical ability, fears over their reproductive health, and accusations of pathological sexual abnormality should they prove these wrong. However, in spite of the hegemonic status of men in sport, it is also clear that women (and non-conforming men) have used sports as sites for struggle and contestation against repressive models of sex and gender. The discursive functioning of modern sport has been under attack from within since its very inception, and the literature suggests that this deconstruction of sporting patriarchy has been gathering pace in recent decades. Before discussing such sporting subversions in Chapter 3, I will now describe in more detail the specific types of masculinity and femininity identified in the literature which typical 'men's' and 'women's' sports respectively have helped to develop and maintain.

### ***2.2.2 Patriarchal Sporting Binaries: Hegemonic Masculinity, Emphasised Femininity, and the Embodiment of Violent Potential***

In making sense of the dominant gender discourse represented through 'male' and 'female' sports, Connell's (1987) conceptions of 'hegemonic masculinity' and 'emphasised femininity' serve as useful articulations of the dominant conceptions of what counts as the idealised/normalised type of gender for men and women respectively, and have been used extensively in the sociology of sport (Pringle, 2005). Connell describes 'hegemonic masculinity' as contested and contingent, being:

the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women. (1995: 77)

I do not wish to delve too deeply into Connell's neo-Gramscian theory of gender power relations, suffice to say that the construct of hegemonic masculinity is thereby a strictly relational one. It "does not exist except in contrast with 'femininity'" (1995: 68), the principle 'other' upon which it draws its status as different and superior. Although there are many ways in which such masculinity can be defined, within the contemporary context of 'masculine' combat sports, hegemonic masculinity is (as discussed above) most often associated with "symbolic representations of... strength, virility and power" (Messner, 1988: 202); of "physical force and toughness" (Bryson, 1990: 173); a profound statement of men's physical (and to a degree, mental) superiority over women which is reducible to the implications of such embodiment for the performance of violence (McCaughey, 1997). Crucially, the male body in 'masculine' sports culture is normalised as a purveyor of said violence; as a large, hard, forceful, and dangerous weapon in the hands of a naturally aggressive psyche (Messner, 1990a). Research into many male sports cultures has helped to ratify the thesis that the performance of violence is a particularly central characteristic of 'masculine' combat sports (e.g. Atyeo, 1979; Dunning, 1986), especially so in boxing and other professional martial arts (e.g. Sheard, 1997; Wacquant, 2004; van Bottenburg & Heilbron, 2006; Hirose & Pih, 2010), although often the explicit linkage of violent embodiment with masculine identity is missing in the literature (De Garis, 2000; Woodward, 2004). In a more explicitly feminist reading of such research, its centrality to notions of masculinity means that "the cultural meaning of sports violence... for many men is linked with larger ideological issues of gender legitimacy and power", helping to "reproduce the subjugation of... femininity and subordinate masculine postures" (Young, 1993: 380). Much sociological research into masculinity and violence in sports has focussed on the destructive, alienating and otherwise negative consequences of men's embodiment of violent potential and its attendant meanings of domination, self-destruction, and alienation from non-conforming men and from women (e.g. Messner, 1990a; 1994; Young, 1993).

McCaughey (1997) describes such masculine embodiment in terms of its role in helping to reify the myths of 'rape culture' – 'real' men (that is masculine,

heterosexual men) are more powerful than women and are more naturally capable of, and more readily given to, aggression and violence. In this sense, “male physical prowess is used to validate male dominance” (Roth & Basow, 2004: 254). Men’s embodiment of hegemonic masculinity appears to entitle them to a superior social status because of their bodies’ supposed ‘in-built’ fighting advantages (Dunning, 1986). Therefore, since they are portrayed as larger and stronger, men are considered *naturally capable* perpetrators of rape. Furthermore, because they are seen as naturally/properly aggressive and dominating, they are also construed as *likely* perpetrators too (McCaughey, 1997). The model of masculinity promoted through traditional, masculine sports is implicated in supporting ‘rape culture’ not because sport participation encourages men to commit rape *per se*, but because such sports’ symbolic construction of what is ‘natural’ and ‘normal’ for men to be and do lends itself easily to a naturalistic explanation of the inevitability of male-to-female sexual violence, so that “men’s power to coerce women physically becomes naturalised in the popular imagination” (McCaughey, 1997: 16).

Social research into the appearance of ‘emphasised femininity’ (Connell, 1987) in sport has also been particularly critical (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003; Hargreaves, 2004). Defined by Connell (1987: 187) as “the pattern of femininity which is given most cultural and ideological support at present”, this type of feminine identity is considered similarly relational and flexible as its masculine counterpart. However, Connell stresses the centrality of ‘compliance’ with the subordinating effects of hegemonic masculinity; emphasised femininity is conceivable as an effect of the compulsory heterosexuality described by feminists (e.g. Rich, 1980), through which women are expected to adopt the inferior positions upon which men’s privilege through hegemonic masculinity depends. To be feminine in this model therefore involves embodying the opposite characteristics to hegemonic masculinity, and accruing status and privilege as a ‘real’ woman within this structure of inferiority. According to Lenskyj,

the institution of compulsory heterosexuality has shaped female sport experience, specifically by classifying physical activity as ‘feminine’, and



therefore appropriate for females, only when they were seen to enhance heterosexual attractiveness. (1990: 236)

In other words, women's sport is only constituted as gender-legitimate when it upholds or strengthens the normative model of woman-feminine-heterosexual (Caudwell, 2003). And this kind of heterosexual feminine embodiment, particularly in contemporary Western society, involves being in many ways the opposite of the idealised heterosexual masculine type (Connell, 1987). Particularly regarding bodies, this means that dominant conceptions of the female body involves a smaller size, less physical strength, less resilience and toughness, and a much greater emphasis on cosmetic beauty (McCaughey, 1997; Dowling, 2000; Markula, 2003). As the officially 'correct' way to be a heterosexual (that is, 'normal') woman, the aesthetics of feminine smallness and weakness render "gender inequality sensual, erotic, and attractive" (McCaughey, 1997: 34). Such characteristics of emphasised femininity have been identified in much of the literature concerning women's sports over the past few decades (e.g. Lenskyj, 1986; Bryson, 1990; Hargreaves, 1994; Markula, 1995; Dowling, 2000; McDonagh & Pappano, 2008), most of which has been critical of women's endorsement of the traditional model of sexual propriety for its ultimately disempowering effects, as women's sports participation on these terms helps to "enhance hegemonic masculinity and reinforce women's inferior status" (Bryson, 1990: 182). Thus, femininity and heterosexual female beauty have long been considered by sports feminists to be more than aesthetic choices, but rather play a central role in informing and legitimising "unequal power relations between the sexes" (Messner, 1988: 203), particularly owing to its role in the process of reifying the ultimate difference in power between men's and women's bodies – the capacity for performing physical violence (McCaughey, 1997; 1998).

Aside from the relatively superficial task of describing the content of 'hegemonic' masculine and 'emphasised' feminine types, two particularly important themes emerge from the literature on gender embodiment in sports which help to explain the deeper significance of sports practices and their processes of embodiment for gender relations. One central issue is the notion that the embodied power of males

(and by extension, relative weakness of females) is considered to be a *natural* phenomenon (Messner, 1990a). According to Bryson,

the message of male superiority embedded in sport takes a great deal of its power from the fact that performance is routinely understood in terms of biology, which in turn is accepted as immutable... An ideology that claims to be based in biological differences is exceptionally powerful, because it claims a naturalness that denies challenge. (1990: 175)

The concept of the 'natural' is a vital discursive component in the construction and reification of differently sexed bodies. As discussed above with regard to the postmodern approach to theorising gender, the ideological power of 'nature' as an immutable determining force is of great significance to the maintenance of the boundaries between male and female (Haraway, 1991a; Butler, 2008). And since "most sport is premised on dimorphic sex and the notion that sex difference is 'natural', stable and fixed" (Caudwell, 2003: 384), sex-differentiated sport is able to provide the "dramatic symbolic proof" (Messner, 1988: 200) of men's 'natural' superiority over women because of the embodied nature of sports and the common-sense conflation of 'body' with 'nature' (Grosz, 1994). Furthermore, believing that it is 'natural' differences which separate men from women regarding the body's capacity for performing and withstanding violence lends itself to the notion that *all* men are in this way different from *all* women. Identifying with the representations of hegemonic masculinity, where "the basis of identification is the violent male body" provides "linkages among men in the project of the domination of women" (Messner, 1990a: 213). Essentialised notions of male power permit men to imagine themselves as naturally superior to all women – or at least, to all 'real' women.

The second central theme in this literature, however, stems from the fact that so few people actually manage to embody the supposedly 'natural' characteristics of either hegemonic masculinity or emphasised femininity (Connell, 1987). In fact, the literature on sports and gender embodiment is saturated with accounts of how men and women engage in sporting pursuits in order to *produce* a more 'masculine' or 'feminine' body, actively enhancing their status as differently gendered subjects (e.g.

Bryson, 1990; Messner & Sabo, 1994; Markula, 1995; Maguire & Mansfield, 1998; Markula & Pringle, 2006). The apparent consensus from a diverse body of literature which deals with this issue is that men and women are specifically active in their embodiment of these two idealised types. That is to say, typically masculine and feminine bodies and comportments do not spring into being as simple, natural inevitabilities, but are actively produced by the deliberate efforts of acting subjects, thus “though the body is popularly equated with nature, it is nevertheless an object of social practice” (Messner, 1990a: 214). In the terms of queer theory, gender – and by extension sex – is *performatively constituted* through active processes of embodiment, such as those involved with sport. As Dworkin puts it, “gender ideologies, once embedded through cumulative fitness practices, construct the sexed materiality of the body itself” (2001: 336). In fact, as already discussed above, such a process lies at the heart of the development of modern sport, as boys were encouraged to play certain games “on the assumption that participation (would) produce healthy, virile, hard working, rule-following, competitive, courageous and moral men” (Markula & Pringle, 2006: 94). As men play violent, ‘masculine’ sports, they are thought to learn how to be a ‘real’ man and develop the kind of body imagined as ‘naturally’ male. In this way sports, and specifically violent male sports, help “to construct hegemonic masculinity” (Messner, 1990a: 60) by producing men whose very bodies bear its imprint. Women’s embodiment of femininity follows a similar process, although as well-documented in the literature, what has counted as a feminine appearance, and feminine propriety, has changed much in the past century and changes in women’s sport have both reflected and helped to instigate these changes (e.g. Lenskyj, 1986; Hargreaves, 1994). Typically though, women’s body projects within sport have, despite their shifting emphasis (and current diversity), entailed an active resistance to embodying ‘masculine’ characteristics, as women have responded to heterosexist pressures to “present a body that is read as woman” (Caudwell, 2006: 152). In the case of ‘feminine’ sports and activities, such as aerobics, women have been seen to actively pursue an idealised ‘womanly’ figure, reflecting dominant conceptions of emphasised femininity, in spite of the near impossibility of attaining what is assumed to be the ‘normal’ look (Markula, 1995). With regard to their involvement in more ‘masculine’ activities, such as weight

lifting, women have been seen to engage with them in ways which preserve some form of gender distinction, often strategically practicing them in order to maintain or enhance a distinctive, feminine quality (e.g. Dworkin, 2001). Projecting a sense of differentiation from men, often through emphasising characteristics which downplay the physical power of the 'feminine' body relative to the 'masculine', means that women's deliberately differentiated embodiment through sport continues to produce bodies in accordance with the power differentials between the sexes which favour men.

In essence then, the deliberateness of masculine and feminine sports-based embodiment highlights how supposedly 'natural' male power advantages are effectively and purposely produced through the routine performance of gender discourse by male and female sports participants. When sport (and other physical activity) is done according to the gendered behavioural demands of hierarchal sex discourse, that very discourse is naturalised through the resultant bodies and comportments which sports practice produces. However, since this naturalisation is the result of deliberate action within the dictates of specific discursive parameters, it stands to reason that should sports be performed in alternative ways, then different embodied results might be expected. There could, therefore, be different consequences entirely for the discourse of male physical supremacy, the stability of which depends upon the authority and legitimacy of its apparent 'naturalness', as evidenced by the bodies of male and female sportspeople. In the next chapter, I will discuss how such different consequences have surfaced through alternative sports practices, as have been described and analysed in the sociology of sport literature, and thereby suggest how certain sports can be considered 'subversive' of the dominant sexual hierarchy in particular ways.

### 3

## ***Sport, Gender, and Subversion***

Whilst examining the emergence and development of modern sport in Chapter 2, I discussed how the literature explained that sport has been used as a means of separating the sexes, of naturalising certain physical attributes of the respective sexes, and of connecting these physical differences to power chances within traditional gender discourses supporting patriarchy. In this chapter I now turn to the issue of gender subversion through sport. Drawing on sources from the available literature, I discuss how sports have been used as a source of resistance against heterosexism and masculine domination. To that end, this chapter briefly covers the literature on alternative masculine styles in sport, on gay men's athletic involvement, and on mixed-sex/integrated sports. The chapter then offers a lengthier discussion of the literature concerning women's engagement with combat sports, an area of study which holds particular relevance for understanding the significance of mixed-sex participation in martial arts.

### **3.1 *Gender Subversion in Sport: Subversive Physical Cultures***

*Reconsideration of what we claim to know or imagine as gendered life can take place only by passing through an unstable and troubled terrain... At that moment, we enter into precisely the kind of epistemic crisis that allows gender categories to change. (Butler, 1998: 110)*

As previously discussed, the normal, idealised, and heterosexist associations of men with masculinity and women with femininity are performatively reproduced within sports settings where men and women emphasise their differences from one-another, helping to construct the sexed and gendered categories of 'man' and 'woman' respectively (Anderson, 2008a). But, according to Wachs, "precisely

because sport operates to normalise and display gender difference and specifically male superiority, it is (also) a site at which such ideologies are made material and can therefore be *challenged concretely*" (2005: 529, emphasis added). When the male-masculine-hetero/woman-feminine-hetero categories are here destabilised, the inessential nature of sex, gender and sexuality is more explicitly exposed and the 'normal'/'natural' labelling of privileged models of gender (those which support patriarchal power structures) is made problematic. Thus, such instances which differ from the aforementioned norms can be labelled 'subversive', as they challenge conventional knowledge about the naturalness, and thus the inevitability, of compulsory heterosexuality and patriarchal domination. And as Wachs (2005) points out, the importance of sport as a means of the naturalisation of gender makes such subversions and challenges all the more meaningful, given the close proximity at which they occur to such a fundamental site of the production of sexed and gendered bodies. Thus, while much literature in the sociology of sport has dealt with the appearance and significance of men's and women's traditional sex/gender embodiment, research has also been directed towards moments of difference which, for theorists such as Butler (2008), are of particular interest in understanding gender performativity. In this sub-section, I will explore two avenues of research into ways in which genders are done differently in sports settings: firstly, looking at men's experiences of gender and sexuality which differ from the heterosexual/hegemonic masculine norm; and secondly, at mixed-sex sports wherein men and women have trained and/or competed against one-another in relatively well-integrated settings.

### ***3.1.1 Different Men: 'Alternative' Masculinities and Homosexual Male Athletes***

Although the concept of hegemonic masculinity has been used extensively to examine male/masculine sports cultures, contemporary sociologists have begun to gain interest in exploring 'alternative' styles of masculine identity (e.g. Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Anderson, 2009; Anderson, Adams & Rivers, 2010). Recognising that masculinity is not a discreet concept, but rather signifies a number

of different possibilities, means understanding that men are able to express a male self in ways which are at once considered 'legitimately' masculine whilst also possibly resistant to dominant conceptions of masculinity (that is, 'hegemonic' masculinity). While Connell's (1987) popular framework for understanding masculine hegemony has been criticised in recent years – both for its simplistic casting of gender power relations as a “single pattern of power... of men over women” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005: 846) and also for essentialising the 'traits' of hegemonic masculinity – the concept of hegemonic masculinity nevertheless retains its usefulness as an analytical tool for understanding which types of masculine character are most socially valued in specific cultural contexts. Yet expanding upon such analyses has seen scholars who are interested in men and masculinities also conceptually recognising 'alternative' masculinities – not as simply disempowered, marginalised and subordinated by hegemonic masculinity, but agentic and socially significant in their own right (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Recognising the importance and significance of alternative masculinities in turn illuminates the concept of hegemonic masculinity, which is “more useful when it specifies relationships with other forms of masculinity rather than when it tries to define its own characteristics” (Hirose & Pih, 2010: 194). The struggle for masculine hegemony is, after all, more than simply men's efforts to subordinate women, but also a struggle to determine which 'type' of man is the most valued in any given social context (Connell, 1995).

Within research into male sports participation, conceiving of alternative masculinities has been productive in analysing how 'non-hegemonic' men fit within hierarchal structures of gender power and accrue sexual status within sports-based discourses of masculine propriety and prestige. Correctly conceiving of masculine hegemony as a contestable, discursive struggle over the meanings of maleness means that sports scholars have been able to show how certain sporting subcultures provide for the development of different masculine types in line with their own specific features and discursive regulations, as well as those of the broader cultures within which they are located. For instance, Hirose and Pih (2010) discuss the competing visions of masculinity produced within mixed martial arts (MMA)

subcultures, the meanings of which are attached to specific styles of competitive fighting. Such visions are also mediated by discourses of masculinity drawn from East Asian cultures as well as traditional Western gender ideology. By contrasting 'striking' (punching and kicking) fighting styles with 'submission' (grappling) styles, the authors comment on how American MMA subcultures feature two major, distinctive and competing masculinities. Strikers, whose fast-paced, dramatic, stand-up style of exchanging blows while attempting to knock an opponent out "easily resembles images of 'bar fights'... the simple yet stylized idea of two men fighting each other" (2010: 199), are more commonly celebrated by American audiences as 'real men'. On the other hand, grapplers, whose technical proficiency and less dramatic style of fighting is easily interpreted as less violent and less courageous, frequently suffer from poor audience receptions owing to the fact that "being seen as less violent in a sport in which physical strength and domination of an opponent is the fundamental goal can be damaging to one's masculine image" (2010: 199). Grapplers are often said to have not fought 'like a man', and their victories over strikers are thereby devalued since they have 'cheated' the implicit rules of masculinity integral to the meanings of MMA in this cultural context. Nevertheless, the authors comment on how American audiences' cultural predilection to view grappling as feminised, and even at times homosexualised, is dependent upon their relative lack of understanding of the effectiveness of submission fighters' techniques and strategies – in other words, their ignorance about particular (Eastern) martial arts. Spectators attuned to the complexities of martial arts knowledge therefore were able to appreciate and celebrate the proficiency of grappling fighters, whose non-dominant masculinity was nevertheless valued for its efficient subtleties and ability to exert control without excessively violent knockouts. Otherwise, audiences would fall back on dominant cultural meanings about fighting and masculinity to make sense of the spectacle of 'men who strike' versus 'men who submit', which becomes for them a site for the physical struggle of 'real' masculinity against a feminised and foreign alternative. Hirose and Pih's (2010) findings suggest, therefore, that even in highly masculinised activities such as MMA, gender is contested, and competing codes of masculine identity find articulation and accrue



prestige through specific, embodied sporting performances relative to dominant cultural discourses.

Other research which has discussed the production of alternative masculinities through sport has explored how such masculinities are deliberately formed in opposition to dominant conceptions of masculinity among self-proclaimed 'alternative' sports such as skateboarding (Beal, 1996). Considering their sports as explicit sites of cultural resistance to the mainstream, participants in such fringe activities construct their ideal notions of manhood in direct opposition to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity implied within other sports cultures. Nevertheless, in spite of their stated resistance to hegemonic masculinity, Beal claims that male skateboarders continue to privilege men and masculinity by "differentiating and elevating themselves from females and femininity" (1996: 205). Further to this, Wheaton and Beal (2003) suggest that within 'alternative' sports subcultures more broadly, the 'othering' and devaluing of women and femininity, as well as non-white males, is prevalent (although not uncontested) in spite of the relatively oppositional stance taken towards mainstream idealisations of (hegemonic) masculinity. Wheaton and Beal's (2003) findings thus imply that resistance to hegemonic masculinity by non-conforming men does not necessarily equate to resistance to male hegemony on the whole.

Therefore, while it is evident that in certain sports subcultural gender discourses may include distinctions between competing masculinities (such as in MMA) or between accepted masculine norms and those of the wider social context (such as in skateboarding), these variations on masculine expression do not necessarily suggest 'subversive' gender practices are taking place. So long as men and women continue to be differentiated in hierarchal ways, with men and masculinity being privileged at the expense of women and femininity, then women remain a relatively subordinated group and sexual inequality remains more or less intact. Nevertheless, the proliferation of alternative masculinities, troubling to the ideology of 'true', 'natural' or fixed masculinity, might hold out the possibility for instigating ideological challenges to male domination through the necessity of recognising the falsity of

essentialist logic regarding sex and gender. As such, proliferations of alternative masculine identities, while not necessarily subversive *per se*, might pose deeper challenges to male hegemony through the implicit understanding they provide of the discursive, inessential, and contestable nature of the linkages between sex and gender.

One other way in which men's subversion of gender through sport is represented in the literature is via the experience of gay male athletes, whose example effectively instigates the disassociation of 'masculine' men with heterosexuality. According to Jarvis (2006: 63), "male athletes are generally assumed to be heterosexual". Consequently, "a gay male athlete violates the image that male athletes are strong, virile, tough, and competitive" (2006: 63) because of the assumption that homosexual men are 'naturally' effeminate and therefore none of those things. When a visibly masculine (i.e. large, strong, competitive, dominant) man is revealed to be homosexual or to have engaged in homosexual acts, the 'naturalness' of heterosexuality and the binary/oppositional sexual characteristics of masculine/feminine is undermined. For instance, Alan Klein's aptly named paper, 'Pumping Irony' (1986), discussed the phenomenon of gay sex services being provided by semi-professional bodybuilders, revealing the ironic and apparently contradictory practice of "hustling" as a necessary "charade" (1986: 128) in which bodybuilders engaged to finance their training. Men whose embodied masculinity reflects cultural ideals of heterosexual, hegemonic male dominance relied on their usefulness as sex performers to homosexual men in order to fund their pursuit of said embodiment. Essentially, attaining the iconic and excessive hyper-masculinity of bodybuilders – itself an obviously deliberate pursuit of typically masculine physical power – required some men to perform sexual services for others and thereby embody a relatively disempowered (sexually subservient) form of masculinity. The 'irony' therefore was that they had to perform a low-status, even illegitimate expression of gender (erotic, 'gay') in order to be able to pursue their performance of the culturally favoured one (powerful, masculine), which deftly illustrates the flexible, inessential, multiple and performative nature of gender(s).

Other researchers who have highlighted the contradictions and shortcomings of the association between men, (hegemonic) masculinity and heterosexuality in sport include Pronger (1990; 2000), Anderson (2002), and Wellard (2002). While these authors all identify gay athletes as potentially posing a challenge to the oppressive institutions of heterosexuality found in (some) mainstream male sports clubs, Wellard mournfully comments on how often, gay sports organisations have involved “(conformity) to the established norms, particularly those based on oppressive male heterosexual codes” (2002: 242). By becoming ‘normal’ sports clubs, it is assumed that gay associations sacrifice their potential to provide a more radical alternative to the heteronormative sporting order (Price & Parker, 2003). But, in a sense, the ‘normality’ of such clubs (and their athletes) is itself a radical phenomenon, as it illustrates the disassociation between male, masculine, and heterosexual. To put it succinctly, gay men can also embody certain features of sporting masculinity, in much the same way and to the same extent as straight men. This calls the ‘naturalness’ of all men’s gender/sexuality into question and demonstrates the constructed nature, and by extension the fragility, of heterosexual, hegemonic masculinity (Anderson, 2002). Such a ‘queering’, in turn, destabilises the naturalistic ideology upon which (heterosexual) masculine domination relies. By embodying any kind of alternative, specifically ‘gay’ athletic masculinity, homosexual athletes would in effect be working to solidify their status as irreconcilably different to other men, and thereby undermine the value of sports participation in revealing the socially constructed nature of differences in sex, gender and sexuality.

Ultimately then, the phenomenon of gay male athletes gains sociological importance via the disruption which such athletes pose to the stability of the discursive links between men, masculinity and heterosexuality. Their example – whether it be through embodying masculine power and identifying as ‘straight’ yet engaging sporadically and pragmatically in homosexual acts (as in Klein, 1986) or through identifying as ‘gay’ yet also embodying ‘normal’ masculinity – illustrates that men’s gender and sexuality are open, fluid, and contestable; they are neither fixed in nature nor even necessarily linked at all.

### **3.1.2 Mixed-Sex Sports: Playing Together and Challenging Gender Myths**

Another way in which sports cultures can subversively disrupt the production of differentially empowered, sexed bodies is through the phenomenon of mixed-sex (or 'co-ed'<sup>1</sup>) sports. Integrating men and women in physical activity settings stands against much of the traditional conception of masculinity and femininity underpinning hierarchal sex discourse (Anderson, 2008a), as outlined in Chapter 2. In their book, *Playing with the Boys*, Eileen McDonagh and Laura Pappano (2008) discuss the possibility, and contemporary reality, of mixed-sex sports at great length, identifying "coercive sex segregation as an instrumental problem" (2008: 19) which must be confronted by feminists studying sport. Despite being a taken-for-granted feature of virtually all contemporary Western sports culture (Wachs, 2005), McDonagh and Pappano (2008) argue that segregating the sexes is ultimately a function of patriarchal logic, which contextualises the rest of the symbolic violence of sex inequality in sport through institutionalising the separation of the sexes. They claim that "hiding the women who can compete with men reinforces the false assumption that no women can meet the challenge" (2008: 20), effectively reifying essentialist dichotomies of sexual difference to the point at which all men are considered the physical superiors of all women (e.g. Messner, 1990a), even though they claim this is demonstrably untrue. McDonagh and Pappano go on to suggest that,

assumptions about female inferiority that serve as a rationale for coercively sex-segregated teams parallel the rationale for the Special Olympics (sic.), thereby reflecting the assumption that to be 'female' is to be 'disabled', while to be 'male' is to be 'abled'. (2008: 23)

Evidently, the underlying messages of default, 'coercive' sex segregation, reducible to the argument that all women are inevitably physically inferior to all men and therefore must be separated in sporting contexts, are so routinely accepted and

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'co-ed', although shorthand for 'co-educational', is commonly used in the research literature (particularly by North American authors) to refer to any mixed-sex activity, including sport. I make use of the convention here with reference to such works, yet it should be read as synonymous with 'mixed-sex', the phrase which I use elsewhere.

normalised that the practice of segregation in sport is not widely considered to be problematic. However, academic literature dealing with this issue suggests that sex integration can be a practicable alternative to 'coercive' sex segregation, and can indeed offer possibilities for generating alternative discourses about sex and gender. For instance, Anderson (2008a; 2009) has shown that men who train in sex-integrated sports teams, competing alongside and against women, tend to have greater levels of appreciation for female athleticism, and value their female teammates as athletic competitors. Researching mixed-sex cheerleading teams and exploring the feelings of male cheerleaders who had once played (American) football on sex-segregated teams led Anderson to find that "the men in cheerleading learn a new respect for women" (2008a: 273), as their exposure to, and their team's dependence upon, women's athletic talent transformed their understanding of sex difference. Anderson thereby claims that sex-integrated sport can radically change the way that men conceive of women. Through their experiences of cheerleading,

even once sexist and misogynistic men were able to witness the athleticism of women, befriend them in ways that they were previously unable to, and to learn of their sexual and gendered narratives – humanising them in the process. (2008a: 273)

Rather than the typically sexist, objectifying, and dismissive attitudes towards women common among male-only teams in specifically 'masculine' sports (e.g. Bryson, 1990; Messner, 1990a; Anderson, 2002), the men in Anderson's (2008a) study were exposed to embodied evidence of a counter-discourse which proved compelling enough for them to change a lifelong predisposition of viewing women as physically inferior, whose athletic abilities were unworthy of male respect. Following this transformation, these men were able to conceive of women as physically capable (and even in some cases, superior) athletes, and from this recognition they came to accept them in a more respectful way. This would suggest that awareness of women's physical capabilities can have consequences for the ways in which men regard women in a broader sense; that is, the radical lessons about female athleticism learned through sport can carry over and affect the relations between men and women more generally.

Other studies dealing explicitly with the transformative effect of integrating men and women in sport have produced similar, although not identical, findings. For instance, Wachs (2002; 2005), discussing mixed-sex softball teams, found that “the co-ed environment allows for direct challenges to ideologies of gender/sex difference and male physical superiority”, as players’ shared experiences ‘demystified’ gender and led them, and the recreational leagues within which they played, to “find gender far less indicative of ability than experience, size, and overall health” (2005: 544). Nevertheless, the experiences of training and competing together did not do away with all sexism and gender-based differentiation. Noting that categories of difference (such as male and female) tend to be reproduced even when they are being challenged, Wachs (2005) observed that in spite of men’s growing recognition of women’s abilities, different ways of interpreting success and failure tended to be assigned to male and female performers, such that the gendering of ability continued to structure men’s and women’s experiences. This was also a key finding in Henry and Comeaux’s (1999) investigation of sex-integrated soccer in the US, where ‘co-ed’ leagues established rules intended to aid in the equalisation of chances between men and women, although those rules actually served to reify women’s status as second-class athletes by rewarding their success more highly and limiting the number of men allowed on each team. In addition to these formal, institutionalised rules, informal on-field practices (such as men tending to dominate ball possession and often taking the most influential playing positions) helped to construct mixed-sex soccer as male-centred despite the ‘egalitarian’ ethos of the players and their leagues. Henry and Comeaux summarise the lack of equality within ‘co-ed’ soccer thus:

(when) confronted with the novelty of joint involvement, men and women share a perception of inequality as well as the need to remedy it, in line with their egalitarian value system. Yet, their attempt to enact egalitarianism falls short since the involvement of women remains marginal. (1999: 283)

Deliberate attempts by sporting bodies to establish more ‘liberating’ forms of female sport through integrating the sexes are prone to give rise to problems whenever mixed-sex sport is seen as different to ‘normal’ (segregated) sport and when

additional rules are implemented within it to aid integration. This is because such rules rest on the basic assumption that men and women are fundamentally different, and explicitly recognising such difference within the rules of the mixed-sex game helps to solidify the boundaries between the sexes, effectively limiting the 'empowerment' these rules are intended to promote. In conclusion to her findings regarding softball, Wachs explained that,

the reproduction of power at moments of challenge remains one of power's most insidious effects. Finding ways to get to the point where 'it's a person' (rather than a 'woman' or a 'man' producing athletic performances) requires finding new ways to address inequity that move beyond categories of analysis that reproduce even at moments of challenge. (2005: 545)

The argument is, therefore, that so long as men and women playing together is considered a special case, there is an open invitation to conceive of the phenomenon within the framework of (conservative) gender discourse. This problematises the labelling of any such activity as 'subversive', until the participants are able to conceive of male and female athletes as simply *athletes*, who no longer require differentiation based on their sex, no longer hold differently gendered status as players, and whose performances are thereby considered equally valid and competitively comparable. Although the literature suggests that much sex-integrated sport continues to be shaped by conservative gender discourse stressing enduring differences, some such breakthroughs have, however, been reported among athletes. As one example,

In 2006... Michaela Hutchison won the Alaska state wrestling title in the 103-pound division, beating all comers, male and female. When she beat wrestler Aaron Boss (in the final), he remarked simply, 'I don't look at it as a loss to a *girl*. I look at it as a loss to a *wrestler*.' (McDonagh & Pappano, 2008: 63, emphasis added)

Supplanting the labelling of his opponent as female with the shared identity of 'wrestler', this magnanimous runner-up signifies the discursive effects of integrated sport. As well as indicating acceptance and respect for female athletes (Anderson,

2008a), such a response to a female victor also neutralises the negative connotations of this specific loss within the framework of gender hierarchy and masculine identity. For while 'losing to a girl' has long been seen as a sign of men's emasculation within traditional Western gender discourse, posing a "powerful challenge to (male) identity" (Miller, 2010: 170), being fairly beaten by a fellow athlete is no shameful thing in and of itself. Therefore, it in fact stands in men's best interests to accept more equitable, de-gendered definitions of female performers, particularly when they become skilled enough to outdo their male counterparts (and, with particular bearing for my current study, especially within the typically 'masculine' realm of combat sports such as wrestling). The conditions under which such changes can take place are clearly uncertain, as the traditional discursive meanings of sex difference continue to surface and interfere with the equity of mixed-sex sports (Henry & Comeaux, 1999; Wachs, 2002; 2005), often relative to the particular context within which the performances of men and women are taking place. As an example, Miller (2010) found that parents of young male wrestlers were happy for their boys to practice with superior female partners, yet anxious that they should not face them in competitions, where 'losing to a girl' takes on much greater emotional significance for young boys. Nevertheless, the stakes are set within mixed-sex sports of all kinds to find ways in which to rationalise male and female performance on the same grounds, so that men and women might be valued equally as athletes and no longer subject to differential rules, or have their performances interpreted through different discursive meanings.

Thus, it remains evident that allowing space for athletically-able women to train and compete on a level footing with athletically-able men means that the fundamental line of physical division between the sexes can visibly be challenged (Anderson, 2008a). Integration within sports, rather than equal opportunities in clearly sex-demarcated fields, potentially offers so profound a challenge to hierarchal structures of gender that it is suggested that feminists must "consider presenting students, parents, teachers, coaches and the public an integrated image of females and males playing together, whenever and wherever possible" (McDonagh & Pappano, 2008: 151). What is at stake in such sex-integrated sports is the attainment of a



recognition among men and women that their teammates, training partners and competitive opponents are conceived of as equals in spite of their sex – a clearly subversive re-appropriation of sport. The extent to which this has so far been accomplished is questionable, as the literature clearly demonstrates that traditional gendered expectations of the sexes do not just ‘go away’ once men and women take to the field together, yet such possibilities do nevertheless remain.

In the final section of this literature review, I now turn to discussing the phenomenon of women’s participation in combat sport. Widely recognised as being among the most ‘masculine’ of all sports (Hargreaves, 1997; Mennesson, 2000), women’s practice in this arena is considered to be a particularly fruitful area of enquiry for any social scientist interested in the subversion of gender through sport.

### **3.2 Women’s Combat Sports: Embodied Challenges to Patriarchy**

*The ‘fighting spirit’ women achieve in self-defence courses complements, and sometimes pushes the envelope of, other efforts central to feminism. (McCaughey, 1997: xi)*

In recent years, an emergent body of literature has begun to address the phenomenon of women’s participation in martial arts, self defence training, and related combat sports. Notable examples include Sharon Guthrie’s (1995) study of a feminist martial arts dojo; Martha McCaughey’s (1997; 1998) review of both unarmed and armed self-defence courses for women; Hargreaves’ (1997) account of the development of women’s boxing in the UK; Halbert’s (1997) and Mennesson’s (2000) studies of female boxers; and De Welde’s (2003) and Hollander’s (2004) studies of the contemporary self-defence movement. While much of the literature about women’s participation in combat sports has focussed on all-female activities, some studies have also included mixed-sex training settings in their empirical base (e.g. Mennesson, 2000; Lafferty & McKay, 2004; Guérandel & Mennesson, 2007). In the following three sections, I will discuss three particular ways in which the work on

women's combat sports portrays the potential of such activities for the subversion of gender.

### **3.2.1 *Women's Fighting and the Embodiment of Masculinity: A Liberating Androgyny?***

As already discussed, women's entry into 'masculine' sports has raised issues concerning the performance and embodiment of masculine physicality and character by women. Particularly within the liberal feminist paradigm, this embodiment of masculinity by women is considered a progressive move because it represents a profound moment of de-differentiation between the sexes. Given the centrality of the powerful, combat-proficient body to ideological definitions of (hegemonic) masculinity (Messner, 1992), *women's* embodiment of size, strength, and violent potential is a highly significant step in undermining patriarchy because it represents the movement of women into one of masculinity's most iconic and enduring arenas (McCaughey, 1997). Thus, women's involvement in this field of masculinity *par excellence* (Mennesson, 2000) instigates an erosion of the boundaries between masculine and feminine genders. Furthermore, women's cultivation of physical size and strength, as well as the assertiveness and aggression required to be fighters, represents an effective democratisation of the character-building effects of 'masculine' sport, and thus also a source of male privilege and advantage in contemporary society. Women's participation in self-defence classes, for instance, can lead to enhanced feelings of agency, empowerment (De Welde, 2003; Hollander, 2004), dignity and entitlement (McCaughey, 1997) which particular 'feminine' types of socialisation otherwise preclude. De Welde (2003) described how women learning self-defence "laid bare how their socialisation to be feminine had contributed to vulnerability and danger in their lives" (2003: 256), and how their ability to make demands and assert themselves "had been compromised by a doctrine of silence" (2003: 266) implicit in 'normal' femininity. For such women, asserting themselves in a public space in any way was a challenge, but self-defence training proved highly effective in offering "gender narrative modifications" (2003:

256) which helped them to move beyond the limitations and restrictions of apparently 'normal' or 'natural' female passivity. McCaughey (1997: 10) similarly emphasises how "self-defence is a primary vehicle for women's achievement of a sense of authority and self-worth"; women learning to fight are not only enjoying access to a typically male institution, but are reaping certain psychological and social benefits from it as well. While being "amazed at what their bodies could do" (De Welde, 2003: 269), women learning to fight are engaging in radically different modes of subjectification – of 'becoming' a subject (Markula & Pringle, 2006) – and coming to know themselves and their bodies in radically new ways. In so doing, they participate in an active deconstruction of gender difference, revealing the socially-constructed nature of exclusive and so-called 'natural' codes of masculinity and femininity, and come to share in the benefits of the kind of physical education that is otherwise largely the province of men (Bryson, 1990).

But women's embodiment of such aspects of (hegemonic) masculinity has been met with differing interpretations by the women themselves. In the literature, such embodiment has been linked with both "deep feelings of pleasure and empowerment" (Hargreaves, 1997: 44) as well as hesitation and fear over being "unnaturally capable" (McCaughy, 1998: 297). These reactions reflect an internalisation of the same kinds of gender stigma faced by other female athletes discussed earlier. The feeling of performing violent techniques while sparring, which McCaughey describes as a "physical 'high' that makes women really need and enjoy the fights" (1998: 291), represents a potent moment of self-realisation whilst providing visceral, embodied evidence against assumptions that women are 'naturally' incapable of or not suited to physical combat. Yet the apparently "unnatural and distasteful (gender) transgression" (McCaughy, 1997: 57) involved in women's embodiment of aggression has also been perceived negatively by many women, who "focus on the perceived dichotomy of masculine versus feminine appearance and enhance (their) 'natural' feminine qualities" (Halbert, 1997: 28) to correct for their evident 'masculinity'. Women's pursuit of apparently masculine embodiment therefore involves both 'liberating', enjoyable experience but can also

involve a difficult series of negotiations as women work to maintain the boundary between 'male' and 'female', and their place on the 'female' side of it (Miller, 2010).

One such negotiation revolves around the physicality of female fighters. While most martial arts do not necessarily require participants to be particularly large or muscular, certain fighting styles, notably wrestling and related grappling disciplines, favour such attributes. Women's involvement in sports which require them to have large, strong bodies have always been controversial for this reason (Hargreaves, 1994). Writing of the 'social burden' of elite women wrestlers' muscles, Sisjord and Kristiansen (2009) detail the difficult trade-off experienced by women whose performance is directly dependent upon their embodiment of a typically 'masculine' appearance. For some female wrestlers, notably the more junior or inexperienced ones, this trade-off was not acceptable and they would 'hold back' when weight training in order to avoid overly 'masculinising' their appearance, remaining beneath what Dworkin (2001) labelled the 'glass ceiling' of women's fitness regimes. Recognising the importance of strength to wrestling success, the more senior (that is, experienced) female wrestlers were critical of the juniors' concerns. For these women, muscularity was in fact an integral and enjoyable part of their physical identity and they did not interpret this as necessarily making them 'mannish', even though they were aware that their appearance may contradict dominant social norms of femininity (Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2009).

Differences between groups of women whose commitment to their training, as well as the requirements of their discipline, affect their willingness to develop muscle mass or display overtly 'masculine' styles is reported elsewhere in the literature. For instance, Mennesson's (2000) paper on women's boxing styles linked early socialisation (the adolescent 'tomboy' identity) as well as social class to women's participation in more rough types of boxing ('tomboy'/working class) or more aesthetic styles ('feminine'/middle class). What remained constant for all women in Mennesson's study, however, was "the particularly rigid regime of sexual differentiation" (2000: 28) which, in spite of their differences from one another, ensured that all women *deliberately* remained different, and inferior, to the men

with whom they trained (echoing the tendency for men embodying 'alternative' masculinities to continue to stress their favourable differences from women (Beal, 1996)). More explicitly regarding the matter of ('natural') physical strength, Guérandel and Mennesson (2007) highlighted the distinctive styles of judo adopted by men and women training together. They found that women's judo practice tended to emphasise skill and technique, compensating for a supposed lack of strength, whereas the men relied more heavily on power. When one woman did make use of the more powerful masculine style, and consequently trained more with men than other women, she had to face not being seen by the others "as a real woman" (2007: 181) because she failed to adhere to the fundamental point of difference established in the training group between 'male' and 'female'. Extrapolating this point, several studies have discussed the pressure of compulsory heterosexuality in shaping women's participation in combat sports and martial arts (e.g. Halbert, 1997; Lafferty & McKay, 2004). Fearful of being stereotyped as 'butch' or lesbian (regardless of their actual sexual preferences), many women involved in combat sports have limited the extent to which they are willing to embody traits labelled as 'masculine', even when their progression in their art depends upon such things.

In many of the studies discussed, women cope with the tensions and contradictions of gender by differentiating themselves from 'traditional' femininity *as well as* maintaining a distinction between themselves and men (Mennesson, 2000). Thus, while "new self-narratives 'liberated' women from previously restrictive conditions" (De Welde, 2003: 263), they often come under the influence of an over-riding master narrative of gender difference. That is to say, for the majority of women participating in combat sports, remaining visibly 'woman' (or at least, 'not man') is an important enough factor to warrant specific strategies of self-management which would effectively mitigate against any kind of embodied 'androgyny'. Some authors have described this in positive terms: De Welde's portrayal of agency and self-authority as "(the) women made choices about what particular aspects of gender prescriptions they would shed" (2003: 266) and came to embody "the 'I'm in control now' narrative without losing sight of femininity" (2003: 271) is one example.

McCaughey, on the other hand, points out that “to become a self-defender is to become a gender transgression” (1997: 128), and women who learn to fight are often treated as deviants, as though their empowerment through ‘masculinity’ comes at the cost of their ‘femininity’ and their status as heterosexually desirable women in the eyes of men. This aspect of the self-defence phenomenon only occupies a small part of McCaughey’s analysis, but in other studies it is more central. Halbert (1997) described how professional female fighters feared that being too ‘un-feminine’ would limit their market potential, and thus reduce their opportunities for competition and profit, such that a balance needed to be struck between being a good boxer – ‘tough enough’ – and having a sexually appealing femininity – ‘woman enough’ – in a male-dominated professional sports setting. Mennesson, however, states that “having entered what is a masculine domain par excellence, female boxers are tolerated as long as they demonstrate that they do not have the same fighting ability as men” (2000: 28), leading some women to restrict their own development as fighters in order to not upset the expectations of the “dualistic gender regime” (2000: 22). Thus, such women directly reproduced the dominant status of hegemonic masculinity through willingly occupying a second-tier position as relatively incapable fighters. While it does not appear to be the uniform experience of all women in combat sports, that the fear of men’s (and other women’s) hostility and doubts over their sexuality should prevent women from pursuing the kind of embodiment which men freely enjoy, clearly demonstrates that women’s ability to participate in such sports does not guarantee equality between the sexes.

Aside from having their sexuality questioned, a further barrier facing women in mixed-sex martial arts settings is the inferior status that their male training partners (and/or coaches) imagine them to hold. Lafferty and McKay, researching women’s boxing in a mixed-sex gym, stated that “women were ‘always already’ positioned by both the larger gender regime... and the specific dynamics of (the gym) as only ever being capable of ‘fighting like a girl’” (2004: 273). This limited their access to time in the ring, to adequate (male) sparring partners, and the attention given to them by the coaches, as it was assumed by the men that their training could not progress beyond an amateurish level. In their paper on mixed-sex judo training, Guérandel

and Mennesson (2007) comment on how gendered expectations often take precedence over the normal discursive framework of judo for making sense of mixed-sex encounters. In their findings, male judokas (judo players) often either hold back and allow women to win fights against them, which effectively “cancels out the girls’ performance” (2007: 176) or, in cases where a female partner manages to legitimately throw them, they redouble their efforts, working harder to win in order to “remind (the women of) the hierarchy between the sexes” (2007: 175). Although the women in their study accepted this as normal, the substantiation of gender difference in sparring exercises begins with the men’s decision to see their female partner as a woman first and foremost, and to assign meaning to the exchange based on gender discourse rather than the normal martial arts framework. Such a practice is akin to the ‘special’ rules and playing expectations for other mixed-sex sports as discussed above (Henry & Comeaux, 1999; Wachs, 2005). Whenever a male judoka sparred a female partner in the ‘normal’ (that is, male-male) fashion, their explanatory narratives required special recourse to the discursive meanings of martial arts to retain a sense of honour and propriety (Guérandel & Mennesson, 2007). Despite other instances of acceptance and equality in training, women’s access to martial arts is certainly hampered whenever the men with whom they train refuse to see them as equals. In such instances, the dominant discursive constitution of women as the ‘other’, the referential subordinate against which masculinity is measured, seems to be left intact thanks to one informal but fundamental rule of gender difference: men and women are not the same, and men, in the last instance, are inevitably going to be better at fighting.

Since “the experiences of women in combat sports prove in fact to be contradictory” (Mennesson, 2000: 22), it is evident that women’s embodiment of masculinity poses a challenge to heterosexism and patriarchy which does not go unanswered. Nevertheless, insomuch as women are able to practice alongside men, and learn how to fight as men have long done, the significant changes in what is counted as female-appropriate physical appearance, demeanour and behaviour can still be considered ‘progressive’, if not outright ‘subversive’, from a liberal standpoint. Hargreaves writes of the “broadening of femininity” involved with the link between

feminine heterosexuality and certain 'masculine' characteristics such as rigorous physicality, muscularity and so on, which leads to "a radicalising of the link between the public female body and hegemonic heterosexuality" (1997: 41). In spite of the ongoing persistence of heterosexist and patriarchal structures, the growing acceptability of women's fighting means that more and more women are able to enjoy the physically invigorating and empowering experience of learning to fight, and at least to some extent, are thus able to "exorcise the bodily memories that a sexist culture has lodged in them" (McCaughey, 1998: 286).

### ***3.2.2 Women and the Redefinition of Combat: 'Physical Feminism' and Sexualisation***

While women's participation in martial arts, self-defence, and combat sports has been shown to lead to women's embodiment of what are commonly labelled as 'masculine' characteristics, it is also evident from the existing literature that female involvement in these activities has led to different kinds of transformations. That is, female presence in combat sports has also involved changes to the practices of said activities, and the meanings assigned to them. In some instances, this has involved a radical re-definition of both the female body (as being perfectly capable of fighting) and the act of fighting (as not exclusively the domain of men or a 'masculine' activity), such as has been prominent in the proliferation of martial arts for women as a form of self-defence/rape prevention (McCaughey, 1997; De Welde, 2003; Hollander, 2004). In other instances, women's combat has been portrayed in an overtly sexualised way, wherein the physical aggression of female fighters is given a sexual flavour, primarily in the form of erotic entertainment for heterosexual men (Hargreaves, 1997; Scambler & Jennings, 1998). In both instances, women's performance of combative/violent techniques is shown to have different meanings to that typically imagined to belong to men's fighting (competition, dominance, masculinity). For better or worse, these distinctive associations between women and combat involve departures from the masculine style and thus are worth discussion from a feminist perspective.



In the case of what could be called women's exclusive, radical practice of martial arts, the literature identifies a number of examples which involve women's active and purposeful resistance to the discursive construction of femininity as passive, weak, and submissive. All-female, female-led martial arts classes are identified as being "transformative not only personally but also socially" (Castelnuovo & Guthrie, 1998: 85), as women use martial arts as a 'technology of the self' (e.g. Markula, 2003) for the purpose of feminist resistance. Far from being the oppressive tool of patriarchy (as characterised in much radical feminist writing), physical violence becomes a vital component of an active, resistive, feminist strategy for individual and also social change, as an integral part of a re-made female subjectivity (McCaughey, 1997). Lenskyj (1986) discusses such female-led, female-focussed martial arts practices, which involve "the reclaiming of the term Amazon" (1986: 120) and have the potential to redefine the meanings of combat sport in terms more readily acceptable to 'anti-violence' feminists. In the same vein as the radical feminist preference for revolutionary emancipation as opposed to egalitarian reform, Lenskyj (1986) argued that women, if given the chance, could pose a challenge to the hyper-masculine brutality of mainstream combat sports by defining martial arts practice in more dignified and humane terms.

McCaughey's (1997) work continually highlights such a character of martial arts training in the context of women's specific involvement in self-defence classes, where the principle purpose of their training is a kind of self (re)discovery, and in which the capacity for performing violence is an integral component of female selfhood rather than something to be feared as a tool of masculine oppression. In this sense, the women's self-defence movement also exerts a transformative effect on feminism, by foregrounding the changeable nature of the physical body as a potent medium for feminist pedagogy. Speaking of her own experiences, McCaughey states that "nothing felt quite like knowing that my body is capable of lethal force. It felt as if I had been let in on a well-kept secret... Whatever its problems and contradictions, self-defence training transformed me" (1997: 86-7). Thus, the physicality of performing violence is construed as a useful educative tool for feminists. Similarly, Guthrie's (1995) study of the *Thousand Waves* dojo, an all-

female martial arts gym with an explicitly feminist curricular focus, gives a prime example of how women have appropriated the practice of physical combat towards specifically feminist ends. Castelnovo and Guthrie (1998) argue that feminist emancipation depends on the “the development of a physically empowered female self” (68) as well as upon the intellectual task of consciousness-raising, and cite the *Thousand Waves* dojo’s complementary curriculum of theory/group study and physical practice of martial arts as an example of “Amazonian feminism” (90). They state that the dojo acts as:

a site that not only effectively challenges the patriarchal status quo but also has the potential to deeply transform it... (We) believe that if a critical mass of females were exposed to this kind of environment and sustained practice, particularly at a young age, we would observe some profound changes in the way women experience their bodies and the world. (Castelnovo & Guthrie, 1998: 88)

The all-female space of the feminist dojo made for a less intimidating arena in which women could learn martial arts skills without “appearing inadequate among men and having to compete with them” (1998: 82), whilst also providing an abundance of female role models in positions of leadership and authority. The female ownership of martial arts exemplified by the female instructing staff, which the authors argue is rare in mixed-sex gyms and clubs, highlights the radically feminised nature of the activity. When feminist consciousness and martial arts training are combined, the meanings of performing violent techniques are changed (McCaughey, 1997; Castelnovo & Guthrie, 1998). In these instances, physical combat is stripped of its masculine connotations, and is either neutralised of any overtly gendered meaning or given an explicitly feminist definition. It is this redefinition of violence that leads McCaughey to describe self-defence as ‘physical feminism’, as an educative vehicle “which moves women to act to rescript bodily boundaries” (1997: 205). It enables women to challenge the definition of their bodies as ‘feminine’, ‘weak’, or simply ‘other’, and actively celebrate their potential for aggression and strength. Martial arts training can thus represent women’s appropriation of what is supposedly the most ‘masculine’ of activities, as physical combat is used to explicitly undermine the

'rape myths' and other patriarchal norms which support masculine hegemony. And the new gender discourse implicit in these adaptations of physical violence is what leads authors such as Hollander to conclude that it is "no wonder, then, that self-defence classes produce such profound changes in women's lives: they shift the foundations upon which those lives are built" (2004: 230).

However, another transformation in the form and content of women's combat sports has taken place in a more or less opposite direction, with women's involvement in modified forms of the same activities premised upon enhancing their heterosexual attractiveness (such as 'boxercise' aerobics), or showcasing it in glamorised or eroticised spectacles (such as in women's professional wrestling). Regarding the 'female-appropriate', modified versions of combat sports, it is clear that many fitness programs which are directed towards a mainstream female market offer emulations of the kinds of techniques and training methods used in 'real' martial arts training as a way for women to work out, lose weight, and tone their muscles in accordance with the norms of emphasised femininity (Hargreaves, 1997). Typically these fitness programmes are non-contact and do not involve any kind of strategic or mental engagement with an opponent. 'Boxercise' aerobics, for instance, promises to provide women access to a challenging and effective fitness regime whilst keeping them from "the worrying relationships between combat, aggression, pain and injury" (Hargreaves, 1997: 40), which carry connotations of masculinity. Hargreaves describes how one such brand of aerobics advertised itself to women by stating that "the only pain you inflict is on yourself" (1997: 40). This reinforced the general assumption that women should be prepared to alienate themselves from and even cause harm to their bodies in the pursuit of a desirable figure (Bordo, 2003), as well as the notion that women ought not to inflict pain on others, which is a stumbling block for many female beginners and non-elite participants in combat sports (McCaughey, 1997; Lafferty & McKay, 2004). Such appropriations of martial arts techniques are clearly intended to be marketed along traditionally heterosexist, female-appropriate lines, but the re-packaging of boxing and other activities in the terms of 'normal' feminine body projects still has the effect of helping to solidify new, more physically 'present' versions of female

(hetero)sexiness (Hargreaves, 1997; Heywood & Dworkin, 2003). As discussed above, as well as in Chapter 2, such revisions of femininity are controversial in debates over whether or not women's gender-differentiated body projects are 'progressive', or even subversive of repressive models of gender. While "in recent years the athletic and muscular image of femininity... has become highly desirable" (Hargreaves, 1997: 40), the disassociation of women and aggression implied by the de-masculinised, 'sanitized' versions of martial arts taught in aerobics classes means that in these instances gender remains relatively un-deconstructed. When women's practice of these techniques is intended principally to enhance their physical fitness as an element of their sexual desirability, and not to teach practical fighting ability or instil the enhanced sense of agency and power discussed by Guthrie (1995), McCaughey (1997), De Welde (2003), Hollander (2004) and others, then women's embodiment remains within the normal dictates of compulsory heterosexuality, and women's bodies therefore remain the objects of sexist discourse and male desire. As Mennesson puts it, "the relatively recent and partial 'feminization' of (combat) sport has created new modes of identity, while simultaneously perpetuating traditional patterns of sexual differentiation" (2000: 21).

To this end, the spectacle of eroticised female violence, in quasi-pornographic performances, stands as more or less the antithesis of the self-defence movement. Discussing the 'seedy side' of women's professional combat sports, Hargreaves described how some aspiring female fighters found themselves taking part in "sadistic spectacles for crowds of jeering men and women. They (were) peepshow fighters, kick-boxers and wrestlers, often topless, shrieking, kicking, biting and yanking each other round the ring by the hair" (1997: 46). This kind of carnivalesque, fetishised performance exists 'on the periphery of the sex industry', as Scambler and Jennings (1998) put it, and typically associates the hyper-masculine instruments of domination (the violence associated with combat sport) with the "images which exaggerate the insignia of female sexuality" to produce "a provocative illusion" (Hargreaves, 1997: 47) of women's status as the sexual playthings of men. Scambler and Jennings (1998) suggest that women's professional wrestling, in both dramatised and 'real' forms, occupies a niche of the pornography industry as female fighters are

cast as 'feisty', domineering, and sexually voracious in both subtly and overtly eroticised contests. As these "women's sexual deviance is... appropriated for male enjoyment" (Hargreaves, 1997: 17), it is difficult to sustain the argument that their practice of combat sports represents a direct challenge to male hegemony in spite of whatever strength or skill these women personally embody. Most women's acceptance within the male-dominated world of these kinds of commercialised, professional combat sports depends at least in part upon their heterosexual glamour and the portrayal of a specific style of fetishised sexuality (Halbert, 1997; Scambler & Jennings, 1998), which clearly limits the degree to which their physical abilities as fighters can challenge the norms of patriarchy. As a principally sexual activity, eroticised wrestling contests can actually be considered to diffuse the radical potential of women's combat by re-signifying the combative female as a pornographic sex object – precisely the status which the self-defence discourse as described by the various authors above attempts to defy.

Nevertheless, in spite of the clear implications of reactionary heterosexism attached to such activities, Scambler and Jennings (1998) argue against any straightforward condemnation or simplistic stereotyping when discussing the meanings that female wrestlers assign to their participation. Despite the fact that the women involved "are essentially being 'used'" in the same manner as are strippers, porn models, or even prostitutes, "there is no question that they rarely feel used, or that they generally enjoy their work, or that they differ from most (but not all) prostitutes or sex workers in these respects" (1998: 428). Arguing that "we should presume (these women) to be active and reflexive agents on their own behalf" (1998: 429), the authors make the case that women who engage in erotic wrestling contests do so partly for pay, but also for enjoyment, and manage to derive similar feelings of agency and efficacy from their experiences of fighting as those described by the women who practice martial arts for self-defence. Thus, it would seem that even in activities which can be implicated in the project of masculine domination, women's practice of physical combat can still involve deconstructive, transgressive and subversive moments. Regardless of whether or not their performance is sexualised

or consumed in a sexual way, women who engage in this kind of combat are still able to recognise and enjoy their bodies' capabilities for performing physical violence.

The question of whether this is 'subversive' or not is fraught with complexity and contradiction, as it restates the status of women as sex objects (and thus, in the radical feminist parlance, 'dominated') whilst also showcasing their ability to fight, sometimes even to 'dominate' men (Scambler & Jennings, 1998). This contradiction essentially reduces to the same problem encountered in other aspects of women's participation in martial arts and combat sports. Whilst differentiating themselves from certain elements of femininity, female fighters have retained a self-identification as (heterosexually desirable) women through other aspects of traditional feminine identity. Women have seized hold of the empowerment offered by the 'masculine' practice of martial arts and self-defence whilst not abandoning their distinction through femininity. They have insisted on differentiating themselves from men in the 'normal' way, but refused to be cast as inferior 'others'. In theoretical paradigms which insist on dualistic frames of reference (masculine/feminine, superior/inferior, empowered/dominated), such contradictions prove to represent something of an impasse. But to postmodernists, and in particular queer theorists, these contradictions are themselves particularly instructive and can be imagined as potential sources of transformation.

### ***3.2.3 Women and the Performance of Femininity: What Martial Artists' 'Balancing Acts' Say About Gender***

While women's embodiment of 'masculinity' might be considered evidence of progressive reform by liberal feminists, and the appropriation/transformation of martial arts for the purposes of feminist education resonates with the radical agenda of redefining womanhood and challenging patriarchal culture, both forms of gender subversion appear to be limited by the heterosexist norms of traditional gender difference which persist in spite of them. Yet the insistence of ongoing gender differentiation, as it is reported in the literature, highlights the explicitly constructed

and consciously enacted nature of gender, as well as the fundamental importance of being clearly 'gendered' in actively maintaining the boundaries between male and female, and hetero- and homosexual. Such a reading of sex, gender and sexuality as something which is consciously chosen and enacted is clearly important to postmodern theories of sexual difference, as it denies a direct and causal link between the 'natural' body and men's and women's different behaviours and embodiment. As discussed above, if a structure of sex-gender-sexuality can be shown to exist through the conscious choices and actions of individuals, then naturalistic arguments about inevitable sex differences, such as those constitutive of 'rape culture' for instance, cannot be sustained. Therefore, any conscious and deliberate pursuit of gender, particularly with a view to reinforcing one's status as legitimately or 'naturally' male or female, hetero- or homosexual, can be used to showcase the arguments of the anti-essentialist position. Consequently, women's deliberate embodiment of femininity can be just as subversive in this sense as their embodiment of masculinity. Wherever gender is chosen and enacted towards some strategic end, the socially constructed and *performative* nature of sex differences can be seen to arise (Butler, 2008).

The literature on women's combat sports, and particularly those papers which discuss mixed-sex training settings, provides many examples of female martial artists' deliberate and selective performance of femininity as a strategy for maintaining (or proving) both femaleness and heterosexuality by presenting, as Caudwell (2006: 152) puts it, "a body that is read as woman". As women's bodies become invested with the power implicit in the ability to fight/self-defend, they inevitably take on a meaning relative to both the discursive construction of gender and of fighting (Guérandel & Mennesson, 2007). For some women, such as those interviewed by De Welde (2003), this involved a reinterpretation of femininity, as they rejected certain restrictive elements (being physically weak and sexually passive, for instance) whilst holding onto others. In this sense, the women's gender became a selective femininity, as they "made choices about what particular aspects of gender prescriptions they would shed" (2003: 266). While self-defence and fighting ability gave women a sense of agency and power as discussed above, the

ability to reinterpret and selectively embody gender itself also involves a profound sense of agency; a very postmodern ability to choose exactly who and what they would 'be' as women. De Welde argues that as such, "self-defence becomes about redefining femininity... (it) enables women to be agents of their own gendered existence, (re)defining themselves on their own terms" (2003: 273). And in the process of such a redefinition, the flexible and inessential nature of gender comes to the fore. Other women, who are more conscious of the stereotypical interpretation of their bodies and abilities as being 'butch' or lesbian – female-masculine-homosexual – have a yet more active and self-consciously performative engagement with gender, actively emphasising specifically gendered traits in order to avoid unwanted labels. As discussed previously, the professional fighters in Halbert's (1997) study deliberately temper their bodies' apparently deviant, masculine gender by emphasising certain aspects of feminine style and appearance, so that they would continue to appear as legitimately female and heterosexual. This 'identity management', as the author calls it, implies a direct negotiation and selective performance of femininity and masculinity to present a body invested with *both* masculine and feminine traits, to ensure their professional survival in a world with specific (and apparently contradictory) gender expectations. To these women, the presentation of femininity is a way to re-affirm both the categories of sex and sexuality as well as their places within them. This clearly echoes Butler's assertion that "sex, by definition, (has) been gender all along" (2008: 11).

Often in feminist theory, femininity is presented as being experienced by women as an external, cultural prescription – as, perhaps, compulsory heterosexuality – yet some (but not all) of the researchers whose works are reviewed here do not present female martial artists' engagement with traditional forms of feminine identity as something about which they feel obliged or resentful. Rather than experience it as something imposed from the outside, femininity (or at least, certain aspects of it) is considered personally meaningful, as well as useful and even important, to many women engaging in martial arts training. For instance, some women view femininity as a tool necessary for success in their personal or professional lives, such as one of the judokas interviewed by Guérandel and Mennesson who "started conforming to



feminine gender norms in order to catch a boy's eye" (2007: 181), or Scambler and Jennings' (1998) pro wrestlers, who used femininity as a form of lucrative career leverage. Others, when particularly conscious of the stereotypical image of the masculinised, lesbian female athlete, are simply proud to display their own identity through visible signs of femininity that confound the stereotype and the ignorance that gives rise to it. Aside from being an important constituent element to some women's identity, certain aspects of femininity have also been argued to bolster the subversive potential of women's martial arts training. De Welde, differing from McCaughey's (1998) argument that women's 'fighting spirit' is in direct contrast to femininity, states that "the 'fighting spirit' came, with a vengeance, from the source of femininity... It was precisely the qualifier of 'woman' that made the women-defenders unique from the mythical, masculine, savaged fighter" (2003: 271). By deliberately retaining a visible and self-confident position as 'woman', which in the context of contemporary culture involves embodying/displaying certain feminine traits, women who learn how to fight generate a more visible and disturbing rupture in the status quo. If their gender visibly denotes them as women (and heterosexual), then their practice of effective and powerful self-defence offers a clear resistance to the discursive construction of 'normal' femininity as the physical inferior to 'normal' masculinity.

As women's involvement in martial arts training has become more and more mainstream, opportunities for the 'unlearning' of gender have expanded (McCaughy, 1997). But, perhaps given the deep and entrenched nature of gender socialisation, or the degree to which the punitive regulation of sexual 'normality' pervades individuals' lives, it is apparent that for most of these women, and particularly those identifying as heterosexual, the feminine identity is not something which they wish to be rid of. What follows then, is an elaborate, strategic engagement with gender that has the potential to destabilise and "deconstruct the 'normal' symbolic boundaries between male and female" (Hargreaves, 1997: 33). Incorporating 'masculine' and 'feminine' behaviours, women who learn to fight also often learn to negotiate and redefine the meanings of gender and the gendered body. They become active and self-conscious agents of their own identity, and offer

evidence in support of the argument that gender is a performative strategy, generative of bodies and boundaries (Haraway, 1991a; Butler, 2008). Therefore, whilst martial arts training offers individual women a way to invest their bodies with power (Hargreaves, 1997), or to gain the sense of entitlement and agency associated with masculine forms of socialisation and embodiment (McCaughey, 1997), it also implicitly produces self-reflexive, postmodern subjects whose ability to design and re-work their bodies and their selves is extended as they enact the 'gender-bending' of martial arts and physical combat. Martial arts training, as a technology of the self, allows women to 'make' of themselves something which transgresses gender boundaries, and simultaneously works to redefine the meanings of the female body in contemporary society (McCaughey, 1998). When female fighters resist the normal 'legitimate' or 'deviant' categories (woman-feminine-heterosexual and woman-masculine-homosexual), and generate new and diverse ways of being and having a sex, gender and sexuality, they upset the established order and begin to subvert the normalising structure of gender expectations. But that they might do so within "the most 'masculine' of all sports" (Halbert, 1997: 7) – the "masculine domain par excellence" (Mennesson, 2000: 28) – amplifies the volume of their transgression, as the ultimate source of hierarchical difference between the sexes – the ability to fight and physically dominate – is used to deconstruct the system which it otherwise helps to perpetuate. The gendered 'balancing acts' of women learning martial arts thus throws the modern construction of gender difference into sharp relief.

In sum then, the subversive potential of women's martial arts training, as documented in the research literature, can be seen to lie in the following areas: women's embodiment of masculinity; women's acceptance within men's groups and their access to sites of 'masculine' socialisation; women's appropriation and re-interpretation of physical power, violence, and martial arts; and women's reflexive engagement with their own performance of gender. It has been argued that for each subversive/progressive moment, resistance is encountered as the traditional order of gender difference is re-asserted by and upon the women and men taking part in martial arts. Yet it is also claimed that these very moments of struggle in the

definition and contestation of gender have the potential to highlight the fabricated and performed nature of the entire structure of sexual difference.

However, it remains to be asked whether women and men practicing martial arts *together* experience these problematic instances as 'subversive', and if so, in what sense and to what ends are they considered as such? Theoretical pronouncements aside, how do men and women training together *actually experience* gender as a structuring phenomenon? How do they interpret the meanings of their own and others' bodies' fighting abilities with regard to this structuring? And do they recognise their interpretations, negotiations, and re-definitions as indicative of the constructed nature of sexual difference? The research literature makes it clear that women's training at martial arts and combat sports holds the potential to undermine patriarchal discourse, as does the practice of sex-integrated sport. Integrated martial arts training therefore holds the potential to become an important site in the contestation of gender in contemporary society. I intend for my present study to expand upon this claim by adding the question of whether or not what is assumed to be 'counter' resistance is in itself evidence of further gender subversion, a postmodern engagement with gender which involves the overt recognition of the constructed and changeable nature of sexual differences. When men and women are training together in an activity commonly imagined to be a strictly 'masculine' thing, such matters, in theory, should be foregrounded.

## 4

### ***Methodology***

Any piece of social scientific research based on empirical enquiry has to involve a methodology. Having a methodology is an inescapable part of doing research, owing to the fact that the process of research – of finding and interpreting information about the social world – necessitates the selection and application of some technique or other ('methods') which are considered, often for multiple reasons, to be of particular usefulness in the discovery of truth(s). These various considerations stem from philosophical, theoretical and ethical understandings of the practice and purpose of the research process, such that the selection of methods requires the researcher to have a contextually relevant rationale concerning their applicability and purpose ('methodology'). This methodology – the theory of methods – needs to be articulated to give one's research findings their fullest meaning, by connecting the dots, as it were, between one's philosophical understanding of truth and reality (ontology), philosophy of knowledge (epistemology), more specific theoretical and political leanings (e.g. postmodern feminism), the substantive field of enquiry (e.g. mixed-sex martial arts), and the chosen techniques of data collection and analysis (methods). Essentially, the methodology is the bridge between theory and research practice, the point at which one merges into the other. It is a fundamental moment in the research process which enables the researcher to generate data congruent with their theoretical hypotheses/inclinations and/or political aims, and thereby be confident that their research findings are reliable as evidence supporting the arguments they later make.

This chapter provides an outline for the epistemological basis of my research project, and explains the methodological reasoning behind the chosen method of data collection which is employed in the study, before describing the actual research

which I carried out. The following sections should be read as one possible 'recipe' for generating knowledge about the experiences of men and women training at martial arts together.

#### **4.1 *Epistemological Problems: Postmodernism, Subjects, Objects, Ethics, and the Politics of Knowledge***

*The politics of knowing and being known take on an urgency in our discourse about what it means to do social inquiry. (Lather, 1991: 153)*

In conducting this research project, I adopted an epistemological position informed by postmodernism and cultural studies, bringing together the two traditions to address the philosophical and empirical problems posed by queer-feminist readings of mixed-sex martial arts. I brought these two schools together partly to reflect my own philosophical understanding of the world, and also as a way of compensating for the shortcomings of either perspective, as explored throughout this chapter. As a way in to discussing the theories' respective contributions to my methodology, the epistemological underpinnings of postmodern theory require expanding, and my own particular reading of them within the cultural studies paradigm needs clarification. Epistemologically speaking, there are certain initial problems which, although beginning with theory and most readily articulated in abstract terms, threaten to undermine the political integrity and applicability of the proposed research, necessitating theoretical and practical manoeuvres to avoid the paradoxical pitfalls associated with this paradigmatic marriage.

Such problems at the fundamental level of one's philosophy of knowledge may seem unsettling, but at the same time make the matter of theorising a more deeply engaging and productive experience. Stuart Hall asserts that "the only theory worth having is that which you have to fight off" (1992: 280), alluding to the responsibility of the social researcher to personally engage with, and progressively struggle through, the 'theoretical legacies' within which they locate themselves, in order to come to a more complete and confident position – not as the user of set,

predetermined theories, but as a theorist involved in the ongoing production of theory. To revel in this struggle is to recognise that “difficulty educates” (Agger, 1991: 114). However, the notion of theoretical struggle is central to the ways in which postmodern thinking is implemented and contested within (feminist) cultural studies, presenting more than simply an educative exercise for researchers intent on combining the two. The principle concern at the outset of such an attempt is to ask how one can reconcile the unruly, ironic, immaterial and anti-enlightenment tendencies of postmodernism with the political desire implicit in cultural studies and feminist research to effect positive social change in tangible ways. That is, how do social scientists use the radical insights, theoretical nuances, and methodological and representational tricks of postmodernism in their research without fully endorsing the nihilistic, over-aesthetic, hyper-intellectual excesses for which it has been criticised (e.g. Lather, 1991; Greenwood & Levin, 2008)? To capture the usefulness and relevance of postmodern thought in the feminist cultural studies project, one must fight against its politically crippling corollaries and somehow negotiate a theoretically sound path through the woods, as it were. As a way in to this theoretical struggle, it is necessary to outline said problems at the particular juncture of cultural studies, feminism, postmodernism, and the engaged sociologist’s task of generating politically useful knowledge.

#### ***4.1.1 Postmodernism: Epistemological Pluralism***

Before defining the problems of using postmodern theory, it is wise to offer up at least a cursory definition of postmodernism itself. This, however, is a problem in its own right, as postmodern theories and movements more or less definitively defy straightforward categorisation and unambiguous definition (Rail, 1998). Stemming from, in Lyotard’s famous phrase, an “incredulity toward metanarratives” (1984: 27), the postmodern movement in social science as elsewhere is rife with rule-breaking, genre-straddling, and boundary-crossing (Pronger, 1998), and so insulates itself against reduction to any simple, catch-all statement with, perhaps ironically, the exception of this notion of irreducibility. The elusive nature of postmodernism

invites differing attempts to outline the characteristics of the postmodern, but the theories and social scientific works thought of as postmodern are not so diffuse as to render the project unknowable or inarticulable. To this end, it is perhaps best to view postmodern theory in the plural and rather than try to introduce a number of explanatory concepts constituting these theories' 'big picture' or metanarrative (of which they purport to have none), it is conceptually more accurate to view postmodernist theories at a more elemental level, united around a general epistemological position more than anything else. Building on the brief account of postmodernism offered in Chapter 2, the following paragraphs will attempt to bring together some strands of postmodern epistemology to provide an outline of what these theories can look like.

Firstly, addressing the term 'postmodern' requires explicit reference to its opposite, the 'modern'. In the spirit of Jacques Derrida's assertion that language operates in hierarchical binaries (Agger, 2002), postmodernism only makes sense when considered as the antithesis to the conception of modernism that it necessarily calls into being and criticises (e.g. Bauman, 1988). This opposition is organised as an epistemological break from the Enlightenment ideals enshrined within what have become known as modernist approaches to science and knowledge; essentially, the notion that mankind is on a teleological path leading to an enlightened 'completion', accomplished through objective, apolitical, value-free reasoning. Science, in the modernist paradigm, has thus replaced the pre-modern religious institutions as the authoritative voice on what counts as 'true'. Scientific facts have become the best, the most pure, the most trustworthy kind of knowledge. In this way, science becomes a new kind of priesthood, a body whose technical complexity and specialised 'language games' (Lyotard, 1984) sets its knowledge above that of the lay population, for whom its mechanisms of knowledge production remain out of reach, and thus above and beyond the right to criticise. To postmodernists, the mystification of its complex methodologies protects the scientific establishment from free-for-all ownership (Agger, 2002), and ensures that only those qualified to understand it – scientists – may participate in its generation of truth and its institutional (re)production or modification. Unlike a priesthood, science is not seen

as unaccountable to all but God, yet its accountability remains largely hidden from the public domain, being in a sense concealed by the complexity of its methods and impenetrability of its language. The production of scientific truth is thereby accountable to none but itself (Pronger, 1998), safe behind the veneer of objectivity and the positivist assumption of 'one knowable truth' which lends objective reason its privileged philosophical status as the only legitimately 'scientific' approach. Thus, modernist science is seen to insist on its own authority by claiming to possess the only reliable tools for understanding and solving the problems faced by humanity, whilst promising that its works will bring about progression and betterment for all. Supported by the epistemological doctrine of positivism, the authoritative status of objective science is secure because 'the truth', in this philosophical paradigm, is knowable in definite terms and, therefore, scientists' truth claims are unproblematic so long as their methodologies are considered sound (by other scientists). Yet the postmodern position is highly critical of the assumptions of this particular modernist vision of objective science and absolute, positivist truth, and of the role of the scientist as an apolitical, disinterested, 'modern priest'. The trustworthiness of scientists, the attainability of objectivity, the value of foundational, universal, metanarrative accounts, and the validity of the teleological vision of human progression enshrined within the Enlightenment's rendition of science are all criticised by postmodernists.

Firstly, postmodernists argue that scientists, no matter their commitment to producing objective accounts of reality, cannot be reduced to this commitment alone. That is, scientists are more than just scientists, they are rounded human beings with characteristics and concerns that stretch beyond the production of value-free truth and deny the possibility of total, objective perception. They are human beings who are bound up in particular socio-political positions on various levels – professionally, politically, personally, and so on – and therefore cannot be considered to have attained the mythical Archimedean standpoint, a 'God's-eye-view' from which to analyse the human condition. In the postmodern reckoning, no amount of methodological rigour can be trusted to erase the personhood of scientists, whose 'subject position', or what Bourdieu (1990) would call *habitus*,



remains as an unacknowledged filter for their perceptions, understanding, and representations of reality. Leading on from this point, and thanks to the insights of such philosophers as Foucault (1977a), the postmodern critique of modernist science draws attention to both the fallibility of human scientists, and the danger of entrusting them with the authority to speak 'the truth'. Foucault's important recognition of the interrelation between knowledge and power, drawn from his work on the governmental rationalisation and institutionalisation of sexuality, criminality and madness, puts the lie to the notion that the objectivity of scientists exists as an apolitical, power-free type of knowledge. He states that:

Power produces knowledge... power and knowledge directly imply one another... there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations. (Foucault, 1977a: 27)

Such reasoning highlights how claims of objectivity ('true', pure knowledge) are suspect in a context where such knowledge has great currency in the power games inherent in the modernist dream of universal, governmental domination (Foucault, 2008). Following this, postmodern scholars attempt to reveal how the discursive construction and presentation of 'the truth' has consequences for social power relations; that is, how scientists' privileged status as truth-tellers affects the kinds of things people think they know about reality and their own lives, and how this knowledge affects people's power chances through the material and symbolic transformations it leads them to. Seen through this light, the unacknowledged perceptive and representational biases of scientists become more than an unavoidable methodological flaw, but actually function politically by concealing these biases within a particular vision packaged as 'objective'. In this way, the worldviews of scientists become normalised as 'the truth', as do their correlative pronouncements (Foucault, 2008).

Of these pronouncements, the idea of universal truth is considered to be an undercurrent to most, if not all, modernist theorising, the metanarratives to which Lyotard (1984), among others, feels incredulity. To postmodernists, the problem

with the use of the metanarrative, much like the problem with the authoritative status of scientists, is that it reduces the scope for competing perceptions and definitions of things by subordinating other explanations. In such a paradigm, centrally definitive concepts, like the genetic foundations of 'human nature', the good of 'the nation', the history of 'class struggle', the rule of 'patriarchy', and so on, have been used to causally explain or justify all number of observed phenomena, to the exclusion of marginalised views. Postmodern accounts are therefore distrustful of metanarratives, not simply for reasons of intellectual pluralism but for the potential that mono-vocal theorising holds to marginalise, ignore, or even outright silence the voices of groups who don't agree with or fit into the models around which metanarratives work. When social groups are thus silenced, their chance to be fairly represented within the scientific academy – imagined to be the sole arbiter of trustworthy truth – are severely reduced, and along with it, the chance to critically engage with and alter the material and symbolic conditions of their existence (Foucault, 1972).

Postmodern theories contend that the exclusionary practices of modern, positivist science thereby place limits both on the explanation of reality (by judging competing interpretations against its own standards), and on the type of people who get to explain it (by claiming that only objective/positivist scientists, whose professional status necessitates an interest in defending the currency value of objectivity, can be trusted to tell 'the truth'). The postmodern position derives from a critical reaction against these trends and the configurations of power that they imply. It is perhaps this fundamental characteristic, the inward orientation of the critical gaze, which furthest separates the various postmodernisms out from other theoretical and methodological approaches in the social sciences and humanities. Rather than only looking outwards at an objectifiable society which it must rationally and methodically attempt to understand, postmodern theorising looks back on the academy itself, examining not just the society but the way in which the society is examined: "The concept of 'postmodernity' connotes the new self-awareness of the 'intellectuals'", writes Bauman (1988: 188). It acts as an academic critique of academics, a critical interpretation of the scientific establishment and a general

rejection of much of what the positivist paradigms of the modern human sciences have long stood for.

This critical interrogation of science has had effects which are more widely felt in the postmodern movement than simply constituting an interesting avenue of inquiry. The dismantling of scientific authority necessitates a profound re-imagining of the status and role of the science establishment and of scientists themselves (Bauman, 1988), particularly social scientists. The straightforward scientific process of discovering 'data' used as evidence to 'prove' theories or solve problems is made problematic itself, as is the belief in the objective, value-free, autonomous, apolitical nature of this enterprise. Reacting to the examination they find (or place) themselves under, postmodern social scientists have to answer charges regarding their own subjectivity, their flawed interpretations, and their own stakes in the contests of the politics of knowledge.

The epistemological consequences of this shifting status of science define the 'postmodern turn' in the social sciences. Some key characteristics of this turn are: the inability to sustain a belief in attaining objectivity through complicated, exclusive methodologies; the breakdown of autonomous, highly specialised, self-accountable scientific disciplines; the growing mistrust in universal metanarratives as valid and helpful theoretical constructs; and the substitution of all this by an outlook defined by a plurality of theories/methods (a disciplinary ambiguity), a self-aware and interpretive emphasis, and a polyvocal, localised and democratic approach to understanding and representing humanity. Within this breakaway paradigm, the pursuit of 'true' or 'pure' knowledge is no longer considered worthwhile, as "global, *totalitarian theories*" and "the attempt to think in terms of a totality (have) in fact proved a hindrance to research" (Foucault, 1972: 40, original emphasis). Instead, believing that "nothing is fundamental" (Foucault, 1999: 136), postmodernists avoid the exclusionary, reductionist lure of the metanarrative, examining multiple 'realities' as they are experienced and given meaning through the lives of the people they are studying. Foucault described this as "an *insurrection of subjugated knowledges*" (1972: 41, original emphasis), a movement away from 'official' and

universal renditions of reality by professional experts towards a localised focus on types of knowledge “located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity”. Rejecting top-down, authoritative science, postmodernists look to alternative, marginal voices, allowing disparate, conflicting accounts of reality to surface – not in order to use them as data to verify a pre-conceived, metanarrative theory, but as stand-alone accounts to reveal the possibilities contained in alternative definitions of reality, with correspondingly alternative consequences for configurations of power/knowledge.

This ontological and epistemological plurality, in which multiple realities exist and can best be known through the subjectivities of many different people, leaves postmodern social science at odds with what traditional science has long looked like. By moving the fundamental presuppositions, aims and methods of traditional disciplines to one side, postmodernism generates ways of engaging with social science which can have both highly productive but also frustrating consequences for sociologists. One such frustration, as alluded to earlier, coalesces around the difficulty that postmodern researchers have when attempting to use their critical work in any kind of moral/political project for social change. Despite emphasising the need to be wary of authoritative, metanarrative, exclusive truth claims, postmodern theorising can lead to a position where *any* kind of truth claim, and thus any kind of empirically-based recommendation for policy or social change, is treated in the same manner and viewed as suspect. While postmodernists may have the best intentions at heart when they emphasise the importance of plurality, the suspect nature of expert authority and the dangers of scientists’ political advocacy, by fully accepting this position they run the risk of neutering the potent capacity of their own critical social research to make an impact on the fault-ridden and unjust societies they are being critical of. Essentially, criticising scientific authority risks becoming a self-destructive exercise for social scientists who believe that the social sciences can offer something positive to humanity by engaging in contemporary moral debates from a position of rational, empirical and theoretical knowledge. Therefore, it is my contention that postmodern researchers are well-served by tempering their epistemological leanings with insights drawn from other perspectives, not to dilute the anti-reductionist, inclusive moral obligations of

postmodernism, but rather to make use of them in an overtly applied manner as they try to make a positive difference through their research. One particular theoretical school that is well-matched with postmodernism in this regard is cultural studies, with which it shares several key assumptions and through which it can be usefully applied to tackling problems beyond the immediate concern with criticising the political power of scientists' truth claims. However, when trying to fuse postmodernism with cultural studies, seen as another 'alternative' paradigm to positivist sociology which presents itself in a similar but by no means identical vein, the results are very much in line with Hall's (1992: 280) notion of productive, "wrestling-with-the-angels" theoretical struggle.

#### **4.1.2 Cultural Studies: Intellectuals as Political Advocates**

Another brief digression is now needed in order to clarify exactly what is meant by 'cultural studies'. In so doing, the chief problem with combining postmodern theory and the cultural studies approach surfaces – as do the benefits of such an arrangement – leading to a clarification of the epistemological and methodological compromises upon which I base my own theoretical position.

Cultural studies literature has, in recent decades, proliferated over multiple formats, from specialised journals (e.g. *Cultural Studies*; *International Journal of Cultural Studies*; *Cultural Studies* ↔ *Critical Methodologies*; etc) to large, collected anthologies (e.g. Grossberg, Nelson & Treichler, 1992; During, 1999; Ryan, 2008). This huge body of literature has shown that much like postmodern sociology, cultural studies is a theoretically and substantively diverse field, crossing genre boundaries, making use of multiple methodologies, and eluding any kind of straightforward, categorical/generic definition. Theoretical and methodological pluralism is an inherent part of the contemporary cultural studies discipline, which has diversified greatly from its origins in post-Marxist hegemony theory via the influence of feminism, poststructuralism and queer theory (Hall, 1992). Again though, this pluralism does not negate the possibility of 'knowing' cultural studies, as there

remain several centrally definitional tenets which constitute the boundaries of the discipline. According to Andrews (2002), knowing and abiding by these boundaries is of great importance to preserve the integrity of cultural studies as a politically applied sociological approach, despite a tendency for the “trite appropriation” (2002: 110) of the term to describe any piece of research on cultural practices otherwise unconnected with the theory and politics of the broader field to which it refers. For the purposes of this chapter, the exploration of cultural studies as a discipline in itself will necessarily focus on the explicit connections cultural studies makes between the engagement in cultural practices and the operations of power, and the concurrent commitment it harbours to expose the insidious presence of such power relations with a view to challenging the inequities they often involve.

Much like the connection between knowledge and power central to postmodern theorising, cultural studies scholars consider cultural practices to be born out of, and suffused with, power relations in some form or another (Bennett, 1992; Hargreaves and McDonald, 2000; Gibson, 2007). In cultural studies, this presupposition initially drew heavily on the theoretical legacy of Antonio Gramsci, whose work on the subtle character of power relations in Western (capitalist) societies inspired much neo-Marxist theorising and was central to the development of cultural studies as a neo-/post-Marxist discipline (Hall, 1992). Hegemony theory, as Gramsci’s ideas became known, posits that dominant social groups attain their power through unstable, ever-contested struggles over the ideological content of everyday life. While never fully guaranteed, this dominance affords powerful interests a degree of control over others, securing subordinate people’s consent to be dominated rather than physically coercing them as in feudal or totalitarian states. Hegemony theory can be used to interpret cultural practices as sites where the ideological conditions necessary for this type of social domination are reproduced. In fact, this idea underpins many theses on culture, from the neo-Marxist critical theory of the Frankfurt School (e.g. Horkheimer & Adorno, 1973) to David Andrews’ nascent Physical Cultural Studies program (Andrews, 2008). Importantly for my present study, the concept of hegemony has also been productively implemented by feminist theorists (e.g. Connell, 1987) to explain the stratifying effects of gendered spheres of

cultural experience and socialisation, particularly through the concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell, 1987; 1995) as discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. The prominent voice of (particularly radical) feminism within cultural studies, which from the 1970s onwards has practically re-defined the field (Hall, 2008), has coalesced around this notion of culture/power, by focussing critical attention on the political ramifications of personal experiences of, and transformations within, cultural forms and their ideologically-invested practices within a stratified society.

This position is hardly at odds with the postmodern tendency to see power relations hiding everywhere and in everything, as an undercurrent to all forms of knowledge and practice. Neither is the emphasis in cultural studies on contextual, historically-conjunctural research (Andrews, 2002; Hall 2008) so dissimilar to the postmodern refusal of the metanarrative as a reductive, totalising account; both are set up in opposition to positivist, universal, one-truth rationality and the search for definite, single causalities. At this particular juncture, the two paradigms are in agreement and often appear quite complementary to one another. The point of divergence, however, emerges around the consideration of what to do 'after theory'; that is, having identified the subtle presence of power relations structuring cultural practices and the language/knowledge games inherent in them, what next? For cultural studies, born out of the post-Orthodox Marxist Left, and having inherited the feminist vision of a political necessity underscoring all intellectual practice (Gibson, 2007), the moral imperative of studying relations of power, repression and domination is clear: use our knowledge to make a difference; advance the cause of the oppressed; fight inequality and open people's eyes to more progressive, alternative ways of knowing and doing culture. The "political urgency" (McRobbie, 1992: 720) of cultural studies, whether feminist, Marxist, or otherwise, defines the field's direction insomuch as cultural studies scholars refuse to become proponents of unapplied, politically neutral research (Andrews, 2002); to be little more than commentators whose voices don't count for much in the cultural struggles they analyse.

Fundamentally, cultural studies aims to make a difference in society through “communicating with and helping to empower subordinate social groups and movements” (McRobbie, 1992: 721). Bringing intellectual criticism into the public domain is a core concern, and the application of academic work to the formation of policy is, for many within cultural studies, of pressing importance (e.g. Bennett, 1992). This is particularly so for feminist cultural studies, the principle focus of which has long been the application of theoretical analysis to intervening in the social milieu comprising gender domination, through theoretically and empirically-informed advocacy of what are deemed to be progressive ideas and practices. The political importance of advocacy is underlined by the notion that not to advocate alternatives is an act of implicit support for existing systems; to refrain from politics is to *do* politics by idly or subtly casting one’s lot in with the beneficiaries of the status quo. As such, sideline commentary is not tolerated as cultural studies; statements must be made, colours pinned to masts, and the emancipatory, liberal/democratic project (be it feminist or otherwise) somehow advanced. With this focus on representing the interests of subordinate social groups and movements (McRobbie, 1992), cultural studies researchers must take a moral stance in their work as the representatives of marginalised people whose cause they highlight.

Much cultural studies work has thus focussed on exploring issues around race, gender, sexuality, illness, and class, with a view to targeting the injustices perpetuated on people whose positions within these categories are accorded unfavourable social status. Cultural studies scholars aim to speak on behalf of such people, giving them a fair presence within academic discourse and calling into question the cultural systems and policies which produce or perpetuate their subordination. The role assumed by the researcher is therefore one of representative and advocate, one who stands up and speaks for the ‘outsiders’, whose own voices are too often drowned out by the noise of (mis)representation in hegemonic cultural relations. Scholars take a stance against these representations, offering alternative readings of the condition, the cause, or the character of diverse social groups – readings which aim to enhance their status (or at least try to dispel mythological misrepresentations of them) and empower individuals otherwise



defined in limiting, disempowering ways. This type of research is considered 'progressive', as it facilitates a more even spread of discursive prestige across diverse societies and undoes the symbolic violence of cultural misrepresentation, working towards increasing democratisation of contemporary, cosmopolitan society. Essentially, the cultural studies researcher adopting a moral position in favour of oppressed social groups aims to systematically expose the hegemonic culture's 'false' representations of them, and replace these with representations gleaned from within said groups. In so doing, marginalised people are being given a voice with which to proclaim and define themselves and their way of life.

To take this kind of moral/political stance within one's research is not unique to cultural studies, much less is it foreign to postmodernism. However, the main point of divergence and disagreement between the two condenses around this notion of taking sides and making statements, with their implicit assumptions of certainty or 'truth', and the authority they invest in those making them as they then assume the moral and intellectual power to qualify to tell others what is 'right'. In postmodern reckonings, such an eagerness to jump from theory to politics threatens to undermine the moral and intellectual credibility of the political stance being taken, as such politicised research risks simply reflecting the pre-theoretical biases of the researcher – or worse – setting the researcher up as a demagogical purveyor of 'better' knowledge used to supplant existing systems in a kind of ideological power struggle. This leaves the over-arching system of power/knowledge intact, continuing the pattern of social relations achieved under the former regime having served only to install a new master.

This postmodern critique is severely damaging to (feminist) cultural studies, if extrapolated to its apparently logical conclusion of a kind of post-truth nihilism, where nothing can be believed in and no moral high ground can be taken. It seems to annihilate the possibility of seeking positive social change, as such things are, strictly speaking, totally abstract and relative; a matter of innumerable subjective reckonings that are extremely difficult to represent fairly within any kind of advocacy, save that kind which speaks out against mono-vocal, metanarrative

research. This version of postmodernism “is not only incompatible with but would undermine the very possibility of feminism as the theoretical articulation of the emancipatory aspirations of women” (Benhabib, 2008: 161), by challenging the definitions of both emancipation (whose idea of freedom does this represent?) and women (who counts as a woman and qualifies for this emancipation?). However close to the mark this critique comes, it nevertheless renders impotent the laudable desire to make a positive difference in the world. It is an impasse through which researchers risk falling by default into cynical conservatism. As such, the heavily interpretivist postmodern position is just as easily criticised as a dangerous force threatening the reformative value of social science, as it becomes “the ultimate form of self-justifying inaction” (Greenwood & Levin, 2008: 70), an “invitation to intellectual posturing without any sense of social or moral responsibility” (2008: 72). The epistemological paradox of postmodern feminism, then, necessitates finding a way to reconcile the moral imperative found within feminist cultural studies research with the moral imperative of the postmodern, pluralised epistemology. That is, if we are to target repressive, marginalising structures of power/knowledge, we should do so without imposing one of our own. To challenge ‘patriarchy’ in the postmodern context, an altogether different model of knowledge, power and social change is required. It is in such a model, attempting to cover all bases, that the value of combining the two positions is revealed.

#### ***4.1.3 Reconciling Theory and Practice: Methodological and Authorial Compromise***

The following passages serve as my attempt to find a point of reconciliation between feminist cultural studies and postmodernism, and thereby establish my own position in this research. First of all, I clarify and define my theoretical assumptions about the ‘reality’ of sex and outline the impact of theory on my methods; and secondly I define my own assumed status as the author of this work within a simultaneously postmodern and politicised paradigm.

Firstly, my use of postmodern theory is ultimately limited to employing the 'queer' conceptions of the performative nature of sex, gender and sexuality outlined in Chapter 2, whilst sharing in the commitment of postmodernists to value the voices of their research participants and avoid reductionism and metanarrative writing. My theoretical assumptions about sex are thus based upon the technical language and conceptual framework developed by postmodern feminists (e.g. Bordo, Butler, Grosz, Haraway, etc.). I have used these ideas to help make sense of the data I gathered through my research, interpreting my findings as evidence of performances which can either challenge or endorse dominant discursive rules about sex difference. Further, my identification with feminism means that my project is directed towards the generation of types of knowledge which provide critical insight into the problems of hierarchal sexual differentiation, ultimately leading towards the generation of some recommendations for martial arts coaches and practitioners regarding the promotion of greater sex equality in their training environments (see Chapter 8).

This theoretical/political position, with its inclination towards recommendations for practice, ultimately necessitated operationalising conceptions of 'sex' as somehow existing in a 'real' and binary sense (males and females), despite the tendency among postmodern feminists to call such categorisations, and the essentialism they typically imply, into question (Butler, 1990). Asserting that binary, hierarchal constructions of sex are important points of reference in making sense of integrated martial arts practice requires a research approach which admits that sexual reality is typically constructed – even though not naturally fixed – around these binaries. Thus, despite recognising in principle that contemporary realities of sex are not as simple as just 'males and females', my research methodology is built upon the assumption that sex is nevertheless constructed and predominantly lived out in such a way. As such, I assume that sex is made 'real' via the performance of a discourse which stresses that there are only two sexes, that they are fundamentally different in a number of ways, and that any given person is definitively either one or the other.

Thus, while I recognise and accept the postmodern assumption that definitively, *naturally fixed* sexual categories are problematic, I also accept that this does not preclude the existence and significance of binary models of sex. While they are not ultimately fixed in nature, I argue that these categories *do* exist in a sociological sense and are therefore considered highly important for research questions such as mine. In this way, my approach to interviewing, as outlined below, was premised upon the assumption that my participants' subjective positions would be built on, or at least constructed with some kind of relation to, binary models of sexual difference. As such, I also assumed that their accounts of mixed-sex training would thus likely be organised around, and possibly in opposition to, such a traditional understanding of sex difference. My interview technique (see Appendix 2) thus involved discussing 'sex' as a definite categorisation, as I asked about the differences between 'men' and 'women', experiences with the 'same sex' or the 'opposite sex', etc. I did this as a way of exploring my participants' beliefs and understandings of such things, rather than owing to any essentialist presuppositions of my own. As Sayer describes, "it is sometimes necessary to employ essentialist descriptions for strategic purposes" (1997: 454), and in order to understand how mixed-sex martial arts might provide opportunities for people to actively and/or discursively challenge essentialist binaries of sex, it was necessary for me to conduct research from a position that made their existence explicit. Without such tactics, exploring the impact of mixed-sex training on participants' discursive constructions of sex, and particularly their endorsement of or challenge to essentialist, hierarchal binaries, would have been problematic.

The second methodological point to make is more closely related to my own presence in the work, as researcher and author. In order to step in line with both the postmodern commitment to polyvocality *and* feminist visions of politicised research, I mean to explicitly underline the non-authoritative stance that I take regarding my own involvement with the research, whilst building a case for mixed-sex martial arts as being instructive regarding the subversion of gender. This involves foregrounding the voices of those whom I have taken as the object of study, whilst maximising the potential for the reader to make their own interpretations of

these as well as listening to mine. Essentially, I mean to write not as an objective, professional expert reporting on the 'real truth' of the matter, but as an openly biased, albeit skilled amateur with something interesting to say about a controversial and undecided topic. I mean to generate a kind of knowledge which serves a political end via the exposure of several, specifically located perspectives.

At this point it is worth returning to the argument that the identity of social science researchers cannot be reduced to simple renditions such as that of knowledgeable, rational experts or moral/intellectual ideologues whose sympathy with the marginalised 'other' has compelled them to political action. Such an approach fails to counter the reified status of science as sole truth, and thus possesses little or no "dialogic validity"<sup>2</sup> (Saukko, 2008: 464) by treating the voices of the research participants as less than valid in their own right and only worth hearing through the interpretive filters of the researcher's voice. Consequently, despite stating an intention to be involved in the struggle for democratic equality against certain repressive social discourses and ideological constraints, researchers who implicitly position themselves as 'above' the work of such social patterning risk lending "emotional or existential support" (Saukko, 2008: 466) to the essentially restricting view that knowledge is only worth knowing if it comes 'from above'. That is to say that the personal accounts of research subjects, and the interpretive faculties of research readers, are being subordinated to the authoritative voice of the researcher, from whom 'truth' emanates and through whom science is done.

Instead, what is needed is a de-centring of the researcher, a removal of that authorial status as a validated, certified expert, and a dismantling of the aura of reverence such a persona is intended to generate. The researcher's narrative should not be given any privileged status, nor elevated higher than the narratives it claims to represent and interpret, because doing so simply perpetuates the subordinated, object status of the 'other' under examination, relative to the agentic and enlightening power assumed by the role of researcher, the subjective voice through

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<sup>2</sup> Dialogic validity hinges on "how well the researcher fulfils the ethical imperative to be true to, and to respect, other people's lived worlds and realities" (Saukko, 2003: 20)

which the researched are objectified and represented (Lather, 1991). In other words, the researcher must also submit to becoming an object, to being situated and deconstructed much the same as the researched, if their narratives are to be considered subversive of the top-down, colonising, objectifying forms of modernist science and attendant schemes of discursive domination which they are intent on criticising. This is a first and vital step in the sharing of discursive authority and in the generation of democratic, pluralised discourse. It is a method of emancipatory research built upon a fundamental belief in the importance of plurality, and via a deconstructive impulse reacting back against the academy's self-appointed authority in the arena of knowledge production.

Insomuch as an alternative self-representation is useful in this regard, it can only be so if it stresses the potential fallibilities and shortcomings of the researcher, revealing their humanity and casting doubt on the scientific authority conferred through the fact of the researcher's authorship. Such an exposé, firmly locating the researcher – 'me' – as a visible, more fully 'known' person, equips the reader with the information necessary to dissect and decode the essentially interpretive statements that 'I' make in the research report. According to Agger, this "raises an author's deep investments to full view and thus allows readers to enter dialogue with them", and ultimately, they thereby "enhance democracy by opening science to public debate" (1991: 120). The reduced authority of the author is thus emphasised, as there is no "science aura" (Agger, 2002: 428) constructed within the text to conceal the researcher's humanity. To this end then, my specific assumptions, inclinations and desires which are written into this research project are as follows:

Firstly, I have explicitly conducted and written this research from a feminist perspective, which should in this context be taken to mean that I am of the belief that: a) gender inequality exists in contemporary society in multiple, varied forms; and b) such inequalities are wrong and deserve to be challenged. Therefore, I am operating under the base assumption that physical cultures which are 'subversive' of dominant, hierarchal gender

norms are *good*, and this morally evaluative principle is what drives my academic interest in this present study.

Secondly, as a white British, university-educated, heterosexual man, I am more or less among the most privileged of social groups in the UK, particularly with regard to the operation of gender inequalities. While this in itself does not keep me from logically understanding feminist theory, or from agreeing with the general moral/political position outlined above, it does bear mention in order to situate me (and my account) within the structures of gender power which I am intent on criticising. My criticism, as it is, must be understood to have emerged from within the social milieu whose discursive possibilities have produced my specific subjectivity.

Thirdly, as a career-minded young researcher, I am intent on producing research which is interesting to the point of being marketable in the current academic field. Hence, my adoption of more contemporary theoretical leanings (postmodernism/cultural studies/queer theory) is not just an intellectual preference, and neither is my study of a controversial aspect of sports culture (e.g. 'men hitting women'; see Chapter 7). As well as producing theoretically interesting scholarship, I hope that the somewhat exotic nature of this research project will attract attention and establish my name within academic circles following later publications.

Finally, my substantive interest in martial arts is largely a product of my own participation within them. Indeed, my attention to the subversive phenomena involved with mixed-sex training is largely thanks to my personal experiences of them (see Chapter 1), which afforded me contextual insight for this study and also allowed for some degree of mutual understanding and connection with my research participants. However, I remain aware that my personal enthusiasm for martial arts, and valuing of gender subversion as mentioned above, makes me something of an evangelist, as well as a scholar,

through the implicit advocacy of this kind of sex-integrated training which I make (see Chapter 8).

A researcher's subjective biases and vested interests may be as unsubtle as I have painted these, or they may be insidiously veiled beneath the most convincing, subject-erasing rhetoric. For the postmodernist though, they are never inconsequential and always assumed to be present. It is thereby necessary, if my postmodern politics are to hold water, for the researcher ('me') to be located, contextualised, and ultimately denied the privilege of objective, scientific authority. In my own case then, my research is conducted from a specific point of view: that of a white, educated, heterosexual British man who readily identifies as a feminist; has an inclination towards being noticed professionally; and is an enthusiast for the sport which he studies. But what does this mean then for making a contribution to postmodern, feminist cultural studies? What are the consequences of this confession for the validity of the scholarly statements I still hope to make, and from where do I inspire confidence in the reader that I have something worthwhile to add to both the sociology of sport, and the broader feminist project?

First of all, regarding a principle pragmatic concern, it is worth pointing out that I, as a seriously applied and future-anxious researcher with 'an eye on the prize' of publications and jobs should not be overly criticised for my more mercenary leanings, given that such rewards demand high quality output. As theorist, as researcher, and as writer, I cannot avoid the call to rigorous, creative and relevant scholarship, and so should be expected to produce the goods which I intend to peddle. Secondly, my feminist leanings should not be considered suspect given my position within the relatively 'privileged' group of white, male heterosexual. As Messner has it, "for men to do feminist research, they must consciously adopt a feminist standpoint... (and in so doing) a new truth is revealed" (1990b: 209-10). Such a 'truth' becomes clear following any foray into the feminist theoretical literature, and being well-versed in feminist discourse makes one's perception of sex, gender, and sexuality all the more acutely attuned to the operations of power within their normalised, everyday practice (e.g. Bordo, 2003; Butler, 2008). This has



certainly been the case for me. Furthermore, the taking of sides and advocacy of identifiably subversive practices following the conscious adoption of an explicitly feminist position is more or less inevitable. The tendency towards nihilism within postmodern cultural critique thus calls for the reflexive use of postmodern theory. As outlined above, the heart of the (feminist) cultural studies effort is in effecting positive social change, and this certainly requires a departure from the potentially more nihilistic aspects of the postmodern epistemology. After all, remaining locked within an unhelpful disciplinary dogma is similarly at odds with postmodernism, and failing to adequately challenge the inequity one sees through one's research invites many scathing and wholly justified criticisms (e.g. Hargreaves, 2004: 190; Benhabib, 2008: 161; Greenwood & Levin, 2008: 70). As a final consideration here, my own enthusiasm for and belief in the usefulness and benefits of martial arts training could in this instance serve as an invitation to see 'subversive' possibilities more readily than might be empirically justified. All the more important then, that in Chapters 5-7 where I present my findings, I have anchored my discussion of such gender subversion within the interviewees' voices, and have thereby worked to maintain the dialogic validity of my study throughout.

Ultimately, what I hope to have communicated here is that the somewhat blunt account of my more pragmatic, selfish, and biased motivations should be read as a contextual disclaimer alongside my self-identification as a social science researcher, to give some vague indication of the crossed borders, the blurred boundaries, the multiple subjectivities and overlapping interests that I have come to embody. The ironic and contradictory aspects of this emergent persona are characteristic of the postmodern subject, who exists in multiple discursive 'places' at once and can be read in differing ways because of it. The point is not to undo my own credibility as a researcher, but instead situate myself within a less authoritative and more democratic form of politicised scholarship. Being known in this 'warts and all' way to the reader of the research makes such a situation more possible, positioning my own narrative accounts within the same territory as those of the people I intend to study.

Therefore, it can be said that this deconstructive approach to doing science “reauthorizes the science text where scientists have lost their own voices” (Agger, 1991: 121, original emphasis). The irony implicit in rubbishing one’s authority in order to regain it thereby becomes the essence of a postmodern, epistemological redemption tale, through which researchers confront the paradox of wanting to make a difference by generating knowledge, in a world where they see knowledge-generating difference-makers as a principle problem. As a result of this self-imposed authorial compromise, readers of their works are left with greater options for interpreting their findings, presented with a multiplicity of voices and narratives which are not rendered subservient to an author’s ‘master’ voice. Such work takes strength from the ‘redeemed’ author’s moral high ground vis-à-vis totalising and monotonous alternatives, the restrictive narrative structure of which reduces the reader’s capacity to engage, criticise, and decide (Markula and Denison, 2005). Via this reflexive methodology, I hope to provide an avenue for realising the task implicit in Foucault’s assertion that “the problem is not one of changing people’s ‘consciousness’ or what’s in their heads; but the political, economic, institutional regime of the production of truth” (1977b: 14). It is essentially to engage in a shift in the way in which social science is ‘done’ and read, towards a postmodern, democratic, and emancipatory end.

#### **4.2 Research Methods: The Semi-Structured Interview and ‘Dialogic’ Research**

*Objective reality can never be captured. We know a thing only through its representations. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008: 7)*

Turning attention to the practical requirements of working out my methodology, and in order to answer my proposed research questions and address the many phenomena arising from the experience of mixed-sex martial arts training, I adopted the use of semi-structured interviewing as a method of dialogic (openly two-way, conversational) research. As readers of this kind of research are confronted with disparate, complementary or even competing accounts of the same phenomena,

they are invited to “become immersed in and merge with new realities to comprehend” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008: 8). Such understandings do not aim to reduce these multiple realities into one singular version of the truth that can be easily comprehended and believed in, but rather mean to produce a kaleidoscopic montage through which various points of view can be seen relative to one-another, and the harmonies and tensions between them identified and analysed.

#### ***4.2.1 Semi-Structured Interviewing: Dialogic Encounters with the ‘Other’***

Exploring the embodied, physical nature of martial arts training grounds our understanding of men and women’s capacity to fight within the boundaries of what they actually experience when they learn martial arts. With regard to other articulations of mixed-sex fighting, there is much which could be asked of, for instance, textual, on-screen representations of martial arts such as those drawn from cinema or video games, both genres in which men and women are depicted performing combat in ways which may offer alternative discourses of gender relations to the (patriarchal) norm. Indeed, there is a growing body of research into such representations (e.g. McCaughey & King, 2001; Atkins, 2003; Inness, 2004; etc), indicative of the value of these cultural texts to scholars interested in gender relations and the capacity for performing physical combat. Nevertheless, I suggest that the imagined possibilities of men’s and women’s capacity to fight which these representations give us cannot alone account for any kind of re-thinking of gender within the parameters of physical combat. There is something more profound about embodied, flesh-and-blood physicality, in that it stands closer to irreducible, ‘natural’ reality than do the artificial bodies of special FX-aided or computer-generated on-screen fantasies, which given today’s technology are still clearly distinguishable from bodies made of muscle and bone moving unaided within the mechanical laws of physics and the discursive rules of physical culture. Thus, while the ‘hyper-real’ women and men of movies and video games are important sites of communication about what is contemporarily imagined about femininity, masculinity and combative ability, the corporeal women and men who have embodied knowledge about the

matter in question are a vital source of information about how a 'real' body that can fight feels, and what kinds of transformations such bodily knowledge leads one to when considering one's gendered position within contemporary society. Thus, the knowledge possessed by men and women who actually train together at martial arts is a necessary element in any attempt to generate an understanding of what it means for men and women to fight one another.

The empirical data for this project is therefore drawn from interviewing male and female martial artists. The fundamental premise of interviewing is simple; a researcher interested in a specific phenomenon asks questions of people who are considered to have some form of knowledge of that phenomenon that is worth the researcher's learning. Interviewing therefore relies upon the assumption that "the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit" (Patton, 1990: 278). There are different ways to approach the interview, with categorical types of interviews differentiated around the level at which researchers control, or 'structure', the process (Amis, 2005). Fully structured interviewing involves asking respondents a pre-determined series of questions, which do not change from one interview to the next and make for standardised and comparable, albeit inflexible sets of data. Open-ended interviewing takes an opposite approach, wherein the researcher does little more than prompt interviewees to talk freely about their lives, leading to a great deal of output that can reveal what particularly matters to respondents, but at the cost of not always focussing on specific problems that the researcher is interested in addressing. The middle ground, found in semi-structured interviewing, provides for the flexibility of open-ended interviews, allowing respondents relative freedom to talk about their own experiences and feelings whilst loosely adhering to sets of pre-selected questions chosen by the researcher to guide respondents' unfolding narratives (Smith, 1995). This method represents an attempt to balance the pursuit of rich, meaningful accounts of respondents' realities with the practical necessities of conducting research about specific social phenomena (Arksey & Knight, 1999), and as such is a method which I have chosen to use.

Through being attentive to the presence of the researcher in the interview situation, it cannot be said that the interview is a one-way process of learning whereby the researcher as passive observer harvests knowledge from freely-speaking subjects whose proffered accounts of reality are, in any sense, a fully faithful reflection of their subjectivity. The researcher is an active element in the semi-structured interview, whose selection of topics and questions within them produces an inherently skewed picture of interviewees' realities through a necessarily selective (and thereby partially exclusionary) focus. The researcher is also a personality within the interview, whose apparent knowledge, sensitivity, warmth, and so on, can influence the willingness of interviewees to share personal information, or to speak about things which they expect the researcher to already know, or not be able to understand (Smith, 1995). At an even more basic level, characteristics such as the researcher's age, their sex, race, appearance, tone of voice, style of dress, and all other aspects relating to first impressions, must be assumed to have some potential effect on the interview (Amis, 2005). As such, the interview is best conceptualised as a dialogical, that is two-way, conversational process wherein certain people, with certain assumptions about one another, talk under given conditions about given topics (Saukko, 2003). It is a learning opportunity for researchers but cannot be relied upon to fully account for the matter under investigation. It is an informative, but strictly relational practice, where subject- and context-specific knowledge is made available to the researcher.

Therefore, bearing in mind the epistemological underpinnings of the postmodern perspective concerning the multiple nature(s) of reality, I explicitly present my interview findings as a type of discourse generated by particular men and women talking to a particular man, confident that data gathered in this way is to be considered no less 'real' or instructive than if the interviewees were giving an unreserved, confessional monologue to none but themselves. In this light, what is said within the interviews is illustrative of a relational situation wherein gendered conversational strategies are being played out, and reality being constructed within a specific social context (Saukko, 2003). All in all then, the interview aims to provide another 'slice' of reality that cannot be abstracted away from the material and

discursive conditions of its production. Trying to draw out 'pure' truth from respondents is inherently positivistic and represents a failure to comprehend the relational nature of social constructions of reality. Instead of trying to somehow compensate for any and every 'drawback' of semi-structured interviewing then, I choose instead to recognise such 'pitfalls' as contextual elements of the dialogical process of the interviews, through which certain types of things are said and done and certain types of knowledge come into being. Ultimately, what is produced through this research is to be considered as a *partial view* to the world under examination.

#### **4.2.2 *The Research Itself: Methodology in Practice***

Before I began the present study, I sought ethical clearance from Loughborough University's ethics committee. This involved submitting an ethical clearance checklist, which outlined the proposed methods of data collection, the target group of research participants, and the characteristics of myself as a researcher. This involved confirming that I was not going to be performing invasive or harmful research techniques, that I was not working with 'vulnerable' groups (such as children, the elderly, people with mental illnesses, etc.), and that I was being given adequate supervision and training. It also asked for confirmation that I would only proceed with recording and documenting my research findings after securing my participants' informed consent regarding the methods of recording, anonymity, and proposed future uses of data, which I explained fully and was sure to secure before beginning each interview. After I submitted the checklist, I was granted ethical clearance to start data collection using the method outlined above.

I then began the process of selecting participants for interviews based on three criteria. Firstly, I ensured that the group of respondents overall consisted of roughly even numbers of men (n=10) and women (n=13); secondly, they were all aged 18 or over; and thirdly they all had at least three years' experience of regular training at martial arts. I employed this third criterion for reasons of ensuring that the

interviewees had a significant amount of experience within and knowledge about martial arts from the point of view of a practicing 'insider', which they would be able to draw upon in the interviews. As an experienced martial artist myself (seven years of training in two different disciplines), I felt that this criterion was suitable for selecting such interviewees. Aside from these deliberately selected criteria, the sample eventually consisted of a majority of White British people (n=15), with some British Chinese (n=3), White 'Other' (n=2), Black British (n=1), British Asian (n=1) and mixed race (n=1). All participants identified as being heterosexual, and most held occupations or qualifications easily considerable as marking them out as being 'middle-class'. These demographic factors are returned to later below.

The interviewee selection process began with a small number of my own personal contacts and through 'cold-calling' martial arts centres in order to make initial headway into the area. Despite several frustrations in this regard (lack of interest to be involved, 'no-shows' at arranged interviews, etc.), I was eventually able to establish connections with martial artists living in three cities in the English East Midlands, upon whom I then relied for further participants as I asked each interviewee to recommend me to someone who would be a possible candidate for involvement. This 'snowballing' sampling method proved effective at leading me through a network of different clubs and different disciplines within the three cities, such that I eventually spoke to martial artists drawn from a variety of different schools and disciplines, including those who had trained in Brazilian jujitsu (BJJ) (n=4), karate (n=5), kickboxing (n=10), kung fu (n=8), mixed martial arts (MMA) (n=5), muay thai (n=2), and taekwondo (n=3), among some other styles. As appears to be somewhat 'normal' for experienced martial artists in England (including myself), many of my participants had experience of training in multiple different styles, as has perhaps recently become vogue thanks to the rising popularity of mixed martial arts (Sánchez García & Malcolm, 2010). This allowed a variety of different perspectives and experiences to surface, and opened the possibility of comparing findings across styles.

However, when participants were asked to compare experiences gleaned from within different styles, they tended to discuss their training histories as a unified set of experiences, wherein pertinent themes relating to gendered practices and ideas about sex difference rarely differed from one martial discipline to the next. When they did differ for some participants, there was no emergent consensus that any one style offered particularly unique sets of opportunities or experiences; what seemed more important were the specific personalities involved and the levels of experience that the participants held at each particular juncture. That such differences were articulated around the idiosyncratic qualities of specific people, times and places rather than being categorically associated with unique styles complicated any ambition to perform a directly comparative analysis between styles or groups of styles (e.g. striking vs. grappling, such as in Hirose and Pih, 2010). Furthermore, comparing accounts between participants in different disciplines likewise tended to reveal similar themes regardless of which particular martial arts they had practiced, with individual differences not clearly relating to any technical or philosophical uniqueness of their respective styles.

Indeed, all of the martial arts clubs represented to me by my participants were reportedly very similar in terms of the techniques and practices they taught. Descriptions of training involving warm ups, stretching, fitness/circuit training sessions, technique drilling, partnered practice including sparring or 'rolling' (grappling practice), and 'forms' or 'kata' (rehearsing choreographed patterns of moves), were common among most clubs. While some disciplines might place more emphasis on certain elements, all of these were routine practices (with the exception of forms/kata, largely only practiced in 'traditional' East Asian martial arts) for all of the martial artists involved and, as explored in Chapter 5, they were often practiced in integrated settings.

This technical similarity between martial arts styles is likely explicable as a function of the fact that many of the globally popular, 'traditional' East Asian martial arts disciplines (karate, kung fu, etc.) are in fact hybridised forms of one another, and are not totally unique cultural products, as some popular conceptions of martial histories



might otherwise hold (Theeboom & De Knop, 1997; Tan, 2004). The same can be said of their more 'modern' incarnations and derivatives, such as judo, kickboxing, MMA, etc., which arose during the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century as an effect of the globalisation of East Asian body cultures and, perhaps, their Westernisation or 'sportisation' (e.g. Goodger & Goodger, 1977; Van Bottenburg & Heilbron, 2006; Sánchez García & Malcolm, 2010; Green & Svinth, 2010). Such processes have arguably involved an increasing standardisation between styles, more evident in the context of the popularisation of mixed contests between practitioners of various arts, and compounded by the fact that cross-disciplinary experience is now evidently quite common among Western practitioners of East Asian martial arts. While philosophical and aesthetic differences may exist between styles and schools, and particularly stand out in contrast between styles such as, for instance, MMA (Western, 'modern') and kung fu (Eastern, 'traditional'), there remain strong similarities among such apparently disparate arts inasmuch as they all involve the deliberate training of the body in the rigours of combative discipline, they frequently employ the same technical manoeuvres, and often involve similar training methods delivered to similar people with similar training goals.

Ultimately this means that many of the martial arts open to practitioners in England feature training in closely related techniques and strategies, towards the same kinds of ends – competitive performance, self-defence, fitness and recreation, etc. Regardless of the particular motivations participants may have, and in spite of the technical differences between styles, all martial arts thus emphasise practices which are premised around enhancing one's ability to perform fighting techniques (which could include hitting, blocking, throwing, grappling, choking, evading, etc.) against resisting opponents. Ultimately then, what unites all the martial arts settings sampled here is that they involve teaching men and women *how to fight* in more or less sex-integrated settings, and in this way they all bear relevance for discussions of sex difference, gendered performances, and subversion within the theoretical framework outlined in previous chapters. For the purposes of this study, I therefore operationalise the term 'martial arts' in such a way: any and every structured activity which features deliberate training aimed at enhancing practitioners' ability to fight.

My range of sampled disciplines thus reflects my perception of the general state of martial arts in England today – a diverse body of practices united around a key fundamental purpose, reflected in the basic premise of their technical curricula. Whilst unfortunately not providing solid grounds for comparative analysis between styles, the range of arts explored nevertheless covers more ground in exploring the experiences of men and women as they engage with the embodied practices of martial arts training than a more narrowly defined sample might have done. It also (and perhaps more simply) arises out of the fact that many of the martial artists I spoke to had trained in more than one discipline and thus formed narratives which drew on this variety of experiences, shaped through ostensibly different, but more often than not quite similar, martial arts practices.

As for the interviews themselves, they were conducted in a number of different settings, although the majority were undertaken in public spaces (cafes, bars, etc), or in martial arts club facilities, while a few took place in participants' own houses. The interviews addressed the core focus of the study, around the question of whether or not and in which particular ways mixed-sex martial arts training was 'subversive' of gender in the sense described by Butler (2008), among others. Namely then, my interviews focussed on how men and women who practice martial arts come to know themselves as martial artists, through exploring how they experience and interpret the emergent recognition of their bodies' capacities to fight; how they experience various difficulties, anxieties and contradictions when training with the both men and women and how they overcome the obstacles posed by such situations; and how they situate themselves and believe themselves to be situated by others within the particular discursive regimes surrounding martial arts, fighting, and gender. In order to do so, I employed the techniques associated with semi-structured interviewing in a relaxed and informal manner, using a schedule of topical questions based upon this present study's literature review, the interviewing work which I have undertaken in a previous study on a closely related theme (Channon, 2008), and my own personal experiences of training in mixed-sex martial arts classes (see Appendix 2).

Drawing upon this past experience of interviewing martial artists (male and female) about gender identity and their own sense of embodiment gave me a good deal of self-confidence regarding the usefulness of my own experience as a martial artist in the interview situation. This experience provided fertile common ground for reassuring interviewees that I understood the situational context of martial arts practice, that I was familiar with its technical language games, and had a good degree of conceptual understanding of what martial arts can 'mean' as a participant. With this insider knowledge, I was able to facilitate reflection about a wide range of pertinent issues with which I was personally familiar, which a non-participating researcher may not have been aware of (e.g. Maguire & Young, 2002). It also afforded me the chance to stimulate conversation through some story-telling of my own, breaking down boundaries through enhancing the feelings of mutual identification between myself and the interviewees (Arksey & Knight, 1999; Kvale, 2007). Using common ground in this way was fruitful with both male and female respondents, partially overcoming, or at least compensating for, what could be considered as an inevitable lack of mutuality between male researcher and female research subjects (Warren & Hackney, 2000; Ortiz, 2005). Yet whilst it cannot be assumed that a perfect conversational flow was borne solely out of the chance to identify through shared (albeit non-identical) experiences of martial arts, it was not my intention to push for any kind of 'true' or 'pure' dialogue in any case. As outlined above, interviewing cannot be considered suitable for generating strictly objective knowledge, the pursuit of which is also hardly in keeping with my own philosophical disposition. Rather, what emerged from my interviews was a series of different conversations which, taken as a whole, provided a partial, specific view on the issues and problems at hand.

I decided to conclude the interviewing phase of my research after having taken my total number of interviews to 23. By this point, I was confident that a sufficiently varied number of interesting, recurrent issues had arisen from the participants' narratives to justify finishing data gathering; that is, I felt as though I had reached "a point of saturation" (Kvale, 2007: 44). Although my participants' demographic backgrounds involve a general bias towards white, middle-class, heterosexual

individuals, I was uncertain about how best to address this issue. Since there is no single governing body overseeing the practice of all 'martial arts' as I have more or less loosely defined them here, there is very little scope for obtaining any reliable data on the participation rates in such activities against which to judge the representative value of my participants as a group. Even among those more 'sportised' martial arts, for which a national-level institutional organisation might reasonably be expected to hold centralised membership registers within competitive structures as is common in many sports, there exist schools outside of the aegis of these organising bodies, and so any such existing data on participants is questionable given its bias towards those involved with particular, registered clubs. In other words, because the 'universe' of martial arts practitioners in the UK is not strictly knowable in a quantitative sense at present, there is no way to tell whether one's sampling is representative of the general demographic makeup of martial arts participation. In any case, it is not strictly in keeping with the postmodern episteme within which I locate my own work to be concerned with generalisability as a mark of representational validity, since work within this paradigm stresses the importance of *all* voices regardless of their representativeness, and pays specific attention to localised, particular examples as its source of information about the social world (e.g. Foucault, 1972; Rail, 1998).

Accounting (very briefly) for the impact of participants' demographic factors besides sex and gender requires a short explanation of both the ethnicity and class differences associated with my sample. Firstly, while there were some differences in the interviewees' ethnicities, there did not appear to be any significant divergences in experiences of and attitudes towards the matters of sex, gender and sexuality between ethnic groups in this particular case. Given the bias towards white, heterosexual British people (as self-defined) within my sample it is hardly possible for me to comment on the possibility of such differences existing within martial arts subcultures, based on the partial view into those subcultures which this research has allowed me to achieve. What little I did manage to gather in this regard indicated that differences were minimal, and furthermore, I had already gathered significant amounts of interesting data on themes which were consistent among all

interviewees to sustain a prolonged and diverse discussion of gendered phenomena within mixed-sex martial arts training. As such, and in spite of the indications from the theoretical literature that gender is a construct often mediated by racial and ethnic identities (e.g. Weedon, 1999; Thornham, 2000), I did not feel it was necessary to pursue this dimension as an avenue of enquiry in the present study.

Another demographic feature which I considered relatively inconsequential to the overall direction of the analysis in this regard was the participants' social class backgrounds. These were judged based on the occupation and level of educational attainment among participants which, although not necessarily definitive of one's social identity as middle- or working-class, gave a cursory indication of the interviewees' location within the fluid class structure of contemporary Britain (Fox, 2004). Again, there tended to be some degree of homogeneity emerging through the fact that the majority of the interviewees had received university education and held jobs in professions normally considered 'middle-class', such as engineers, teachers, surveyors, technicians, business managers, etc. Again, due to the lack of broad, quantitative data on the backgrounds of martial arts practitioners, it is difficult to tell exactly how representative this group of interviewees is, although a sense emerged from the interviews that the martial arts clubs within which they had trained tended to be populated by 'these types' of people. That is to say, in the interviewees' experiences, those combat sports popularly described as 'martial arts' tended to be practiced by the middle classes, a notion supported by some earlier research into class distinction in combat sports (Clement, 1981; Mennesson, 2000). While some interesting data regarding the interplay of class and gender identities did surface in some of the interviews, I decided not to make social class differences regarding gender a prominent aspect of my thesis. This was partly because the perspectives on class which I gathered were overly biased in favour of those of middle-class people, and also because there was insufficient repetition of these class-based themes to justify prioritising their inclusion and therefore omitting other aspects of the analysis due to the constraints of space, as well as the need to expand the thesis to properly theorise class-gender intersectionality and thus contextualise these findings.

Therefore, the omission of racial/ethnic and class-based analysis from my thesis is due to the fact that: a) there was limited scope to investigate these areas given the relative lack of diversity in the sample which I was able to access; and b) those elements of racial and class identity which did seem to exist did not give rise to any significant and reoccurring indication that the sexed and gendered phenomena experienced in this context was strongly mediated by either of these factors. Therefore, my interviews remained largely structured around the experience of sex, gender and sexuality<sup>3</sup>, with minimal attention directed towards investigating class or ethnic differences/divergences. The following table gives a brief account of each interviewee's demographic characteristics as well as the styles of martial arts they had trained in:

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Martial Art(s)</b>
Amir	Male	43	British Asian	Kickboxing Coach	Kickboxing, Kung Fu
Andrea	Female	25	White British	Researcher	Choi Kwang Do
Andy	Male	30	White British	MMA coach	BJJ, Karate, MMA
Beth	Female	23	White British	Teacher	Kung Fu
Claude	Male	25	White British	Accountant	Kickboxing
David	Male	23	White British	University Student	Jujitsu, Karate, Kung Fu
Ed	Male	29	White British	Musician	Muay Thai
Elliot	Male	27	Black British	Retail Manager	Karate, MMA
Evelyn	Female	24	British Chinese	University Student	Kickboxing, Kung Fu
Helen	Female	29	White 'Other' (Australian)	Sports Therapist	Kickboxing
Jack	Male	34	White British	Teacher	Kung Fu
Jenny	Female	24	British Chinese	Technician	Kung Fu

<sup>3</sup> Admittedly, limited to heterosexuality given that all participants openly identified as being heterosexual

Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Ethnicity	Occupation	Martial Art(s)
John	Male	27	White British	Researcher	Taekwondo
Kate	Female	24	White 'Other' (Norwegian)	Sports Development Officer	Taekwondo
Keeley	Female	26	White British	Teaching Assistant	Judo, Kickboxing
Louise	Female	32	White British	Newspaper Journalist	BJJ
Marie	Female	30	White British	Personal Assistant	Kickboxing
Rachel	Female	22	White British	None	BJJ, MMA
Sara	Female	23	White British	Kickboxing Coach	Kickboxing, Kung Fu, MMA
Simon	Male	27	White British	Teacher	Karate, Kickboxing
Steve	Male	30	British Chinese	Quantity Surveyor	Karate, Kung Fu
Suzie	Female	22	White British	None	BJJ, Kickboxing, Kung Fu, Taekwondo
Sylvia	Female	19	Mixed Race (Japanese/British)	University Student	Kickboxing, MMA, Muay Thai

### 4.2.3 Data Analysis and Reporting

Throughout the practical process of the research, I produced transcripts of each interview and subjected these to discourse analysis (Holstein & Gubrium, 2005; O'Regan & MacDonald, 2009). Discourse analysis is a method for interpreting data which hinges upon the recognition that language is imbued with a *productive* form of power, and operates to both “support the performance of social activities and social identities and to support human affiliation within cultures, social groups, and institutions” (Gee, 2005: 1). Drawing on Foucault’s understanding of discourses as

structured systems of thought which produce thinking and acting subjects (e.g. Foucault, 1972), discourse analysis directs a researcher's attention to the wider significance of interviewees' narratives by linking them with structures of meaning which go beyond the specific experiences and feelings being described, locating interviewees' accounts within broader social structures and ideological terrains. Thus, through studying the texts produced through interviewing, "the goal (of discourse analysis) is to make a contribution to our understanding of issues of identity, the nature of mind, constructions of self, other and the world" (Potter & Wetherell, 1995: 81).

By this method I attempted to draw out specific 'discursive' statements about the experience of mixed-sex training which were particularly pertinent within the theoretical constructs regarding gender (and gender subversion) as outlined in Chapters 2 and 3. For instance, in many of the interviews I conducted for this study, participants would construct discourses based upon their martial arts experiences which contradicted discourses of essential sexual difference regarding physical power and combative ability. Hence, discourse analysis led me to identify certain specific moments of challenge to the dominant ideological structures of sexual identity which were collectively taking shape within what I eventually call a 'martial arts discourse' about the body. In brief then, discourse analysis involves drawing connections between the language used in localised, specific accounts of experience with broader, structured sets of meanings, identities, and cultural processes (Gee, 2005). This gives data significance in the abstract world of sociological metaphysics which, in this case, gives accounts about the experiences of mixed-sex martial arts training significance in debates about the subversion of gender.

I began undertaking this analysis shortly after I initiated interviewing, and it soon became clear that certain experienced phenomena were particularly important in the experience of the participants, sometimes more so to women or to men, although often to both at once. These early, emergent findings helped me in each successive interview as I was able to better anticipate and seek clarification on certain themes, as and when they almost inevitably arose (Smith, 1995). I was thus



able to make subtle refinements to my interview schedule and technique as the data gathering process progressed, prioritising the phenomena which were more commonly reported, although without omitting any questions which did not initially appear so fruitful (Berg, 2007). Following the eventual conclusion of the interviewing phase, I analysed the transcripts again, grouping together similar statements from my various interviewees around the underlying discursive meanings of which these statements were indicative. I then grouped these within three overall thematic areas, which provide the basis for each of the three different empirical findings chapters of this thesis.

During the writing-up of the findings chapters, I consistently tried to construct my arguments around the use of direct quotes from the interview transcripts – a writing technique through which I emphasise the interviewees' own voices and the primary importance of their accounts in constructing my own. However, in order to 'tidy up' the presentation of direct quotations, preserve an academic style, and ease the flow of reading, I have not quoted participants verbatim, having removed excessive chatter, stalling and repetitions, etc. In keeping with convention for such paraphrasing, my own contextualising additions to the text are encased in brackets, and those quotations which I have shortened feature spacing indicated with ellipses in replacement of omitted text. I consider these adaptations of interviewees' voices to be an important aspect of constructing a concise and stylistically coherent report on my findings. To overstate the importance of the interviewees' voices to a point at which I allow myself no editorial license would make for both an overly long and confusingly verbose report. Nevertheless, in order to preserve the importance of the interviewees' voices as a means of locating the research findings within specifically situated, social reality, I have included brief biographies of all participants in Appendix 1. Also, in order to produce a sense of personality for the interviewees which is congruent with their own sense of identity, all of the pseudonyms used were chosen by the interviewees, as they were invited to rename themselves for the sake of both confidentiality as well as personal presence within the text of the research report. In addition to this, in each of the empirical findings chapters, I have supported every statement with reference to at least one direct quote from the

interviews. This is another example of a compromised approach to making use of postmodern theoretical leanings and methodological conventions, as a way of stressing the inclusive/democratic polyvocality of my research without losing sight of the importance of generating coherent, stylistically appropriate work through which clear statements and conclusions about the social world can emerge (Agger, 2002).

In the following three chapters then, the findings of my research project are presented in this fashion, towards the generation of such statements and conclusions at the end of the thesis. As a way of leading in to these chapters, it is worth briefly recapping the central question driving this research, namely whether or not, and in which particular ways, mixed-sex martial arts training can be thought of as a 'gender subversive' activity. The findings which I use to address this question are divided into three topics which speak to the potential of mixed-sex martial arts as a subversive space in which gender is questioned, negotiated, and practiced, and as such are presented in three distinct chapters. While the three chapters are structurally separated, this is not intended to suggest that there is a great deal of conceptual difference between the issues which are discussed within them. Rather, I hope that the ordered structuring of the findings I present indicate something of a progression, revealing the successive stages, as it were, of the participants' engagement with gender through their practice of martial arts. This progression begins with issues related to women's access to martial arts and their opportunities within what otherwise ostensibly appears as a 'man's world'; through the exploration of men's and women's gendered constructions of self within the context of training together; and ultimately leading to a discussion of the embodied experiences of training and fighting as men and women 'wrestle with gender' (Sisjord, 1997) in both a literal and metaphorical sense. Thus, my findings chapters symbolically represent the martial artists' progression, from their entrance into a realm beset with 'masculine' discourse but populated by a gender-heterogeneous group; through their engagement in negotiating and performing an apparently suitable, gendered identity based on the discursive meanings of both mainstream sexual politics and the world of martial arts; and ending in the acid-test of physical

combat, the place in which the body is foregrounded as the site for the ongoing production and contestation of our knowledge about sex difference.

To suggest that the embodied experience of practicing martial arts is the most important site in which gender might ultimately be subverted would be disingenuous, as the normative model of binary, hierarchal sex difference, and the attendant discursive linkages of male-masculinity-heterosexual and female-feminine-heterosexual, etc, are challenged in many different ways within mixed-sex martial arts, and indeed outside of this setting. Nevertheless, the participants in this study often gave their own explicit accounts of gender with particular regard to the experience of physical contact including training exercises, sparring, and competition with the opposite sex as a key point of reference for the understanding of a gendered and sexual self, within and outside of 'normal' social conventions. As such, the discourse generated by the experience of *physically* negotiating gender difference is considered to take a place of prominence. This reasoning is supported by the literature, given that men's assumed physical fighting advantages are what have long been the central constitutive element of the symbolic importance of combat sports as 'male preserves' (Dunning, 1986), and furthermore that the body occupies such an important place in discourses of essential difference owing to its ideological conflation with nature (Grosz, 1994; Butler, 2008). So, while the Chapter 7 deals specifically with the physical aspects of training together, references to physicality and embodied experience feature throughout the preceding two chapters, as participants reported that lessons learned through the embodied practice of martial arts affected how they engaged with many other aspects of their experience within this sphere and beyond.

As a final note on the structural presentation of my findings, the three chapters each consist of a central topic broken down into several separate sections, within which the research findings are presented alongside interview quotes from the participants. Each chapter then concludes with a discussion section theorising the findings and summarising the chapter's significance to the overall research problem.

## 5

### ***Access to Martial Arts: The (Ab)Normality of Mixed-Sex Training***

In this chapter, the central issue under investigation is the matter of the equality of access to martial arts. The data for this chapter are drawn from enquiring into several thematic areas, including: men's and women's reasons for taking up and carrying on with martial arts training; women's feelings about their reception within the clubs at which they have trained; opportunities for women and men to progress in martial arts, for instance as competitors and instructors; the practices of integration and segregation in training; and in general, martial artists' perceptions about the (ab)normality of training in mixed-sex settings.

The chapter is largely intended to deal with the contention that martial arts training, as a form of combat sport, could be understood as a quintessentially 'masculine' domain (Mennesson, 2000). This association was identified as a popular misconception by the majority of the participants in the research, and was often explained with reference to the typical connections drawn between dominant codes of masculinity and physical combat in traditional gender discourse, of which participants were largely critical. This chapter illustrates how contemporary martial arts training offers an alternative setting for the practice of combat sports to that identified in earlier sociological research into sports widely considered as 'masculine' (Sheard & Dunning, 1973; Messner, 1990a; etc). Further, I mean to propose that mixed-sex training has become a normal model for participants' engagement with martial arts, and thus their practices of embodiment concerning physical combat. The normalisation of such relatively well-integrated training settings opens the possibilities for imagining (embodied) gender difference and sameness in a different

light (Anderson, 2008a), by providing space for the emergence of alternative discourses of sex and gender upon which participants are able to draw.

This chapter will be divided into three sub-sections: women's entry into martial arts; opportunities open to women within martial arts; and sex integration and segregation in martial arts. It should be noted that in all of my findings chapters, attention is directed towards discussing specific issues which are taken to hold potential for the subversion of gender, as the discussion focuses on identifying these particular moments and exploring their meanings, rather than giving the broadest of overviews of the experience of mixed-sex training. That is to say, priority is given to discussing those findings which are most of interest in ascertaining how mixed-sex martial arts might contain possibilities for the subversion of gender, or how they might work against it through supporting traditional, dominant structures as outlined in Chapters 2 and 3.

### **5.1 *Participants' Entry Into Martial Arts***

*The extent to which a sport is framed as feminine or masculine controls if and how women participate in it. (Roth & Basow, 2004: 252)*

Upon entering the world of martial arts training as either a participant or an observer, it becomes immediately apparent that martial arts is not, generally speaking, an activity solely 'for' men. The clubs which were represented to me by participants in the course of this research project have all boasted significant numbers of female members. Although participants suggested that there is a general bias in terms of which martial arts disciplines women tend to participate in, the women interviewed in the course of this study had actually practiced in a great diversity of disciplines and engaged in various levels of training. These included so-called 'traditional' Eastern styles (karate, kung fu), Westernised or 'modern' sports-oriented styles (kickboxing, taekwondo), and contemporary, synthesised disciplines (mixed martial arts, submission wrestling). Often, female participants had experience in multiple styles of martial arts, and several had become 'senior'

members in their clubs, which often meant being involved in teaching others. Thus, it was evident from the first point of introduction to my female participants that the experiences of women in martial arts are expansive, with many women continuing long training careers, and almost always in clubs where they would train directly with men.

### **5.1.1 Initial Motivations**

One of the first questions which I asked my participants was how and why they had become involved in martial arts, which involved asking who or what had inspired their original interest, why they had settled in particular clubs, and why they had carried on with their training long-term. Responses typically indicated that while there may be a gendered trend in initial motivations, experienced martial artists of both sexes continue to train for a number of different reasons, and there is generally no clear distinction between men's and women's training goals. Regarding this general trend in initial differences, it was often claimed that while men's interests are usually more focussed on the combative aspects of martial arts, women tend to see the activity more in terms of an alternative fitness programme. Such views are somewhat in line with stereotypical conceptions of 'masculine' and 'feminine' embodiment:

"I suppose it's one of those things for boys, you know, as a kid you always want to be good at karate, or be a ninja, that sort of thing... I would have play fights at school, was just always into it." (Elliot)

"I got into it because I wanted something to do for fitness really, and it's something my friends had done and recommended." (Andrea)

Both men's and women's reasons for participation beyond the initial draw of these apparently 'masculine' and 'feminine' training outcomes were then considered to diversify to the point at which no discernable gendered trends existed. As they become more involved with martial arts training, it was claimed that men and women would see the activity, and what it could offer them, in a different light:

“Generally when you speak to the guys, they’re here because they wanna be able to look after themselves on the street. Some of them want to be (competitive) fighters, but mostly I think it’s that they want to look after themselves, and then stay in shape or something along those lines... Women come here for the fitness really, and then when they realise how good they are they might want to take the next step (and become competitive fighters). Some of them get the bug, and that’s all they wanna do then, fight.” (Amir)

“Do men and women train for different reasons? You’d think so but not really. Maybe at first yeah, but then the same reasons always come up when you ask people why they still do it after so many years... It’s not really a sex thing, more of like what kind of club they’re in.” (John)

Typical in many martial artists’ accounts of their early motivation was the influence of the media in constructing a ‘cool’ and attractive image of martial arts. Many of the male participants suggested that their interest stemmed from boyhood fascinations with martial arts movies and other mediated representations of men fighting. Iconic figures such as Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan, and movies such as *The Karate Kid*, often featured in the men’s accounts. Although predominantly talked about by the men, some of the women also mentioned movie stars as an early inspiration, suggesting that media representations of martial artists can be inspiring for both sexes:

“*The Karate Kid*... (I was) jumping around the living room copying those movies, and I had a cousin who did karate so my parents took me to his club.” (Andy)

“My parents would watch the old Chinese films with me, always lots of kung fu in them... It was a part of my life from when I was young.” (Evelyn)

“I always loved those films where it’s not all shooting and explosions, it’s fighting, like the Jackie Chan movies, I love it.” (Andrea)

Despite a growing number of female action stars in contemporary cinema and television (e.g. McCaughey & King, 2001; Inness, 2004; Mainon & Ursini, 2006), it was predominantly male stars who were identified as being inspirational with regard to both men’s and women’s uptake of martial arts. Conversely, females were often

overlooked and generally not thought of as role models by the women. As one interviewee pointed out:

“How many fighting women do you see in the media that aren’t all sexual? You don’t see many serious fighters that are like, role models. It’s all *Charlie’s Angels*, high heels and big boobs, they would be rubbish for a fighter! But for the boys, there’s loads of people who they can be like, as real serious fighters. I don’t think that exists for women, not to that extent.” (Beth)

Aside from media inspiration, initial entry into martial arts training was almost always described by participants in terms of having a personal introduction to a club, often (but not always) from *male* friends or family members. It was generally felt that women were not typically predisposed to favour martial arts and as such their entry into the activity was often dependent upon male encouragement:

“I think generally girls aren’t confident enough to get into it, they don’t have that push, maybe. But luckily I had my father, who would take me to training with him.” (Sylvia)

“I got into kickboxing a while ago when I was working with a man who did it, he said that lots of girls did it so I went with him instead of going to the gym alone.” (Keeley)

“When my older brother went to university he learned some kung fu and he showed me a few moves... then when I was sixteen I wanted to learn it too.” (Evelyn)

### **5.1.2 A ‘Man’s Sport’?**

The need for male encouragement has been identified elsewhere in the literature on women’s entry into ‘male’ sport (e.g. Scraton et al., 1999), and in this case is probably a reflection of the fact that the majority of the clubs and disciplines represented by the participants were considered by them to be ‘male dominated’ (with the exception of kickboxing clubs, whose membership was often described as being fairly even). But in spite of the tendency for martial arts to be identified with a



male-centred media image and to be practiced largely by men, all of the participants contested the perception that martial arts was indeed a 'man's sport'. The presence of women in clubs was considered 'normal' and the fact of their presence was enough to dispel the idea that the activity was 'masculine':

"I don't think fighting is manly... there's a lot of girls fighting here, it just makes it less manly I think. Like, girls are doing it too so how can you still call it that?" (Sara)

"I definitely don't think it's a man's thing. I mean there are just loads of women doing it, like in karate, I mean there was all different ages too. Like a family thing, not just a man's thing." (Elliot)

The obvious demonstration of women's abilities, visible to themselves as much as to other women and to men, further undermined the connection between martial arts and masculinity. A discourse of personal realisation about gender was frequently constructed around the experience of training alongside competent female martial artists, whose performance in class put the lie to the idea that martial arts was a 'man's sport':

"Because women are doing it just as much as men these days, you know, getting quite good at it and all that, it makes you think that maybe you need to change your definition of manly, you know, you can't say this is manly nowadays." (Claude)

"Training with women, yeah that was definitely weird at the start... I went to a boy's school and I don't think I'd ever seen a woman in a proper fighting situation, not like, proper technical fighting... (But) these girls were good at what they did and I remember in sparring, being shown up pretty bad by one of the senior girls... and that was a bit of a moment when I thought well, I should definitely take them more seriously and not feel so weird about it when they can hit like that." (Simon)

"I was just really impressed with what my own body could do, like breaking boards and stuff, you impress yourself, I mean especially as a woman, I never thought I would be able to break wood like that with my hands... It just goes to show that women can do it too and so you can't say this is a man's sport." (Andrea)

This disassociation of martial arts and masculinity led many participants to frame their own practice as taking place on gender-neutral turf. Despite what outsiders might think, or how the media may portray it, to the martial artists themselves it made little sense to attach masculine connotations to their training. As such, shortly after starting martial arts, participants were questioning the gender imbalance in 'male-dominated' clubs and began asking why the activity remained relatively unpopular with women. Dealing with issues surrounding the initial attraction of the activity to either sex led them to openly question their own and others' beliefs about sexual difference and participation:

"So you just come to wonder like, why there aren't more women in the gym. It's hard to explain, but that's how I see it... When you first walk in you think well (muay thai) is quite an extreme martial art, so maybe you don't expect women to do it, but after a while when you've done it enough, it's normal, and you know, I'm not like any kind of really hard, brutal man, and I can do it and I'm quite good at it now. So why aren't there more people doing it, more women doing it?" (Ed)

This sentiment was reflected in the question of how best to promote martial arts to women, which was a challenging issue for many participants who were in positions of seniority within their clubs. It was suggested that it was difficult to market it to women because of the typical discursive association between martial arts, fighting, masculinity, and men, and as such particular strategies were required in order to appeal to them. However, there was little consensus as to how best to go about this, although all strategies engaged in were somehow aimed at constructing martial arts participation within non-masculine terms:

"From a marketing point of view, we wanna attract everyone here... I use pictures of women on my fliers because I'm trying to send out an image (that) it's for anyone... and guys already know they can do it, or they think they can, but women don't so we need to attract them somehow." (Amir)

"I promote it as self defence to women. Because if you say martial arts they just think of fighting, it's perceived as violent, you know, punching someone and kicking someone, and they don't like that. So if you say self defence it

sounds more like something they might want to do and they listen up more, it's practical for them and not just like all the stuff in the movies." (Evelyn)

"I've been taught over the years to make allowances and treat women differently in this respect. And to be honest I've found that having a fitness component in the classes is what really gets them in... It's much easier to market to guys, they see UFC on the television and want to be fighters like those guys, it's an easy association for them, but not for women." (Andy)

Thus, despite the fact that women's participation in martial arts is widespread, there is evidence to suggest that women's initial access to martial arts remains somewhat shaped by typical associations between martial arts, 'fighting' and masculinity (McCaughey, 1997). Most martial arts clubs tend to be 'male dominated' (e.g. Mennesson, 2000; Lafferty & McKay, 2004), and the most iconic representations of martial arts in the media (movies, TV drama, sports, etc) remain predominantly male as well. As such, and in common with findings from research into other 'masculine' sports (e.g. Theberge, 1995; Scraton et al., 1999) men often (although not always) act as gatekeepers to participation, both in terms of the masculinised image of the activity and in terms of the existing makeup of club memberships. But despite this, women who do enter martial arts tend not to reflect on the activity, or themselves, as being masculine, and neither do they perceive themselves as outsiders in a man's world. Rather, the positioning of martial arts as being 'male dominated' was largely discussed by female and male participants alike as simply circumstantial, as a result of gender discourses from the broader culture which they do not perceive as accurate or personally meaningful:

"Martial arts has always been seen to be quite a male sport... It all comes down to gender stereotypes really, not anything real I guess, just stereotypes." (Suzie)

In addition to this, although most women agreed that their initial reasons for taking up martial arts were to do with either fitness or, in some cases, self-defence (identified from the literature as being considered 'normal', legitimately feminine reasons for women's training, e.g. Hargreaves, 1997; De Welde, 2003), they did not

believe these led to them engaging in martial arts in 'feminine' ways, or in other words, in ways which categorically differed from the overall pattern of men's engagement. Male respondents concurred with these sentiments, often stressing that the diversity of experiences shared by men and women alike made any kind of outright gendering of the activity pointless.

As the women continued with their training careers, learning techniques and developing fitness in the same ways in which men were doing, they built an understanding of martial arts as an essentially non-gendered activity. In other words, as they deliberately practiced and embodied something which was otherwise considered quintessentially masculine, they revealed how men's deliberate practice and embodiment was just as much of a culturally constructed phenomenon as their own. In Butler's analysis, this "gives us a way of understanding the taken-for-granted world of sexual categorisation as a constructed one, indeed, as one that might well be constructed differently" (2008: 149). This is achieved as the normalisation of women's presence in martial arts problematises the supposedly natural and exclusive linkages between men, masculinity, and fighting, which are dependent upon (and provide support for) traditional, hierarchal gender discourse. Martial artists do not, therefore, draw upon such ideas to explain their practice, and instead use an alternative discourse about sex, gender and fighting which allows space for women's legitimate involvement. Given, however, that their ability to do so arises from their own personal experiences of mixed-sex training, they face something of an uphill struggle in communicating this 'gender-free' message to non-martial artists, and particularly women, leaving martial arts clubs relatively 'male-dominated'.

## **5.2 Opportunities for Women Within Martial Arts**

*Many of the problems which affect women's participation as recreative performers are exacerbated if they want to take their sport more seriously... In almost all sports, men are in a beneficial position in relation to women. (Hargreaves, 1994: 203)*

Once women have surmounted this initial discursive barrier and made entry into the ostensibly 'masculine' realm of martial arts, what kinds of opportunities are open to them? How are they received as club members, competitors, or even coaches, and what kinds of masculine biases, if any, remain to limit these opportunities? Such questions were key in each interview, helping to gather more contextual insight into the experiences of men and women training together.

### **5.2.1 Valuing Female Club Members**

It soon emerged from the interviewees that the ways in which women have been received as members of their clubs have largely been very positive:

"There were lots of these guys, and we were the only girls there when we started, but they liked us being there, liked it that we wanted to join in and be part of their thing... never made us feel like we didn't belong or anything."  
(Marie)

"There were always girls who were more experienced than me in the clubs I was with... I looked up to them as people who were better and like, more important than me."  
(Simon)

"They can see (how good I am) when I'm sparring... I have a good eye for fighting and I can talk about it with confidence so I think people see that, they like that... even the guys want to partner with me."  
(Sylvia)

This kind of recognition and valuing of women as martial artists was very common among the participants, indicating that both sexes were able to accrue prestige and respect within their clubs. That women were valued by men as club members is in contrast with Mennesson's (2000) finding that women felt pressured into limiting their abilities in order to be accepted by men, and also Halbert's (1997) finding that women were only ever respected if they could prove they were up to 'male' standards. In the context of my participants, women's acceptance as members of martial arts clubs was not contingent on any special requirements. However, this was not always the case for female senior members, who encountered some

difficulties when attempting to translate their seniority into teaching/instructing roles, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

As well as being accepting of women in the gym, all of the participants expressed a preference for mixed-sex training environments. For the men, training in an all-male gym was considered to involve an atmosphere which could easily become 'too masculine' or 'macho', something which several of them had experienced (for instance, before their clubs had female members, or when women were absent from training) and not enjoyed. Women were to thank for bringing a more positive and inclusive social atmosphere to the clubs, while women themselves were thankful to train alongside men because of similar fears about the imbalance of training only with other women. It emerged that both sexes were grateful for the presence of the other because neither wanted to train with or socialise with a group which was homogenous, either in terms of sex or in terms of the gendered behaviours which homosocial groups were considered to encourage:

"It helps build a nice social atmosphere... if it was an all-male club you might get a bit of a macho thing but with girls there it doesn't go that way." (David)

"With the image of muay thai you expect it to be like an old-school boxing gym, full of testosterone-fuelled blokes, you know what I mean? So I was surprised there were women, I was pleased, it lightened it up a lot." (Ed)

"I guess we stop their egos from coming out so much. And if they weren't there, I don't think the girls would work as hard, it might get a bit cliquey or chatty." (Suzie)

"Women are usually bitches in an all-woman environment... their competitiveness can get personal and bitchy. So this is a really good environment to train in because men have a really good work ethic, working with each other, being friends and being competitive.." (Helen)

Having a mix of men and women was thereby seen as an important part of club life; not only was it usual to find both sexes in martial arts clubs, it was also considered beneficial and positive for the social atmosphere of the group. Martial artists thus

expressed a preference for the mixing of masculine and feminine characters in a productive and enjoyable way. Within this model there was no space for gendered exclusivity, identified as distasteful, backwards, and even harmful to training. Given this preference for mixed company, it is clear that clubs such as these do not frame combat sports as masculinist sites for the exclusion and denigration of women (e.g. Messner, 1988), but must rather be conceived as spaces where sex integration is mutually desirable and beneficial. While this desirability nevertheless depended upon highly stereotyped gender identities, and as such cannot in itself be taken to signify gender subversion, it does make for a significant departure from the construction of sport as a site for sexual segregation and differential embodiment. Remembering Hargreaves' statement that the partial success of liberal strategies (such as enhancing female access to privileged male spaces) might "pave the way for more radical changes in the future" (1994: 29), it bears mention that training in this preferred, integrated environment was conducive to experiences which had more profoundly transformative effects on the participants' embodiment and practice of gender, as will be explored later.

In addition to preferring a more varied social atmosphere, a mix of both sexes was largely thought to be good for training owing to the fact that women and men could learn things by training with each other which they would otherwise miss out on training with only the same sex. The perceived benefits of training together revolve around the notion that one needs to practice against a variety of different partners in order to fully master martial arts techniques. Discussing the variability between different individuals' fighting styles, Jack commented on how not sparring against women would limit a martial artist's progression by reducing the amount of variety which they are able to be exposed to:

"Everyone brings different things, you need to learn to be able to fight different people, and everyone has different skills... And this includes girls as well, (we all) have different capabilities, different ways of fighting, and if you want to learn then you have to spar with them." (Jack)

The benefits (and the pitfalls) of training and sparring together will be returned to later in both this chapter and Chapter 7, but at this point it is important to stress that the participants were largely in agreement that mixed-sex training was preferential to single-sex, and that for this reason both men and women were valued as members of the clubs they joined. That women had a legitimate place in martial arts clubs was therefore never in doubt, but the opportunities open to them beyond simply training were not so readily attainable.

### ***5.2.2 Opportunities for Female Competitors***

One of the more common topics of discussion regarding such opportunities centred around the availability of competition. Although not all of the clubs represented within the sample of participants encouraged their members to seek competition, inter-club or regional sparring contests are common and for some clubs – particularly kickboxing, MMA and BJJ (Brazilian Jujitsu) clubs – competition provided a key focus for training and was a normal part of the experience of being a martial artist. However, a lack of female opposition in tournaments was often a major problem for women who wanted to compete. The effect of this lack of competition was felt to hurt the standards of women’s competitive martial arts, which devalued competition as a training goal as tournaments were often brief, sometimes with only one entrant for an entire weight category, and were thus less meaningful to the female participants than the men’s competitions were to men:

“There’s a Brazilian jujitsu competition coming up, like next week for example, and it’s the biggest in the country and there’ll be hundreds of competitors there, and in the women’s category so far there’s twelve divisions and only seven women entering. Most of the divisions are either empty or have only one fighter, so the levels are just really low.” (Andy)

“(Women) don’t bother turning up (to competitive events) because they think no other women will turn up... If everyone did it then we’d have a lot more competition and it’d be so much better for us.” (Rachel)



Contrasting this with men's experiences, women felt that their chances to excel in martial arts were harmed by the lack of meaningful competition and competitive training partners, which created a gap in performance levels between the sexes:

“Men tend to be challenged more, because not as many girls enter (tournaments)... if you wanted to go professional then girls definitely wouldn't have as much of a chance as the men.” (Suzie)

“I need to have sparring but I can't get any in. And then I know that when I've had women here, they come and go. And when I have partners in it's such a godsend... When I don't have (a female) partner I'll lose out and my training is slightly different, (the men) do loads of sparring and I'll do pad work, so it's not balanced really.” (Helen)

The lack of female competition was often explained as simply an extrapolation of the limited numbers of women involved in martial arts. Most participants did not feel as though men with sufficient experience to begin competing were more likely to aspire to compete than women of the same level, but simply that the overall numbers involved in training meant that women were often under-represented relative to men in tournaments. However, one effect of this gendering of competitive participation was that, in spite of the default way in which it arose, the coding of competitive combat sport as 'masculine' gained demonstrable support – both from the ratio of male to female competitors, and from the ways in which competitions were frequently organised to prioritise male events. Relative to the motivations that new (and inexperienced) club members often arrived with – men looking to compete, women generally not – the over-representation of men at competitions was, in the eyes of some, 'normal' gendered behaviour. The participants noted that this could give rise to explanations about competitive aspirations built upon traditional gender discourse, and effectively compound some women's reluctance to train competitively:

“Well they (women reluctant to compete) say it's just more of a man's thing, wanting to prove themselves, and that like, 'us women' don't like that. If people think that, like the stereotypes, then they probably don't know what we (male and female martial artists) are actually like and what we compete

for... Things like this can make it harder to get women to want to compete, but men don't have that problem." (Louise)

As such, the general, gendered character of competitive martial arts tended to lend implicit support to the notion that combat sports are 'for' men, in spite of the prevailing rejection of this idea among the participants. The more or less default masculine bias in competitions remained as a structuring element which defined one of the points at which sex difference was articulated and effectively produced. This self-reinforcing phenomenon can be taken to illustrate the "repeated performance... of discourses of gender" (Weedon, 1999: 122) which normalised the connection between men, masculinity and fighting. And this discursive formation was implicated in feeding back into the processes of embodiment which underscore the hierarchal sex differentiation which it implicitly supports: as men were favourably positioned to engage in competitive martial arts, they were more easily driven to enhance their fighting abilities, while women (generally) were not.

However, despite this experience of limited opportunity and lack of recognition, there is also evidence to suggest that women's competitions are at times being taken seriously and well organised. Also, while standards were generally described as being low (lower than men's, or lower than they 'ought' to be) there were also some incidences of high praise for women's competition and evidence that an increasing number of women are becoming more focussed on developing their competitive opportunities and abilities:

"I just came back from Ireland, from a massive kickboxing show there, and the main event was the women's European title fight, and it put most of the guys' fights to shame. It was a ten round fight... a pleasure to watch, it was brilliant." (Amir)

"At my current club, with kickboxing, there's much more opportunities to compete, like with other universities and that. I've enjoyed it a lot and it's making me train much harder, yeah... Everyone trains much harder for competitions, and you get better because of it, much better." (Suzie)

“There are loads of places where there are women’s divisions, we just need to fill them... I’ve started being more proactive, organising things, like I set up a facebook group so we all know who’s competing where, that kind of thing.”  
(Rachel)

So while the shape of competitive martial arts (according to the participants’ experiences) remains predominantly male-oriented and women are having to work harder than men in order to find suitable competition, such statements as these suggest that at least in some cases women’s opportunities to compete, as well as their competitive abilities, are comparable to men’s. It was also the case that most (male) coaches were very supportive of helping to develop the skills of aspiring female competitors. Recognising that both the organisational infrastructure and the cultural norms necessary for women’s competition were somewhat lacking in their particular disciplines led coaches to appreciate the urgency of encouraging female talent and providing adequate attention to their aspiring female fighters. This would suggest that for these coaches, men’s competition does not necessarily hold a place of prestige above that of women’s competition:

“(My coach) will use that more, as soon as someone comes he’ll be like, right, you two partner up because he knows that I need it. He always gives me the time I need, it’s very good, you know he cares about it.” (Helen)

“I absolutely want my girls to do well. It’s harder for them sure, but they reflect back on me and my gym so it’s all on the line, all the time... Maybe some coaches don’t give them the time of day but not here, they’re equals. Always will be.” (Amir)

In this sense, some women (along with their male supporters) are active in challenging the default structure of competitive martial arts. As mentioned above, the participants were able to identify stereotypical conceptions of gender propriety as harmful to the development of women’s opportunities to become better martial artists, and after dismissing these ideas and engaging in alternative practices of embodiment, they exercised agency in the face of institutionalised inequality by performing this embodiment on the competitive stage. Enabled by the general atmosphere of acceptance and respect which existed within their clubs/disciplines,

and by the coaches whose reputations stood to benefit from their competitive success, it is evident that some women are beginning to subvert the normative masculine bias here, whilst attempting to blaze a trail for others to follow:

“I think that when we get more women at events, show people that women have that technical skill and the aggression as well, then it won’t be such a problem... I don’t think they’ll understand it until they’ve done it or at least seen it. It’s hard to see inside something you don’t do.” (Rachel)

### ***5.2.3 Women as Coaches: Contesting the ‘Ownership’ of Martial Arts***

One other interesting element of women’s involvement in martial arts is their attainment of seniority and their taking up of coaching roles within clubs. The earning of a black belt, or attaining a similar level of seniority, and passing into the rank of ‘senior’ within their club could be considered to be one particular high-point of a martial artists’ training career. In all clubs which were represented by the participants, coloured belt rankings or similar progressive ‘grading’ structures help to establish a hierarchal system of seniority, which primarily works as a mechanism for the transmission of martial arts knowledge between members. For instance, a club will have a small number of full-time instructors, often with one head instructor, who do the formal teaching at each session. Then, the more senior club members (typically those who have black belts or are one or two ranks below) will act as assistant instructors on an informal basis, helping with demonstrations, giving one-to-one coaching to more junior members, and occasionally formally leading a session in the absence of the usual instructors. As such, when they engage in formal instruction, club seniors are called upon in a leadership capacity to direct training and are therefore recognised widely within their clubs as having an authority on correct technical knowledge.

As with the general trend regarding competitive martial arts, the majority of coaches and senior club members in the participants’ experience had been male, but most felt that this was again a reflection of the general ratio of males to females in their

clubs, and not the effect of differential treatment of either sex within them. Accordingly, all of the participants interviewed agreed that within their club structures it was perfectly normal for women and men to hold equal status as 'seniors' as they progressed through the belt rankings:

"Yeah there's no male-female divide there... It's normal for women to be seniors." (John)

"Why would it be different? Women in our club get just as good as men, the technique is the same whether a woman or a man is doing it... We have a good number of female seniors, it shows it's not strange for women to get really good and that helps to encourage the (female) newbies." (Beth)

The presence of women in the higher rankings within clubs means that frequently, women are playing instructing roles, either in the informal sense of showing a junior partner how to do a technique properly, or by formally leading a session as the instructor. In these instances, where women's seniority translates into positions of authority and ownership, men (and other women) are effectively learning how to fight under the instruction of a woman. In the experiences of the participants, the reception of female coaches is mixed, as women taking positions of authority invokes a particularly potent contradiction between 'normal' gender expectations and the importance of respect for seniority within martial arts:

"I do really enjoy teaching people, so long as they want to be taught... Sometimes there are people who don't really listen... like some big guy who doesn't think he needs to be taught to fight by a girl." (Sara)

"The boys are much less receptive (of my instruction), especially when I'm criticising their sparring, I find that a lot. I find it quite frustrating that they don't listen to my advice, but then the next (senior) guy who comes along and says the same thing to them, they'll listen... It's like they're hearing it from a girl, a girl criticising their fighting, and they're not interested in listening to that. It makes me angry... for someone to outright ignore my suggestions is insulting, I think I should have earned more respect by now." (Beth)

"I don't think (the men) see me the same as they see the guys who are fighting in tournaments, they look at them and go yeah I want to be like him,

and they don't seem like that with me and I don't think they would with any woman. It's a role model thing, I can show them things but I don't know if I'm ever a role model to them." (Marie)

These findings are in agreement with Theberge's (1993) argument that women coaches are often considered to be 'tokens', rather than taken seriously as teachers and leaders, and with Norman's (2010) recent findings concerning how female coaches are made to feel undervalued, underrated and trivialised by the men they train and work with. Nevertheless, in spite of these and similar experiences, other women reported that the men and women they have trained have received them well and, in particular, those club members who have been training for a longer period of time or who have seen their abilities as martial artists are much more accepting of them as coaches. This would suggest that a greater level of knowledge of martial arts, and of women's abilities in martial arts in particular, makes the thought of being trained by a woman more agreeable:

"When they actually see what I can do, it's amazing the amount of, like how people's perceptions change, and then all of a sudden they will listen to you. It is quite funny and I know that's a big thing, one week they're not interested and then they've seen you do something awesome and they want to listen." (Helen)

"I think men should be more open to women teachers, and they are once they realise how good they can be. Maybe they're seeing it as something a bit below them but once they've listened, yeah they'll see what they're missing." (Rachel)

"I don't seem to remember (learning from a woman) crossing my mind as being an issue. When I was younger the club I trained at had a female instructor so maybe that helped to make me see that anyone can do this, get to that level." (David)

Unlike the general acceptance of female club members, these findings are in agreement with Halbert's (1997) contention that women boxers are not taken seriously by the men they train with until some proof of their ability is forthcoming. For while none of the female participants in this study had ever felt as though they

had to prove themselves in order to be accepted as club *members*, it remained that women frequently needed to visibly demonstrate their aptitude in order to be respected as *coaches*. This would suggest that in spite of the prevailing liberal attitudes towards women's presence in their clubs, male martial artists *without* knowledge of women's abilities are not ready to accept that women can 'own' the activity in this way. Conversely, for many who were more familiar with women's abilities, female coaches were not considered problematic. In effect, this further demonstrates the importance of personal familiarity and experience for instigating subversive shifts in the way gender is conceived and practiced. In Halbert's words, "this change in attitude is often dependent on the proof of ability rather than an ideological decision" (1997: 21). Women's embodiment of martial arts prowess, and their effectively successful adoption of the martial arts discourse which this represents (i.e., fighting ability arises through training and not nature), provides the necessary "dramatic symbolic proof" (Messner, 1988: 200) to challenge men's (and women's) belief in the male ownership of fighting ability. As this takes place through "practices of repetitive signifying" (Butler, 2008: 199), it ultimately leads to the normalisation of female ownership of martial arts and a concurrent subversive shift in how gender is conceived. Importantly, this still remains contingent upon individuals' exposure to skilled female martial artists.

In sum, women's progression within martial arts training, from being accepted as valued club members, through their engagement with competition and the efforts they make to develop their competitive opportunities, to taking on the role of coach, remains more or less structured by a prevailing bias towards men which exists in most martial arts clubs. Competition is more readily accessible to men, men are more readily accepted by others as coaches and instructors, and women have to work harder in order to find success in both of these arenas. Ultimately however, once a greater familiarity with women's presence and ability in martial arts sets in, their participation in these higher levels of training is made easier, seen as more significant, and eventually taken to be as meaningful as that of men's participation. Importantly, experienced martial artists tended not to perceive women's

involvement in these aspects of training to be abnormal or illegitimate, in spite of their relative rarity.

### **5.3 Sex Integration and Segregation in Martial Arts**

*The problem exists when educational policies coercively restrict women... Women may self-segregate when they find themselves in traditionally male fields, but it must be their choice. (McDonagh & Pappano, 2008: 224)*

This section concerns the degree to which men and women are integrated or segregated in training. Given that women were welcomed into all of the clubs within which participants trained, and that opportunities do exist for them to become competitors and coaches, it would appear that women's chances for participation in martial arts can be relatively equal to those of men. But in mixed-sex clubs, are men and women training together in the same ways? Are they being treated as physical equals, by practicing with and competing against the opposite sex? Essentially, are the same expectations made of male and female martial artists, or are they being positioned in relatively differentiated ways within their clubs?

#### **5.3.1 Integration and Segregation in Training**

For most participants, integration was considered the norm for their classes, but at a *certain point* segregation was seen to become something of a necessity. For instance, technique training was always considered to be something which both sexes would practice together, and often involved male-female partner work. Fitness training – circuits, weight lifting, timed drills, etc – was also something which participants largely practiced in an integrated fashion, although in some clubs this training was differentiated. Typical among such differentiations was women instructed to do press-ups on their knees:

“Well usually it's all the same, men and women together, yeah, and it should be like that. We don't want to make things different and make it look like



women need to do a softer or weaker thing because that would really go against a lot of what kung fu is about... But yeah we do those girl press-ups and to be honest I really don't like that, when the other instructors say 'girls, do it on your knees'. I mean they can if they want but I always do the full ones, I don't want half-training, you know?" (Evelyn)

The matter of 'girl press-ups', as a modified, easier version of a typical fitness training exercise, represents this 'certain point' at which some clubs would begin to segregate their training, effectively coding some exercises 'masculine' and others 'feminine'. These differentiated exercises were always justified with reference to a biological discourse of masculine strength and feminine frailty (e.g. Dowling, 2000; McDonagh & Pappano, 2008), clearly implying that in some clubs, traditional gender binaries continued to be a structuring element of men's and women's practices of embodiment. However, the majority of participants, like Evelyn, were critical of this segregation. One participant even suggested that differentiated exercises gave women the chance to 'cheat', as those who lacked motivation would hide behind their assumed 'female weakness' in order to not have to work as hard as the rest of the class:

"Well it's just like when you get an injury and the coach says take it easy, but you know it's not your injury that's stopping you it's just that you're unfit, and you pretend it's the injury to get a breather. I think some of the girls do that, you know, if the coach isn't pushing them to do (full exercises) because they're girls they'll slack off because they can get away with it... And then they wonder why they lose (in competitions)!" (Marie)

By this logic, women are considered perfectly capable of meeting the demands of 'regular' training, but the presence of a regulating gender discourse in some coaches' practice meant that some women were led to retreat from realising their potential and embody a lesser version of the type of fitness which other martial artists were attaining. In this regard, they were implicitly coached to accept a second-place position relative to men, for whom no sex-based, 'opt-out' from difficult training existed. As such, the discursive differentiation between men and women which shaped such coaching approaches ultimately created the differentiation it was

assumed to reflect. That both male and female participants were aware of how this affected women's successful embodiment of fighting fitness, and that they were largely critical of it, suggests an awareness of the culturally-constructed nature of sex differences. Although differentiations around fitness exercises were not reported as being widespread, they still represented a controversial site where the interviewees vocally contested the logic of female physical inferiority.

Beyond different fitness training programmes, the matter of segregation became more prominent in discussions of drills which involved hard physical contact, such as 'conditioning' exercises and sparring, where the sexes were sometimes separated from each other and integration was not presented as an option. In this instance, participants were divided on whether or not segregation was appropriate. It was evident that segregation would at times arise informally from personal choices, as some female participants told how they were not keen on sparring with men, and how some men with whom they trained felt that there was little to be gained from practicing with women who were often much smaller than them:

"It hurts more, training with the guys, I mean obviously with the bigger guys. Sometimes yeah I do avoid doing drills with them, it just hurts too much, they're too big for me to be honest." (Andrea)

"Yeah we get it happening by itself almost, like women will partner with women and men with men... I think it's because they just go with people who are similar builds to them because it's often easier that way." (John)

Concerning more formally-sanctioned segregation, the most commonplace reason for dividing practice by sex was specifically when training to prepare for competition. This was described as a necessity in terms of both giving male and female fighters the most realistic preparation for facing opponents of their own sex in competitions, and also as a practical measure to ensure they could practice 'properly' (that is, aggressively and without pulling punches) by facing sparring partners of an appropriate weight. Articulating the common association between sex and weight, it

was evident that sex segregation was viewed in this sense as an indirect form of weight segregation:

“The guys that are fighting now they are all heavyweights and they, like the two that are training, they’re ninety-five kilos. And they should take it easy with me anyway otherwise they’d completely annihilate me. And there’s other guys, other fighters in the gym, where it’s more balanced and we can go heavy on each other and they still feel like they’re getting something out of it.” (Helen)

“If you’re getting ready to compete then you shouldn’t be sparring with girls. It’s the same as if you’re sparring with guys who weigh less than you, because there’s no girls in my weight division so I only ever spar them or roll with them for technique practice.” (Elliot)

Dividing the sexes based on the observable weight differences between them was considered by many participants to be an appropriate, legitimate form of segregation, because it made sense relative to the demands of competition and did not assume that sex by itself was the reason to split classes; larger men would not train with smaller women, but nor would they train with smaller men. Outside of this form of segregation, it was evident that some of the coaches under whom participants had trained often had reservations about fully integrated training outside of ‘full-on’, competitive sparring, wherein sex was more central in its own right. For instance, coaches were said to worry about gendered physical mismatches leading to injuries which they could be considered liable for, and also about ensuring new (female) members were not made to feel intimidated by training with men:

“In the gym I trained with when I was a student they said it would be against health and safety rules because blokes were generally bigger and so it was just safer to keep us apart, because of injuries and I guess (the coaches) were worried about that, like if a girl got hurt by a bloke then people would be going after them for letting it happen... In my Dad’s gym, it’s a small gym, he’s not worried about health and safety but because there are only a few members we also have to think about scaring women away so (the coaches) keep (certain drills) separate to begin with, it makes sense to (newer female members) like that.” (Claude)

Given the particularly gendered mindset characteristic of new and inexperienced club members, it was apparent that segregation could be used as a way of ‘softening’ women’s entry into martial arts. The perceived differences between the sexes, coalescing around men’s (assumed) size, toughness and strength advantages, were therefore cause for segregation because of the ways in which inexperienced members or outsiders might be inclined to think about sex. That is to say that it was reported that coaches feared incidences of injury could appear more drastic to health and safety regulators when inflicted upon a woman by a man, and that the tougher aspects of training could appear more intimidating to inexperienced women if they were asked to practice them with men. That these segregations were tailored to the expectations of relative outsiders is telling, inasmuch as those with significant personal, embodied knowledge of martial arts (e.g. my participants – several of whom were or had been coaches in some capacity) preferred not to train in segregated classes.

Reasons for criticising a segregated approach to training were varied but again tended to coalesce around the notion that segregating the sexes ultimately *creates* the very division it intends to reflect; the idea that men are physically superior combatants. This gendered positioning was decried in terms of its explicit sexism, and also as a form of defeatist reasoning which was fundamentally at odds with the discourse of self-improvement so central to martial arts training:

“It wouldn’t go down well if we segregated like some clubs do. The girls would not like that one bit, one of my female friends once said that it’s like telling them to leave us (men) to it, like they aren’t good enough to partner with us. Yeah they wouldn’t like that... We actually encourage the girls to partner with guys because they benefit a lot from it, and the guys too, like they wouldn’t think.” (John)

“In my old club it didn’t matter who you sparring with, and I think that’s much better really, you learn so much more, like you learn how to take hard punches from the blokes who are bigger than you. It’s important you learn how to get hit like that otherwise you’ll never get stronger yourself.” (Sara)

For all participants, it remained important to recognise and be careful with physically different sparring or training partners, although this was almost always a concern about physical size and not directly to do with a person's sex, as outlined above. The general feeling was that training with the opposite sex was desirable, owing both to the beneficial experience of training with a number of different partners (as mentioned previously) but also to avoid placing artificial limitations on women's opportunities to develop their abilities by casting them into a separate, less intense training group. This is because segregation in this regard was always discussed relative to not just superficial, but in fact hierarchal differences between the sexes. That is, segregation was often interpreted as a function of the idea that women should not train with men because they aren't able to keep up with the demands of men's training (McDonagh & Pappano, 2008). When such sex segregations arose in relation to activities where physical strength and toughness were important, it was felt by some that training practices were becoming unduly conservative and contradicting the important message and purpose of an inclusive martial arts philosophy:

"If you say you're a girl so you shouldn't train as hard as men, what does that say? 'You're weak so you should stay weak?' I don't like it. 'You're a girl', so what? You can still train hard, get strong, be a good fighter... That's what martial arts is for, giving that strength to anyone despite how big or strong they already are... That's what brings a lot of guys to it so why should it be a different message to the girls?" (Simon)

"I know I can't spar a heavyweight, I'm not big enough, but I can spar a guy my own weight, no problem. So I just don't get it when people think like, (women can't match men) because what are we teaching you here? It's important we actually practice what we preach and let women (spar against men), which we do in my club." (Marie)

Judging by the participants' responses, there was evidently a degree of tension within some clubs regarding integrated training practices, reflecting a conflict between the notion that men and women 'need' to be separated at certain points in training, and what many participants perceived as the fundamental core of martial arts discourse, that anyone can become a good fighter if they worked hard enough.

As such, integration 'to a point' in practice highlights the contradictory natures of hierarchal gender discourse and inclusive martial arts discourse. The emergent consensus towards what constituted legitimate segregation settled around the often direct relationship between sex and size/weight, showing the importance of recognising sex segregation as never self-evidently justified to experienced martial artists. This is in contrast to some previous work which has argued that sex segregation is largely accepted as an unproblematic and 'normal' way to practice sport: "(it) is such an ingrained part of athletics at every skill level that it rarely draws attention, much less protest... Sex segregation in sports is so taken for granted that it is only challenged in rare circumstances" (McDonagh & Pappano, 2008: 8-9).

It appears then that after women's entry into martial arts is celebrated and promoted widely, and given that opportunities to become competitive fighters and coaches do exist, the only remaining formal barrier to sexual equality is to do with integrating men's and women's practice of the rougher physical elements of martial arts. While it was reported that many clubs do practice such things in integrated settings (i.e. without formalised, normative separation), there are still problems encountered based on individuals' hesitation, fears, and sense of propriety in practice.

### ***5.3.2 Mixed-Sex Competition: The Final Frontier for Integration?***

One other very interesting aspect of integration is an extrapolation of integrated sparring practice: pitting men and women against one another in mixed-sex competition. There was only limited evidence to suggest that this 'next step' towards sex equality, as it were, has been made, and no suggestion that formal mixed-sex competitive sparring is commonplace in any martial arts discipline. Rather, given that the competitive opportunities open to women are often very limited (as discussed above), this sometimes leads those few who are driven to compete to go up against whoever is available at tournaments, normally men. In other words, the lack of adequate (or even any) female opposition on occasion gives

rise to mixed-sex competition more or less by accident, as one or two women will enter what was otherwise intended to be a male division at events where no women's division can legitimately be offered. Since competitors are grouped according to weight categories, the physical differences between individuals (weight, strength, reach) can be more or less equalised, making mixed-sex sparring competition a justifiable accommodation for women who want to put their skills to the test. Not surprisingly given the hesitations often felt in sparring practice, attitudes towards mixed-sex competition were reportedly negative among many within martial arts. According to two of the participants, women often struggle to convince (male) competition organisers to let them compete in men's divisions:

"I said, you know, 'let me do it, I've been training with men all the time', and he said 'no it's not fair on the men if you do it... because if they lose it's embarrassing that they lost to a woman but if they win then what have they gained?' Which I thought was ridiculous because obviously when you're fighting someone who's at the same weight as you, been training the same amount of time as you, then it's the same thing isn't it?" (Rachel)

"I was the only woman there that day so I asked them to let me fight the men, I knew they didn't want it but then they eventually let me. But they put me in a weight category below my weight, thinking I'd be rubbish, and obviously I wasn't because I'd been doing it for years. I beat everyone easily, it was a joke really, and I told them they should take me more seriously next time." (Louise)

Reservations towards mixed-sex competition were not felt by tournament organisers alone. While the majority of participants who had not had any experience of mixed competition expressed curiosity about the possibility, many felt that it would be difficult in practice, particularly for men. As is explored in detail in Chapter 7, hitting women was something with which many male martial artists struggle, as in spite of whatever else they may reject about traditional gender roles, the moral necessity of not 'hurting' women remains an important aspect of their understanding of gender propriety. And since competitive sparring necessitates the use of maximum effort, often with the most aggressive and physically powerful fighter being rewarded victory, it was felt by some that mixed competitions would be problematic so long as

men were holding themselves to this 'masculine' imperative. Given that contradictory messages are at play when men are asked to compete physically with women in combat sports, there was a sense among some participants that men would be psychologically disadvantaged:

"I personally wouldn't hit a girl as hard as I would a guy... You think about it more, that sort of thing... I don't think I would be able to fight in a competition against (a woman) because I'd be too busy thinking about it, about not hitting hard." (Steve)

"I guess it wouldn't work for everyone, most men aren't ready for this are they?" (Ed)

Nevertheless, despite the general sense of opposition to or unease with mixed-sex sparring, those participants who had competed against the opposite sex felt that there was nothing intrinsically wrong with the arrangement, and that it actually represented a more progressive move for inclusion and equality than the establishment of separate women's divisions:

"I do want more women to compete, but if they won't come (to events) then I want women to be allowed to fight with men. I don't see it as being unsafe, or against any health and safety thing. If anything what I've done so far shows you how putting us in different divisions is like, well it's stupid to begin with. When we beat men it shows everyone we should be taken seriously." (Rachel)

"Because fighting sports are always divided by weight you never get massive men fighting small men, so if a woman is trained to that high level it makes sense for them to fight against men... We're getting more and more equal and if it's ok in training then why not give it a go competitively?" (Simon)

As with other aspects of women's involvement in martial arts, it is evident that when the activity under question stands far outside of the limits of traditional gender discourse, the martial artists' ability to accept and celebrate it is dependent upon their level of personal experience in the sport. Contrasting his earliest experience of mixed-sex competition as a teenager in a karate tournament (in which he claimed to



have become too nervous at the prospect of fighting a girl to properly focus and subsequently lost) with a much later experience in a mixed grappling contest, one participant stressed the importance of his maturity and contextual knowledge in understanding and engaging in the fight in the legitimising terms of martial arts:

“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 didn’t feel like I did when I was a kid, definitely not. Because again as a kid I didn’t know what to think, but at this point I knew she was a great athlete and that we were both there to win... So yeah, I didn’t have any hesitation about trying to beat her.” (Andy)

Although it remains a rarity, those who had participated in formally-sanctioned mixed-sex competition spoke in largely positive terms about it, and whilst experiencing and recognising the controversies which surround the activity, they were still able to frame it as both legitimate and worthwhile. Once again the juxtaposition between traditional hierarchal gender discourse and a liberal, inclusive, de-gendered martial arts discourse is apparent, and there is evidence to suggest that those who have actually experienced competing in mixed-sex settings tend to support the latter. That acceptance of and participation in mixed-sex competition is not more widely seen is a function of the relatively entrenched character of the former, which remains the norm regarding competition in spite of several challenges to its hegemony elsewhere in the martial arts world. As mixed-sex competition is rare and often lacks institutional support, there is less opportunity for martial artists to take part in or even watch it, and thus limited scope for it to be impressed upon them as a viable alternative to the normalised separation of the sexes seen in competitive martial arts and in (combat) sports more generally.

Judging from the findings given above, the degree to which martial arts training is integrated between the sexes is therefore evidently still a largely contested matter, with norms differing between and within clubs/disciplines. The general picture, however, is that integration is accepted up to a point, after which certain ‘ultimate’ differences between the sexes are considered to be too great to surmount and men and women are segregated out of a perceived necessity. While some experiences

provide evidence to the contrary, these are relatively uncommon and in most cases the integration of martial arts training is incomplete. That segregation takes place mostly around the most physically intense aspects of martial arts is indicative of the resilience of traditional gender discourse, echoing the logic behind the emergence of early forms of modern sport as described by Messner (1988), Theberge (2000b), and others. In the face of growing equality and integration elsewhere, there remains a 'last instance' in which men and women 'must' be kept separate, as the fundamental division between the sexes continues to be defined in terms of men's superior physical prowess and the naturalised assumption of inevitable masculine domination (McCaughey, 1997). Further, it is clear from the discourse generated by participants with ample experience of martial arts that this 'last instance' is itself responsible for maintaining the grounds of its own necessity, as men's and women's practices of embodiment are concurrently shaped by the differential demands it places upon them. Yet once again, the experiences of the few who believe and act differently to the imperatives of these demands can work to "deconstruct the 'normal' symbolic boundaries between male and female" (Hargreaves, 1997: 33), and thus help to illustrate that gender "might well be constructed differently" (Butler, 2008: 149).

#### **5.4 Discussion: Against the 'Male Preserve'? The Possibility of Combat Sport as a Subversive Space**

*If a critical mass of females were exposed to this kind of environment and sustained practice, particularly at a young age, we would observe some profound changes in the way women experience their bodies and the world. (Castelnuovo & Guthrie, 1998: 88)*

To summarise the findings presented in this chapter, it is evident that the participants believed women's presence in martial arts was normal, and that there was no reason why they should not have the same access to opportunities to compete and teach as do men. All participants were in agreement that men and women benefited from training together, and everyone preferred to train in mixed-sex clubs. There was evidence that women's competition is not as well established

as men's, but that female fighters and their (male) coaches are working towards equalising this. Although women are not accepted as coaches by all members of their clubs, this was something which was often overcome by earning respect through demonstrating their abilities. Within mixed-sex clubs, training was often described as being fairly well integrated, although participants differed on their definitions of exactly how far integration should go and noted that different clubs have different norms concerning the matter, with consensus as to 'correct' segregation settling around the notion that sex and weight were often directly related. The point at which integration rarely occurred was in sparring competition, something which only a few participants had personally experienced, and around which a certain amount of controversy exists. Overall, women and men do experience a great deal of shared opportunities in martial arts, but there remain points at which they are differentiated between, and these points are often contested. All of these issues seem to articulate a tension between two different ways of understanding the practice of mixed-sex martial arts, that is between dominant conceptions of gender which place men and women in a hierarchal binary privileging men as women's more physically powerful, combative superiors; and the fundamental discourse of martial arts training which positions the sex of the practitioner as irrelevant in light of the transformative potential of technical training. Frequently, this tension manifests in the findings as a function of the broader culture outside of martial arts (with its dominant gender discourse linking men, masculinity, and fighting whilst excluding women) versus the embodied knowledge one can gain from inside of it.

What then do these findings mean in terms of the central question of this thesis – that of the subversive potential of mixed-sex martial arts? Principally, this chapter has been structured towards addressing the contention that combat sports represent a "masculine domain par excellence" (Mennesson, 2000: 28), or in other words, a "male preserve" (Dunning, 1986), a homosocial space in which men can practice an activity which is of huge importance in the shoring up of their privileged status as the 'stronger' sex. The findings suggest that in the contemporary context,

where mixed-sex classes are the norm for the practice of martial arts, such terms inadequately describe this particular form of combat sport. As one participant put it:

“I’ve travelled around the world, I’ve met hundreds and hundreds of different fighters and instructors, and we talk about it but never once in twenty-five years did we have a conversation, discussed it like oh, what do you think to women in this sport? Nobody ever said it, oh you know, maybe we shouldn’t let them in, maybe it’s ruining our sport, they shouldn’t be involved... There’s never been a problem with women doing it, or why women do it, or them making anyone feel uncomfortable, because it’s just normal.” (Amir)

Participants continued to stress that within their own experiences, women’s participation in martial arts was ‘normal’. Indeed, for the majority of participants, the notion that martial arts (or any kind of combat sports) should be described as ‘manly’ was in fact that which they considered to be *abnormal*, with some participants responding to the idea with incredulity and confusion. Therefore, as opposed to the masculinist, exclusive, homosocial spaces described by earlier work in the sociology of sport (Sheard & Dunning, 1973; Messner, 1990a; etc), or the relatively hostile, ‘male-dominated’ gyms described in some previous studies of women’s entry into martial arts and other combat sports (Mennesson, 2000; Lafferty & McKay, 2004), my findings suggest that in the contemporary UK context martial arts classes are diverse environments where opportunities to participate and to excel are open to both sexes.

This is made possible principally by the circulation of an alternative discourse of corporeal normality, which draws on the discursive meanings of martial arts in order to help construct a way of seeing the body outside of the usual dictates of naturalistic, sexist binaries. Believing that it is training which produces the body of an ideal fighter, martial artists frame their corporeal and gendered selves as malleable, pliable subjects whose embodiment is a function of their deliberate performance of this alternative martial arts discourse (McCaughey, 1997). This belief is central to the martial artists’ endeavour, and is a clear undercurrent in many iconic media representations of martial arts. For instance, *The Karate Kid* sees the unfit

and weak young male protagonist transform from the school bullies' easy target to a fighting champion following training. The same transformation affects a female counterpart in the film's third sequel, *The Next Karate Kid*. The centrality of this discourse of physical self-improvement to men's (and women's) uptake of martial arts exemplifies the "ability of bodies to... extend the frameworks which attempt to contain them, to seep beyond their domains of control" (Grosz, 1994: xi), finding purchase for their agency within the parameters of a new discursive space. For many participants this was combined with a self-identified predilection for liberal gender relations and 'equal opportunities', meaning that women's shared ownership of this training potential stands to reason as an obvious and 'normal' phenomenon. As such, martial arts can clearly represent a site where progressive gender practices take place because the dominant meanings of martial arts construct sex as a superficial difference, and physicality more generally as something which can be altered through deliberate action. These discourses are, evidently, practiced and embodied by both men and women through training, confirming the central message of this inclusive philosophy through the visibility of proficient female fighters. Just as many scholars have previously suggested, women become such competent fighters through hard work in training (Halbert, 1997; McCaughey, 1997; etc), and along with their male peers they come to embody the discourses which have inspired them. In a sense, they are 'the word become flesh', providing "dramatic symbolic proof" (Messner, 1988: 200) not of natural male superiority, but rather of the primacy of the effects of culture upon the body (Grosz, 1994; Bordo, 2003). Integrated martial arts training thereby generates a discourse of the body which highlights the socially-constructed character of (sexual) difference, something which was not lost on the interview participants in this study.

However, it is not the case that these practices hold out the promise of easily-attained, cut-and-dry equality between men and women. The participants' accounts given in this chapter have highlighted the ways in which traditional patterns of gender differentiation have often recurred within the settings explored, hampering the development and spread of these gender-subversive practices. It is clear that in several instances, changes to martial artists' reckonings of gender are still shaped by

dominant discursive structures. To suggest therefore that martial arts practice represents a uniform social space through which participants may easily learn new gender discourses would be incorrect, as mixed-sex martial arts training does not take place in an insulated, self-contained arena within which gender is always 'done' differently. Furthermore, it would be wrong to draw absolute distinctions between martial arts and 'the rest' of contemporary physical culture, as if gender is only thought of and performed differently within the training hall. Rather, different, competing discourses of sex, gender and the body circulate and are practiced and embodied within the context of martial arts, and the outcomes for subversive sexed embodiment remain relatively limited because of this. For instance, the relatively low number of women who progress to the level of organised competitive sparring results in the re-affirmation of a differentiation between men and women regarding fighting. As men are over-represented in competitive martial arts, there becomes the sense among some that to compete is therefore 'masculine', and the characteristics of a competitive martial artist (serious about fighting, competitive, physically dominant, aggressive, etc) are reified as masculine qualities, in line with traditional conceptions of (hegemonic) masculinity (Messner, 1990a; Connell, 1995). This masculine discourse is then felt to deter some women from aspiring to compete, feeding back into the initial lack of female representation and thus effectively providing evidence in support of itself. Therefore, despite the formal lack of constraints and the widely-held view (from within) that there is nothing inappropriate or wrong with women's martial arts, the ways in which masculine and feminine propriety are discussed and practiced *outside* of the norms of martial arts continues to restrict the free practice of the more equal alternative on offer. This is also evident in such phenomena as women's initial entry into martial arts, their acceptance as coaches and training partners, etc.

Yet within this continuing tension, a further mechanism through which martial arts can be a site of gender subversion surfaces. Given that competing discourses are seemingly in operation, structuring the practice of martial arts in specifically gendered ways, how is it that one comes to leave behind the adherence to and practice of one and take part in an alternative? It is evident from these findings that

the general pattern in this regard is that traditional gender differences are often cited by and upheld through the practices of those who are less experienced within and lack personal knowledge of mixed-sex martial arts. Conversely, it is primarily with reference to their personal, embodied experiences that those with greater knowledge of the activity explain their alternative, subversive attitudes and practices. In this sense, 'seeing is believing', as more experienced martial artists are led to actively contest traditional discursive systems, as their knowledge gives them sufficient intellectual resources to take part in the construction and propagation of a more open discourse of sexed embodiment. Contrasting their views against those of the 'others' – namely, those who might consider martial arts to be a 'man's sport', those with condescending and disrespectful attitudes towards female coaches, or those who resist integration in training – helps to solidify the belief that 'true' martial arts knowledge instigates a breakdown of sexual differentiation. In other words, living out and embodying this knowledge against a backdrop of discrimination and resistance which, vitally, is explained as a function of inexperience or ignorance, enables martial artists to develop a 'superior', more 'enlightened' gender discourse which portrays traditional, hierarchal sexual binaries in a negative light. In this way, the alternative discourse is consciously and purposefully constructed in opposition to the 'normal' way of thinking. It is actively subversive of the traditional structure.

Therefore, the matter of women's equal participation in mixed-sex martial arts draws out and insists upon engagement with an intellectual debate over a key moment in the theoretical negotiation of understanding the body. According to Butler (2008: 202), "there is no possibility of agency or reality outside of the discursive practices that give those terms the intelligibility that they have". From the findings presented above, it can be argued that practicing mixed-sex martial arts provides the discursive resources necessary to actively engage in a form of agency which exists outside of the usual parameters of sexual difference, but *inside* those of the corporeal norms of martial arts. This is achieved through the propagation and practice of an alternative discourse about bodies which: a) implicitly portrays the body as an effect of deliberate effort, as something which is culturally constructed and not just naturally occurring; and b) explicitly disassociates the exclusive link

between men, masculinity and fighting. In this way, through jointly embodying the central message of martial arts, and actively engaging with oppositional ideas which others hold and which sometimes constrain their practices, male and female martial artists can become sensitive towards what is considered a crucial debate within sociology. They are then able to engage in this debate from a position informed by personal, embodied knowledge, of a type “located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity” (Foucault, 1972: 41), yet nevertheless potentially transformative.

In this sense, it is my contention that the fact of women’s participation in such activities, particularly in sex-integrated settings, and particularly when they hold positions of seniority and ownership over them, *can hold out the possibility for the subversion of gender* by giving men and women the material upon which to build an alternative discourse about the body. In the following two chapters, I will present more findings and offer more analysis of other ways in which this can take place, exploring first how male and female martial artists express gendered identities and deal with questions of sameness and difference, and second, the particular issues faced by participants as they actively embody these alternative, subversive discourses.



## 6

### ***Masculinities, Femininities, Sexualities: Martial Artists' Gendered Identities***

This chapter details how the male and female martial artists understood, discussed and engaged with gender. The key thematic areas which inform this chapter include: men's critical engagement with dominant codes of masculinity; women's embodiment of 'masculine' characteristics through training; women's negotiation of this masculinity alongside their understanding of femininity; participants' perspectives on the deliberateness and (in)essential nature of gender; and the production, maintenance and defence of specific, idealised gender codes.

As outlined in Chapter 5, the contention that martial arts is a 'man's sport' or 'manly activity' was often framed by participants as a fundamental misinterpretation of the meanings of martial arts. However, this masculinised label of the activity remained as an effective limitation on women's entry into and sometimes progression within martial arts, particularly owing to the pervasiveness of traditional gender discourse among new participants and among those with limited experience of mixed-sex training and competition. Likewise, this chapter will discuss the ways in which dominant codes of masculinity and femininity remained as structuring elements of martial artists' conceptions of themselves and their activities, as they attempted to define gender in ways which sometimes conformed to and sometimes challenged dominant stereotypes. Ultimately the chapter will outline how these typical, binary types (and the heterosexual imperative which they imply) were selectively and deliberately practiced by the participants, alongside re-articulations of gender which their experiences as martial artists allowed them to make. The chapter will conclude by suggesting that these findings lend strength to the model of gender as a 'performative' construct (Butler, 2008), a deliberate and changeable identity which is

practiced and embodied in line with existing, available discursive structures in contexts of productive and punitive power relations (Foucault, 1977a).

The chapter will be divided into two main sub-sections, discussing firstly how conceptions of gender affect men's experiences of martial arts, and secondly how they shape women's experiences. Attention will be paid to men's negotiation of masculinity, and women's engagement with both this and femininity, as female martial artists (like female athletes more generally) are faced with questions of both masculinity and femininity as they engage in supposedly 'masculine' sport (Halbert, 1997; Miller, 2010). The data gathered from interviews with both male and female participants tended to reveal that the experiences of women were often shaped by both of these two oppositional gender types, while men's engagement with gender coalesced principally around their understanding and practice of differing codes of masculinity.

### **6.1 Male Martial Artists' Engagement with Gender**

*The internal complexities of masculinities has only gradually come into focus as a research issue... Masculinities are likely to involve specific patterns of internal division and emotional conflict, precisely because of their association with gendered power. (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005: 852)*

Until recently, the majority of the research literature concerning men, masculinity and combat sports has portrayed men's practice as being central in upholding hierarchal gender differentiation by engendering and privileging certain dominant, or 'hegemonic', types of masculinity (Messner, 1990a; Young, 1993; Connell, 1995). As outlined in Chapter 2, men's uptake of such sports and their embodiment of the 'masculine' virtues they are taken to represent are considered by feminist scholars to be fundamentally important in maintaining men's dominant position over women, and also the structures of dominance between men as such sports help to clarify what counts as 'correct' masculine behaviour. As such, one's aptitude in the games of physical domination within combat sports are considered to be a symbolic marker

of one's relative position in the gender order, with the most powerful and successful performances being coded 'masculine' and receiving the greatest prestige (Connell, 1995). Seen in this light, sport acts as "a social institution principally organised around the political project of defining certain forms of masculinity as acceptable, while denigrating others" (Anderson, 2009b: 3), and more broadly, as a space for the "naturalisation of (all) men's power over (all) women" (Messner, 1990a: 60). Consequently, men's practice of combat sports has been considered to entail the practice of exclusive, chauvinistic, and homophobic forms of masculine identity, which devalue alternative expressions of gender by men, and exclude women from participating to begin with.

In recent years however, scholars interested in the relationship between men, masculinity and sports have begun researching how male athletes have expressed forms of masculinity which are more open to alternatives; for instance, the expression of feminine character by men, practices of male homosexuality, and respect for the presence of women in sports (e.g., Price & Parker, 2003; Anderson, 2008a, 2008b). As such, it is apparent that in the contemporary context, men's practice of 'masculine' combat sports cannot be linked *a priori* with masculinist discourses of male supremacy, machismo or heterosexual exclusivity, as alternative expressions of masculinity have been shown to exist in the world of sport. Considering these emergent forms of more 'liberal' masculinity, this sub-section will outline the ways in which male participants discussed traditional, 'stereotypical' masculinities and either endorsed or rejected them as legitimate gender identities for both themselves and their respective sports/disciplines.

### **6.1.1 Martial Arts as a Site for Questioning 'Masculinity'**

To begin with, the question of masculinity was addressed by discussing how participants felt about the contention that martial arts was a 'masculine' activity. As already discussed, this idea was often challenged by both male and female participants, and would frequently lead to questioning what was meant by

'masculinity' itself. Recognising the implicit linkages between coding the activity 'male' and the exclusion of women, participants problematised the exclusivity of gender labelling owing to their understanding and valuing of women's presence in their sports:

"Since women can do martial arts too, it's wrong to say that it's manly, you know, you shouldn't refer to it as being a man's thing when both can do it and have those qualities (strength, confidence, competitiveness)." (Simon)

"It's an old stereotype, maybe that's what martial arts was (in the past). But I think now, women are taking up a variety of sports and martial arts is part of that so no, I don't think it's masculine or manly or whatever you want to call it." (Claude)

While all of the participants disagreed with the idea that *their* martial art was 'masculine', it was fairly common to associate different disciplines with these gendered meanings. For instance, there was a tendency to describe especially 'strong' or 'hard' martial arts as being masculine:

"Certain martial arts might be more manly than others, things like karate and taekwondo I wouldn't class as being specifically manly because both women and men can do them... (But) like boxing, MMA, and muay thai, I think they are more manly because there's more emphasis on strength... you couldn't really match men and women up, I don't think it would be possible to have a mixed fight." (Steve)

This association between certain martial arts, 'strength' and masculinity is reminiscent of the general perspective of *all* martial arts being a showcase of traditional masculine virtues, and reflects the typical discursive association between maleness and physical power. Tellingly however, these gendered differentiations between disciplines were made by martial artists who did not have experience of these other styles which they cited as being masculine. In contrast to Steve's classification, other participants with direct experience in these styles offered their thoughts on masculinity and mixed-sex participation in muay thai and MMA:

“I thought it would be just men there, be very masculine... (But then) I saw this girl, just sixteen, and she’d fight properly. I saw her fight with no pads, proper full contact, knees to the head, everything, I was like, fuck! She’s good, and I trained with her and got a lot out of it... If you’ve been in the gym long enough to see that then you know it’s ok for women.” (Ed)

“The main girls (in the MMA club) are just very individual people, they are who they are, they’re not masculine or butch, not like that.” (Andy)

So, while the general feeling among male participants was that the martial arts discipline they participated in was not necessarily ‘manly’ (in spite of what others might think), this position begged the question as to whether or not they considered themselves, as martial artists, to be ‘manly’. In response to this question, almost all participants began by defining what they thought ‘manly’ or ‘masculine’ would mean not to themselves, but to others, framing their own masculinity by addressing perceived stereotypes about what it meant to be a ‘real’ man. These accounts were all given in such a way as to cast these ‘macho’ forms of masculinity as distasteful, comical, or simply unrealistic:

“A lot of guys come in here with that ego, the big man ego... it’s all hot air isn’t it? You have to laugh, they don’t know the half of it and then most of them drop out within a week.” (Amir)

“I think with the way some martial arts are marketed there’s this whole masculine thing where you know, it’s like you get massive and you smash people up and you’re like, the alpha male, all aggressive and intimidating... I never met anyone who was a real martial artist who was in any way like that, that kinda thing is just total bullshit in my mind... that kind of attitude isn’t really suitable for a serious martial artist.” (Simon)

Describing masculinity in this negative light was often informed by experiences they had had with particular male martial artists whose ‘masculine’ behaviour was disruptive, off-putting, or otherwise at odds with what they considered to be the normative values and aesthetics of martial arts:

“There are guys out there who compete because they wanna prove they’re better than other people, and that ain’t me, you know, (from practicing karate) I learned that’s not why you should do it... There’s always that guy isn’t there, and I don’t wanna be like that, or have to train with anyone like that.” (Elliot)

“You get guys coming down to the gym and saying they wanna be fighters, they’re usually idiots and won’t do the work or stay with us long. They think they’ve got a strong punch and that’s enough to prove themselves... there’s a lot of machismo but as soon as they get schooled in training, that’s it, they leave... We get a lot of that, but it’s nearly all just that childish bullshit, you can see it a mile off and I just don’t have the time of day for it.” (Andy)

Invoking the ‘seriousness’ of their disciplines, the male participants who were especially critical of this form of masculine behaviour argued that martial arts should not be considered as a proving ground for ‘childish’ fantasies of male invincibility. Interestingly, some of these same participants had previously told how their initial entry into martial arts was framed by these same masculine discourses – revolving around the desire to become a good fighter – and as such, they were able to discuss it in infantilising terms as the motivation of the immature or inexperienced type of martial artist. As discussed previously, progression within martial arts involved the learning of a new set of meanings with which to make sense of physical combat, gender, the body and so on. This martial arts discourse, fundamentally at odds with the ‘aggressive’, ‘intimidating’, ‘egotistical’ masculinity which the participants were so critical of, helped them to construct their own sense of identity in a position of superiority to the thuggish, immature ‘others’ (from within and outside of martial arts) with whom they had come into contact.

As well as criticising such men’s desire to fight and dominate other men, some of the participants were also critical of other certain, negatively framed ‘masculine’ types of behaviour within martial arts, particularly regarding sexuality and the treatment of women:

“I have a couple of guys in this club who are proper lads. I travel with them sometimes and it’s made me see how I’m not like them at all, the way they

talk about women, and they cheat on their girlfriends, do all this nasty stuff to women, do other people think that's manly? I don't know, I don't like it at all." (Andy)

"I've been to (martial arts) gyms where you'll have guys who talk like they're at a building site... They view it as a male place perhaps, I don't think they mean to put two fingers up to the women... if I'm out on a Friday night drinking with my mates I won't be minding my language, I might piss off the people at the next table but I'm there to have a laugh with my mates. But then for me at the gym that is different, it's a multi-sex gym, you're not drinking with your mates, I wouldn't expect anyone to make a nasty joke in front of women. But some guys do and the problem is there's a blurring of edges when women are there and they carry on with their jokes and I don't think it's right. Not a perfect world I guess." (Ed)

"There's that laddish behaviour when women aren't there, yeah, more swearing, joking about girls. When there are women there you know everyone is more self-conscious about it... you don't want anyone to be made uncomfortable." (Steve)

This sense of propriety around and towards women was something which was evidently contested in certain gyms, although behaving 'like a lad' (that is, using crude language, or exhibiting heterosexist/chauvinistic views) was something of which the majority of male participants were critical, and saw restraint in this regard as a key aspect of their own masculinity. Different standards for acceptable behaviour with regard to humour and overt displays of sexuality are to be expected among such a broad and heterogeneous group as 'male martial artists', but evidently the stance taken by the participants in this study was that a certain sense of reserve was necessary when it comes to training in mixed-sex company.

The majority of the male participants initially described 'masculinity' as negative in these ways, and thereby distanced themselves from renditions of a type of gender identity which they framed as being incompatible with the dominant meanings of martial arts. That certain men practice combat sports in order to develop their ability to dominate others (e.g. Messner, 1990a) was considered particularly distasteful, and even though physical domination remains a central theme in most

martial arts training and competition, engaging in such practices in order to enhance social standing or masculine credibility was cast as illegitimate and immature. After all, in line with the structures of seniority described in Chapter 5, the 'better' martial artist was expected to teach others, not dominate them. In addition to this, according to the discourse of appropriate masculine behaviour shared by most of the male participants, attitudes towards women were supposed to be respectful and the overt sexual objectification or joking derision of women was largely considered inappropriate (at least in the gym, and particularly when female members were present). These findings illustrate that mixed-sex martial arts training is idealised by the male interviewees as a form of combat sport which does not act as a 'male preserve' in the ways described by Sheard & Dunning (1973), Messner (1990a), McKay, Messner & Sabo (2000), and others. In fact, in line with Anderson's (2008a) contention that sex-integrated sports are conducive to more liberal and accepting forms of masculinity as well as a greater degree of respect for the abilities of women, it appears that for the majority of the research participants their involvement in mixed-sex martial arts led them to consolidate a type of identity which stood in opposition to the domineering, chauvinistic, exclusive types identified in this earlier research.

### ***6.1.2 Male Martial Artists and 'Real' Men***

So what, exactly, did the male participants make of their own 'masculinity'? Recognising that masculine identity does not exist in the singular, but rather appears in many varieties (e.g. Connell, 1995), means that the participants' rejection of what they considered to be typical masculine form does not necessarily preclude their practice and embodiment of other characteristics considered to be 'masculine'. In determining what the participants considered suitable, legitimate and even admirable forms of masculine identity, a more subtle approach to questioning was needed, given the outright rejection of the term which usually followed from their derisory definitions of mainstream masculinity. When asked what 'type' of man usually participated in their clubs, what 'type' they thought they were, and who in



particular they respected and looked up to, the male participants were more forthcoming in revealing exactly what kind of masculinity they embraced:

“Well a lot of people in my circle of friends who do martial arts, they’re like me and they don’t go around wearing it on their sleeves, I do kung fu, that sort of thing. They’re more subdued about it... Yeah, I think a real man isn’t into superficial things.” (Steve)

“I think if you’ve got something to prove all the time then you’re not comfortable in your own skin, and to be honest with you I’ve never liked men who are always out to prove something... That kind of quiet confidence that you see in a lot of martial artists, that’s a lot more real to me than all the bluster and showboating of like, bodybuilder types, image-focussed, sort of thing.” (Jack)

“My (male) fighters here, they’re from all types of backgrounds. If you met them in the street you’d not know they were fighters, and that’s the thing with kickboxing, I’ve always said it just produces grounded people, whereas other sports like boxing, well it produces thugs. My kickboxing guys aren’t going around showing off, starting fights, acting out, they’re just normal people who know what they’re about... They’re not acting tough all the time either, I mean if you don’t cry does that make you a real man? No, I just think it means you’re covering up, pretending, not being yourself... I’ve had lads pour their hearts out to me, some of them have had hard lives, you know, and they’ve literally told me that kickboxing saved their lives, and I got nothing but respect for them.” (Amir)

“I’ve seen a lot of people grow as people, like with respect to this contact stuff, experienced wrestlers will hug each other, I know guys who’ll come up and kiss me, there’s no boundaries with it because you’re used to rolling on the mat, they’re not worried about what other people will think.” (Andy)

A preference for a subdued, subtle, personal form of masculinity, a gender identity which was not ‘for show’, not for others, and not overtly deliberate, was common among many of the male participants, as was an appreciation for the kind of emotional expressiveness and honesty which could otherwise be derisively construed as ‘feminine’ or ‘gay’. This was often identified as the ‘type’ of man who really excelled in martial arts, owing to the humility of his quiet confidence and his

openness towards others. These qualities enabled him to effectively embody both the discipline and mutual trust required for good training free from the trappings of a harmful and distracting 'ego'. They were also conducive to (and perhaps inspired by) the respect for women which these idealised martial arts men would exhibit:

"It's one of those things that when you're a bit humble about yourself and you think well, I never used to be much good until I started training, then you think well if I can do it then anyone can. So why would you say it's not normal for girls to fight, because they can fight, I mean anyone can... I think it's rare for a real martial artist to say girls can't fight." (Simon)

In addition to these qualities, and in spite of their general rejection of and purposeful differentiation from certain prominent aspects of 'mainstream', dominant versions of masculinity, all of the participants described some degree of identification and engagement with particular elements of this character. For instance, to the participants who competed and/or coached competitors, male competitiveness was valued and not considered the sole property of the 'undesirable' types. In other words, it was an element of 'normal' hegemonic masculinity which was compatible with martial arts in specific ways. Particularly, harnessing men's assumed typical competitive impulses was thought to be useful in order to encourage them to reach their potential, so long as this competitiveness remained tempered by the discursive parameters of martial arts:

"People who don't do martial arts will think it's just fighting, but competing is a good way to learn, because when you do martial arts you understand that it's not a fight, it has those other aspects to it. You compete to bring out your best, it's really more about helping each other rather than beating each other. Martial artists have a better perspective on why you compete." (David)

Another characteristic which was common among the participants, and which they identified as an element of traditional masculinity, was a paternalistic attitude towards the women they trained with, coalescing around a reluctance to 'hurt' women by sparring with them at the same intensity as with other men. Several of

the male participants described how this was particularly important to them personally, owing to their understanding of what it meant to respect women:

“I really don’t wanna hurt women, that’s quite important to me, from the way I was raised. Don’t hurt women, yeah, that’s a big thing, like, an important part of being a man I think.” (Elliot)

“Well it sounds bad, but I wouldn’t feel guilty if I hurt a guy, but if I hurt a girl I would feel really bad about it, really guilty... as a boy you’re always taught not to hit girls, aren’t you?” (Steve)

“With guys you just say go on, suck it up mate. But for girls, it’s different, it feels wrong to hit them hard and to hurt them, you’re more apologetic about it. I know that’s a bit wrong, but that’s how it feels.” (John)

Ironically, given the general stance of the participants being one of respect for female martial artists, this was frequently cited as an element of masculine propriety which, in the eyes of most of the female participants and even to some of the men themselves, evidenced a misplaced sense of chivalry that was experienced by the women as personally undermining rather than respectful. Even though some of the men were aware of this, many found it hard to act otherwise, citing ‘deep’ hesitation and even fear of being guilty of hurting women. This suggests that not all aspects of traditional masculinity which they saw as undesirable were easy for the men to move away from, although as evidenced in Chapter 5 with regards to mixed competition, some were capable of doing so. This particular phenomenon will be returned to in greater depth in Chapter 7.

In sum then, the men interviewed in this study exhibited a form of masculinity which framed certain types of ‘typical male behaviour’, including aggression, machismo, brashness, over-confidence, and (hetero)sexism as illegitimate and immature. They cast their own masculine identities in opposition to these characteristics, but at the same time several of the men retained certain elements of normative/dominant masculinity such as competitiveness and, in some cases, paternalistic attitudes towards women. However, one very interesting aspect of the men’s critical

negotiation of, practices within, and discourse about masculinity centres around the degree to which they considered 'falseness' and 'realness' to be important factors in defining correct, legitimate forms of identity. For instance, dominating and exclusive masculinity was cast as illegitimate partly for its deliberateness; it was seen as a calculated attempt to impress or intimidate others, and therefore was not 'real'. Such put-on masculinity was considered incompatible with martial arts discourse, as the humility required to train 'properly' was often missing in men whose motivations settled around the desire to physically dominate others and thereby accrue masculine status. Since they were trying to 'do' masculinity, they would miss out on properly 'doing' martial arts. Indeed, the kind of men who would look for fights, boast about their abilities, or assume women did not belong in martial arts lost credibility as 'real' martial artists, but were also critiqued for not being 'real' men either.

### ***6.1.3 Constructing and Defending Idealised Masculine Norms***

The notion that there exists such a thing as 'real' men echoes the argument that "there is a fixed, true masculinity beneath the ebb and flow of daily life" (Connell, 1995: 45), something which is inherent within men and shouldn't need to be deliberately enhanced or proven to anyone. As the participants saw a deliberate, exaggerated, artificial masculinity being performed by others, they interpreted it as distasteful and 'false', and dismissed the men they saw as guilty of it. However, it was evident that this more subtle, supposedly 'internal' masculinity was also being performed, alongside the rejected 'other' which effectively gave it its meaning. By valorising their own more subtle masculine style and embodying the norms of a physical culture which was built upon its virtues, they constructed this alternative type as a deliberate, calculated way of differentiating themselves from the 'others':

"Well I think doing something like martial arts sets you apart. Lots of people go to the gym and get big, but you don't see that many people doing martial arts... it makes you different, and of course it teaches you so much more than the usual ('masculine') stuff does." (Jack)

“Most lads were into football, and I wasn’t really fitting in with them to be honest with you... It made you feel kinda special doing something that other people didn’t do, and I was good at it. And that always helps with the appeal of something.” (Andy)

Furthermore, several of the participants explicitly recognised the deliberateness of their embodiment within this alternative athletic space. Martial arts was frequently cast as a way in which one would ‘develop’ oneself; that is, actively produce a ‘better’ person through the rigours of disciplined training:

“Personal fulfilment and like, development, I think that’s what I get out of this the most. When you do this you can be the person that you want to be.” (Steve)

“I think self-improvement is the main thing that makes this different. You’re not competing to be the best, beat other people. There’s this disciplined side to it, you know, it’s more like you’re trying to make yourself better.” (John)

Finally, the idealised form of masculinity towards which the participants would aspire occupied a position of prestige, which was policed among club memberships through the disciplinary or exclusionary behaviour of the ‘correct’ majority towards the illegitimate ‘others’. By drawing on and embodying elements of this alternative, martial arts-based masculinity, and deliberately seeking to “punish those who fail to do their gender right” (Butler, 2008: 190), the male martial artists were active in constructing and defending their preferred identity:

“You get that twelve-year-old boy psychology going on. In fact I was training with this guy the other day, he was so full of ego and he really wasn’t even very good at all... I’m looking forward to sparring him again. I’ll teach him a lesson. I’m not a malicious person but I’ll happily let him know where he stands. Those kind of egos never last long in the gym, there’s always someone who’ll sort them out... there’s a short tolerance for that kind of thing.” (Ed)

“We get a lot of these chavvy types come down and go yeah, I watch the UFC and wanna be a fighter. So I say yeah ok, two years of practicing your grappling, your stand up, the clinch... and they go no I don’t wanna do any of

that grappling stuff, I wanna do MMA... I won't let them fight for my club, they can compete if they want but they're never gonna represent me (at tournaments), I won't let them." (Andy)

Therefore, the constructions of masculinity which were most prized among the male participants were clearly being chosen, performed and embodied in a most deliberate manner. As they went about earning distinction from others, they framed themselves and their masculine practices and identities as superior to external social norms, and policed the standards of behaviour within the spaces which helped to define themselves as such. The participants were thereby exercising their agency in support of a productive, discursive, power structure which 'made' men (and also, importantly, women) into altogether different, and 'better', people. Regardless of the legitimising, naturalising language which was used – being true or 'real', for instance – the gendered character which was celebrated in this context was clearly a product of socially constructed, performatively regulated discourse (Butler, 2008), with attendant punitive consequences for those who did not conform to its definitive norms. Albeit that the men's identities were structured more or less around openness, humility, and the acceptance of others (including women), the manner in which this dominant code of behaviour was established within the martial arts clubs remains similar to the constitution of gender identities more broadly. Indeed, the men's very point of departure in discussing masculine propriety was to establish first and foremost who it was that *did not fit* within their framework; their own inclusion was taken for granted while defining the grounds for the exclusion of others was a primary concern. As such, and in spite of the fact that it was chauvinism, domination, and other such typically 'negative' masculine behaviours which were being vilified, the male participants were still "defining certain forms of masculinity as acceptable, while denigrating others" (Anderson, 2009b: 3). Therefore, for the male participants, one can say that martial arts remained a site for the constitution and production of a hierarchal formation of gender identities.

## **6.2 Female Martial Artists' Engagement with Gender**

*The athletic body, when coded as athletic, can redeem female sexuality and make it visible as an assertion of female presence... Of course, bodies, muscular or not, can and are coded as vulnerable and/or granting heterosexual access. But it's more complicated than the simple reduction of a woman to a 'piece of ass'. (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003: 82-3)*

Within the sociology of sport literature, female athletes have consistently been shown to struggle with gender as a limiting structure which frustrates and complicates their athletic identities through the discursive conflict between femininity, athleticism and sexuality (Lenskyj, 1986, 1990; Hargreaves, 1994; Theberge & Birrell, 1994; Heywood & Dworkin, 2003). This conflict, as outlined previously, revolves around the perceived discrepancies between dominant codes of femininity and the physical demands of (combat) sports, and is compounded by the hetero- and homosexualisation of women's 'correct' and 'deviant' embodiment of either respectively. In other words, dominant cultural expectations concerning the configuration of sex-gender-sexuality imply that it is normal for a woman to be feminine (correct) if she is heterosexual (correct), or masculine (deviant) if she is homosexual (deviant) (Caudwell, 2003). This 'gender of sexuality' (Schwartz & Rutter, 2000) means that women who engage in behaviours conventionally considered masculine are considered to be homosexual because of this gendered transgression. As such, women in so-called 'masculine' sports are often labelled as 'butch' lesbians, as their male/masculine embodiment is taken to indicate male/masculine sexual desires as well. The heterosexism of this essentialist logic is considered to be harmful to women's successful engagement with sport, because in order to 'prove' heterosexuality (and thereby earn social legitimacy), female athletes must exhibit overt displays of femininity which can directly preclude successful athletic embodiment, which is itself almost always coded as masculine (Hargreaves, 1994; Theberge & Birrell, 1994; Mennesson, 2000). Considering the relative degree of openness towards women in martial arts clubs as previously outlined, as well as the participants' general disagreement with the notion that martial arts is masculine, do women in mixed-sex martial arts clubs feel this need to stress their feminine

identities, to avoid being seen as 'butch' or lesbian, or to otherwise differentiate themselves from the men with whom they train? And how, if at all, do female martial artists construct gendered hierarchies among women, as do their male counterparts regarding men who do not 'fit' with their idealised type?

### **6.2.1 Women, Masculinity, and the 'Butch' Stigma**

To contextualise these questions, the idea that martial arts was a masculine activity was discussed, and the women interviewed were just as quick as the men to dismiss this discursive connection. Similarly interpreting 'masculine' as meaning 'not for (real) women', the female participants stressed that they themselves were visible proof of the fallacy of such assumptions, adding also that their status as 'normal' (i.e., heterosexual; 'straight') women supported this counter argument:

"It doesn't make sense to call it manly when there are loads of girls doing it, and it's not like the girls here are, you know, sort of like the whole butch, feminist lot, they're all really normal." (Marie)

Nevertheless, in spite of how they might think about the obviousness of the 'genderless' character of martial arts, several of the female participants agreed that they had, at times, encountered the kind of heterosexist and homophobic stereotyping commonly directed at female athletes from those outside of the sport. Recognising that in the terms of everyday gender discourse, to fight was not considered 'normal' for women, the participants understood how such stereotyping could come about:

"I understand what martial arts looks like, that it's a close contact, physical sport. I mean obviously I wouldn't wanna be seen as being abnormal, or butch, anything like that, like maybe a lot of martial artists, rugby players, footballers get associated with. I don't think that's very good or accurate, but how do you stop people thinking it?" (Suzie)

The women interviewed noted that the homosexual connotations of being a masculine woman remained as a conscious element of 'doing' one's gender in the



context of being a martial artist. While not all participants were equally preoccupied with avoiding this 'masculine' label, for some it was an important concern, and they told how they would avoid telling others (that is, non-martial artists) about their participation in martial arts because of the tiresome or upsetting judgements which often followed it:

"Sometimes you do get those comments, 'Isn't that a bit manly', that kind of thing. I just find it's easier to not bother talking about it, otherwise I'll get angry at those people." (Kate)

"When I first started muay thai I was a bit embarrassed to say that I did it because of what the boys (at school) would say, you know, they'd tease me about it." (Sylvia)

"There are men I've worked with who just really don't get it. Traditional types, you know, they can't understand that a woman can do serious combat sport. So yeah I don't really talk about it with people I don't know well." (Louise)

An important aspect of the 'masculine' image associated with martial arts, the 'abnormality' of the female fighter which often led to homosexual labelling was considered to be harmful to the development of female participation in martial arts, as it potentially deterred more women from taking part:

"Saying it's masculine is probably what puts a lot of girls off trying it out, especially when they're younger and they care about that kind of thing. I know I wouldn't have thought about doing it when I was younger." (Jenny)

"It's no good for girls who don't know anything about how good kickboxing is, because they'll be put off if they think it's going to make them into a lesbian." (Keeley)

Within their clubs however, the women did not report feeling stigmatised or labelled in this way, and as will be discussed later, the male participants largely perceived women who practiced martial arts as 'normal' – heterosexual, feminine, and even attractive. Within the more familiar setting of the gym then, the women were

reportedly less hesitant about openly embodying what was otherwise considered as ‘masculine’ characteristics. Among their male and female peers, there was little fear over being stigmatised as homosexual<sup>4</sup>, owing to the general understanding among experienced martial artists that fighting prowess was not exclusively masculine and did not necessarily have anything to do with a person’s gender identity or sexual orientation. Free from such anxieties, the women reported that they were proud of their martial arts abilities, of the improvements training made to their self-confidence and assertiveness, and of the strong, tough, well-muscled bodies which allowed them to become effective fighters:

“I am a bit crazy when it comes to fighting, it’s true... I don’t know anything that’s as close to how much I love this, like, I just LOVE it, I love being able to do this.” (Sylvia)

“I feel so much more confident in myself... You don’t realise how much power your body can produce, when you train hard and learn to do the techniques in the right way, it’s amazing.” (Andrea)

“I think people can tell I’m more confident. I’m bigger, like, more muscley, and it’s not like I’m a bodybuilder but it’s enough that I know I’m stronger, and I’m proud of that, definitely.” (Jenny)

Women’s enjoyment and empowerment through embodying typically ‘masculine’ traits, regardless of whether or not they are considered masculine by the women themselves, has been a consistent finding in this study and others (e.g. McCaughey, 1997; De Welde, 2003; Miller, 2010). Such pride in their abilities and accomplishments as fighters was evident even when recognising the apparent opportunity cost of embodying these ‘masculine’ features, particularly with regards to the appearance of their bodies:

“My body has changed loads, you know, my thighs are so muscular and my arms are big... It’s not a deliberate look, it’s a by-product of the training. I love what my body can do, I absolutely love that, and I prefer it over the way my body looks.” (Helen)

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<sup>4</sup> Remembering, of course, that all of my interviewees identified as being heterosexual – see Chapter 4

“Well to be honest I would rather be toned than curvaceous. When it comes to training I know that I’m very committed, and you know, my body is like it is and that makes me good (at competitive kickboxing)... It’s not like I want it but I guess I don’t mind if people perceive me as tomboyish or whatever, it’s what I enjoy and what you enjoy is important, isn’t it?” (Suzie)

While it was not a central part of their discourse about their gender, some of the women were comfortable with using words such as ‘masculine’, ‘manly’, or ‘tomboy’ to describe their embodiment of fighting prowess reached through martial arts. In fact, comparable to the men, the women were less hesitant to use these masculinising terms and often did so with little apology for or regret over the masculinity which they implied the women possessed. Nevertheless, the women still exhibited a general distaste for what they thought of as mainstream masculinity. Just as the male interviewees, they were very critical of the machismo, ‘false’ bravado, and general boorishness associated with this ‘type’ of man. Thankful that martial arts was largely free of such individuals, the women were nevertheless vocal in their criticism of those few who slipped through the discursive, regulatory net:

“We do get these meat heads coming down (to the gym), they just don’t get it. They’ve never done any training before, and they go ‘yeah I wanna be a cage fighter! When can you get me my first fight?’ They’re just total posers and they think they get to compete just like that, no way.” (Rachel)

“Mostly it’s the younger guys, when they first arrive here they are just clueless about fighting and don’t know what it means to be a real fighter... they have all these ideas about being a man and thinking that because they had a few scraps out on the town they can handle themselves in the ring. It’s those ones that you’ve gotta teach a lesson to.” (Marie)

Despite their criticism of some men’s excessive and illegitimate forms of masculinity, the women remained very positive towards their embodiment of what others saw as ‘masculine’ traits; strength, power, toughness, and so on. Nevertheless, all of the women were eager to maintain some sense of differentiation from the men with whom they trained. That is, while they were taking on many of the characteristics popularly associated with masculinity, it remained important for the female

participants to “present a body that is read as woman” (Caudwell, 2006: 152), and thereby to avoid being seen as an ‘honorary male’. All of the women interviewed reported feeling that it was important for them to maintain a separate female/feminine identity:

“Being able to roll with the men and keep up with them and everything, it doesn’t mean you have to actually be like them. I’m fine with being different from other women but I know I’m still a woman myself and I wouldn’t want to lose sight of that.” (Louise)

“Well I want (the men I train with) to include me and let me join in one hundred percent, but then still treat me as a girl. I don’t want them to treat me like just another man because I’m a fighter.” (Sylvia)

### **6.2.2 ‘Feminine Sides’: Legitimate and Illegitimate Femininities**

Wanting to be seen ‘as a woman’ by their male (and female) peers expressed the desire of the women to be respected simultaneously as fighters, as well as ‘normal’, that is feminine/heterosexual females. This dual desire suggests that to the participants, fighting and femininity were not necessarily mutually exclusive, but more importantly it shows that for them to be seen ‘as a woman’ required being seen in some way as feminine. That is, their classification as a specific sex depended upon their embodiment of a specific gender (Butler, 2008). As such, they would draw on a discourse of personal choice and flexibility in order to explain how they had a ‘feminine side’ which effectively proved their femaleness whilst not obstructing their embodiment of fighting ability. Discussing their feminine sides revealed how the female martial artists would selectively embody certain aspects of femininity with which they identified, celebrating their distinctiveness from men in a way which did not preclude a successful engagement with martial arts training. For some women this was a matter of appearance, including hairstyles, dress, makeup, and ‘feminine’ equipment such as pink boxing gloves. For others it included activities they were involved in outside of martial arts, including partying with female friends, pole dancing, and even taking part in a beauty pageant. As the women

explained, having this feminine side allowed them to simultaneously appear as 'female' to themselves and others, whilst also enjoying and celebrating this femaleness alongside the 'masculine' pursuit of martial arts:

"I mean you get girls here who want to look good when they come to training, you know, wear the right gear, stuff like that. That's fine, I mean they still take their training seriously and it doesn't get in the way, it's fine, they just wanna look good and I've got no problem with that." (Rachel)

"I'm not gonna lie and say I don't like doing the feminine thing too, put on nice dresses, do my hair, put on makeup. I enjoy those things, they're fun... last year I did the Miss Universe GB contest, so I know what it's like to do that whole thing, I really enjoy it and I don't think girls in those shows are any like, less real than anyone else. Being real is about being yourself and I think if you enjoy that stuff then why not do it?" (Andrea)

Some participants even described their 'feminine side' as being a part of a deliberate balancing act which was undertaken in order to protect their status as 'normal', heterosexual females. As well as being enjoyed and identified with, femininity was therefore also a way to compensate for the masculinity implied by martial artistry:

"As much as I love fighting, I still love the sense of being a girl... It might be a bit hypocritical but I just want to have a bit of girliness in it, so I have these hot pink gloves, they're so cool! Not every girl in my club has the gloves, but I think because I'm so into it I kinda need them a bit, if you know what I mean. You know, to balance it out maybe." (Sylvia)

"I teach pole dancing too, that's another part of me really. It's two extremes, isn't it! ...So I think through doing that I really explored my sexuality and everything, because I'm now teaching girls how to be feminine, and yet I'm a kickboxer, do you know what I mean? And that's spilled into it, and that's what I mean about discovering myself here, the different aspects and the different sides we have, and it all does just come together in the middle. It's all part of me." (Helen)

It was therefore obvious that being legitimately feminine *and* a martial artist did not involve an inherent contradiction when the femininity was articulated through certain means, as these favoured expressions of female identity did not obstruct the

women's martial arts training, and so gender did not clash with martial artistry. As such, 'femininity' was not seen as a singular construct to be either embodied or rejected. Rather, it was considered as a set of traits from which one could choose at will, in order to remain visibly 'female' whilst simultaneously embodying alternative, even 'masculine' traits as well. In the eyes of the female participants, embodying certain chosen elements of femininity, and not others, was still sufficient in order to guarantee them status as 'normal' women. The men with whom they trained seconded this, agreeing that in their experience female martial artists were, generally speaking, not an un-feminine or otherwise 'abnormal' group. Some men even commented on how martial arts could enhance a woman's femininity and by extension, her heterosexual attractiveness:

"I'd say that nine out of ten of (the women I train with) I'd see at the weekend in a nice dress, looking quite attractive actually. Even the better girls, like the ones who might compete, they're not really like any kind of textbook hard woman. They're quite womanly, feminine I guess." (Claude)

"I think (martial arts) makes (women) more attractive to be honest. Obviously it depends how you train but I've seen lots of fighters who have like, you know, that nice physique, toned and everything. And being more confident always helps, whether you're masculine or feminine." (Ed)

Within this conceptualisation of gender as a fragmented set of characteristics, there were certain elements of traditional femininity which were identified as not fitting with successfully embodying martial arts prowess, and these were roundly rejected by the female participants. Principal among these was the idea that feminine women were weak and passive:

"Well I know some people will think of being feminine as being weak, like mentally weak, that type of woman who just lets people walk all over her, you know what I mean? ...That's not something women should be doing so learning to fight is good for them if they're like that." (Marie)

"Being non-aggressive, it's something women are taught because it's an old ideal, like in old fairytales where beautiful women just wait to be rescued by

heroic men... Hopefully by doing martial arts classes we can escape that way of thinking.” (Beth)

While none of the female participants identified as taking such an approach to their training, it was frequently mentioned that certain women in their clubs would more or less embody this discursive construction of the weak, hesitant female and were reluctant to engage in tough, effective training. These ‘types’ of women, once they had proven they were not interested in ‘un-learning’ this particularly limiting aspect of femininity (McCaughey, 1997), were considered to be undesirable elements within the participants’ clubs as they would set poor standards for other women to follow. In fact, such women were considered harmful because their collective example lent strength to the stereotype of women as being incapable of embodying martial arts prowess and of attaining equality with men. The same distaste was expressed towards these women as to the ‘feminized’/‘watered-down’, non-contact versions of martial arts which are marketed towards female exercisers, such as ‘boxercise’ aerobics (e.g. Hargreaves, 1997). As such, the participants practiced certain disciplinary strategies towards these women, aiming to either inspire them to change their attitude, or reminding them of their peripheral place within the clubs and, by extension, their relative lack of prestige as martial artists:

“There are some girls who are a bit too girly I think. They don’t throw themselves into sparring and it can be hard to really get anything out of working with them, they’re more worried about getting bruises so I just don’t bother training with them, they generally have to stick to themselves (in sparring).” (Sara)

“You get girls who are chatting a lot and not taking it seriously. You have to wonder why they come to this club because all they really seem to want is the workout and I’m thinking, can’t you go to a boxing aerobics class instead? I try to help them with their sparring but if they won’t learn then they don’t really belong here.” (Suzie)

“It’s a bad example for the younger girls. I’ve always trained in clubs where the seniors have to set the example and I take that seriously so it really annoys me that there are women just sitting on the side and not getting involved (in sparring). What kind of message does that send?” (Louise)

Another particular 'feminine' behaviour which the participants disliked, and reported observing occasionally among other female club members, concerned the exaggerated display of female heterosexuality. Occasionally, women who overtly sexualised their appearance and behaved in a flirtatious manner in classes were said to attend training, and these behaviours were considered to be unacceptable forms of femininity for a serious martial artist. Although certainly confirming a 'normal' (that is, heterosexual and feminine) female identity, dressing and behaving in such a way was thought to undermine a woman's right to participate as an equal within martial arts, as it overstated and gave primacy to their sexuality and distracted from the dedication and focus necessary for proper training, as well as being costly to their social standing within their clubs:

"Some women you get here are a bit groupie-ish, they come to meet (professional male) fighters, always with the low-cut tops, cleavage falling out, too much makeup on, stuff like that. It's a bit gross... There are the serious women too and you just have to separate them out from the groupies, who are just there to get laid basically... You've gotta teach them a lesson on the mat and hopefully they won't come back, you know? If they're not serious then they won't stick it out." (Rachel)

"I made a promise when I came in here that I wouldn't ever get involved romantically with anyone in the club and it's the best decision I could've made... I know I've got much more respect through never having been involved with anyone." (Helen)

Therefore, as with the men regarding masculinity, the relationship which women had with femininity emphasised both legitimate and illegitimate expressions of this traditional gender identity. While all of the women interviewed discussed their own femininity in largely positive terms (as a source of personal identity, something which was to be enjoyed, etc.) the point remained that for a woman to overstate her feminine embodiment, particularly at the cost of training properly, was not acceptable. Particularly, being non-assertive and hesitant, and being too open with their sexual interest in male training partners, was seen to undermine a woman's respectability as a 'real' martial artist in the eyes of the female (and often also male) participants. While none of the women interviewed suggested that they saw women



in martial arts going ‘too far’ with embodying masculinity, it still remained important to distinguish themselves from the aforementioned stereotype of the ‘butch’ lesbian as well as from the overly (hetero)sexual or weak, passive women with whom they occasionally came into contact. Correctly balancing one’s gender identity was therefore an important part of being a female martial artist, and as with the men’s attitudes towards excessive, distasteful displays of masculinity, the women were active in policing their martial arts clubs against the wrong ‘types’ of female members, looking to ‘teach them a lesson’ as either a deterrent or a corrective strategy. Once again, the participants would actively “punish those who fail to do their gender right” (Butler, 2008: 190), ensuring that the normalised and accepted, moderate standards of femininity were maintained among female memberships.

### ***6.2.3 Selective Femininity, Heterosexuality, and Being a ‘Normal’ Woman***

This flexible, ‘cherry-picking’ approach to embodying specific feminine attributes while rejecting others is indicative of a number of sociologically interesting phenomena. Firstly, it clearly illustrates the deliberateness of gender embodiment, showing that a good deal of agency is implicated in the women’s purposeful and sometimes strategic practice of femininity. This echoes Halbert’s (1997) findings concerning how female boxers would manage their gendered and athletic identities in a bid to secure and enhance their careers. For the female martial artists interviewed here, femininity was not something which arose naturally from within them, but rather something which could be selectively embodied in an appropriate and personally agreeable balance with other forms of identity, particularly the ‘masculinised’ image of the skilful and accomplished martial artist. While some of the women discussed their embodiment in terms of a deliberate balancing act, this compensatory nature of their ‘feminine sides’ was never cast as being something which was unwillingly practiced or externally imposed; femininity remained a deliberate and enjoyable choice for all of the women interviewed:

“I really have to work at being feminine, you know, I don’t think anybody is ever like, just feminine without trying. But I like having that side to me, I

want to be seen as a woman and I enjoy the girly stuff, doing kickboxing is no reason to go without it.” (Helen)

Secondly, it shows that gender identities need not be embodied in strictly self-contained, mutually-exclusive binaries; that is, either masculine or feminine, never a mix of both. Considering their specific, legitimate types of femininity to be perfectly compatible with practicing martial arts, the women reconciled elements of traditional masculinity and femininity without adhering to the insistent, mutually-exclusive binaries which suggest a person can only be one or the other. It was perfectly acceptable, even ‘normal’, to have elements of both, and in so doing to deconstruct the entire idea that gender and sexual difference exists in such rigid, dualistic oppositions. Some of the earlier work examining women’s practice of martial arts, in particular McCaughey’s (1997, 1998) studies of women’s self defence, have suggested that at their most fundamental levels, ‘fighting’ and ‘femininity’ are incompatible. Stating that “aggression and femininity are not complimentary” and that “women must overcome (femininity) when learning to fight” (1998: 281), McCaughey argues that women must do away with femininity, transcending it in order to become competent fighters. While the participants in this study certainly agreed in principle that weakness and passivity were not suitable characteristics of a female martial artist, from their accounts it seems more fitting to suggest that learning to fight involves learning how to reflexively negotiate the definition of femininity, as De Welde (2003) suggests, rather than letting it go altogether. Since it was important for the women to be both feminine *and* skilled martial artists, the contradiction between the natures of femininity and fighting must lose its necessity as their femininity is reconstructed around the empowering and enjoyable experience of learning to fight. Retaining their importance as a visible way of constituting and celebrating women’s aesthetic differences from men, certain aspects of femininity in this instance were cast as not merely superficial but potent, expressive markers of the women’s sex and sexuality, legitimately combined with fighting prowess under the umbrella of an inclusive martial arts discourse. As a symbolic demonstration of this restructuring, the hot pink boxing gloves worn by female fighters illustrate clearly the reconciliation of the feminine and fighter

identities. Such a boxing glove can be at once both feminine and menacing, as the pink leather houses a powerful, clenched fist:

“Yeah some people joke about it, these gloves I mean, but pink or black or whatever, it still hurts when they hit!” (Suzie)

Thirdly, this selective engagement with femininity highlights the way in which the performance of gender is used to constitute the very definition of sexual difference (Butler, 2008). Although their deliberate acts of femininity were routinely described as relating to either ‘feminine’ activities (e.g. pole dancing) or to surface-level aspects of their bodies’ appearance, the women nevertheless maintained that femininity was very important to them because of how it reflected the distinction between themselves and men. That is, *femininity*, even while existing in practice as a largely superficial and deliberate construct, signified *femaleness*, which had a deeper, more stable meaning for the women and was something which they sought to defend. By connection then, deliberate acts of femininity worked as profound expressions of the women’s sexual identities. They helped to articulate the fact that the women did not perceive themselves to be essentially ‘masculinised’ by their participation in martial arts; that they remained heterosexual and therefore ‘normal’; and ultimately that women who successfully embodied martial arts prowess, fighting ability, and the strength and physical agency which this implies, are not to be considered by definition as exceptional, as ‘special cases’, or as fundamentally different from other women. Their feminine identities, proving femaleness and normality within the mainstream discursive structure of female-feminine-heterosexual, ultimately challenge the essentially masculine character of fighting ability. As De Welde notes, “it was precisely the qualifier of ‘woman’ that made the women-defenders unique from the mythical, masculine, savaged fighter” (2003: 271). Without this feminine-female distinction from men and masculinity, the subversive, symbolic potential of the *female* fighter is weakened, as the deviance implied by female masculinity, and implicated homosexuality, allows for the discursive annihilation of such individuals as being ‘not real women’ after all. That the women were ‘correctly’ female therefore represented a challenge to default

masculine privilege by locating combative expertise (i.e. a powerful, physical agency) as the province of all 'normal' women as well as men. In this sense, the women's deliberate retention and practice of femininity, as a strategy to consolidate and defend their femaleness, becomes an aspect of the 'physical feminism' (McCaughey, 1997) of women's martial arts:

"In fact I think of myself as more of a woman because I see myself doing something for women, instead of just obeying a stereotype... I think it's feminism, you know, pursuing something for ourselves and showing that normal everyday women are capable of doing something which a lot of people say we're not. I think it's a good thing what we're doing." (Rachel)

In sum then, the female participants presented an overall picture of an engagement with gender which involved the embodiment of what were considered by the women as elements of both masculinity and femininity. Their critical appraisals of masculine and feminine behaviour indicate that to be either exclusively masculine or feminine was not a desirable or legitimate way in which to marry up having a gendered identity with being a martial artist; their involvement in this specific activity necessitated a balance which was articulated through choosing to embody specific elements of either gender. A discourse of moderation was evident in the way in which the women were comfortable with being 'feminine', as although it was important to be feminine enough to confirm their status as both heterosexual and female ('balancing out' their evident masculinity), it was also important to avoid being so feminine as to obstruct their embodiment of fighting prowess or distract from the purposes of practicing martial arts to begin with. Once again, the excessive 'doing' of gender was identified as being a potential hazard to the 'doing' of martial arts, and the female participants were particularly critical of those women who they saw as being excessively, harmfully feminine and sexualised. To this end, just as with the men's relationship towards masculinity, the female participants revealed that femininity was a fractured construct, elements of which were considered appropriate, with other aspects considered illegitimate and not suitable for a serious martial artist. Selectively embodying elements of disparate genders in this manner illustrates the flexible and fluid character of gender identities, although the residual

importance of enacting enough femininity to remain 'normally' heterosexual suggests a complex engagement with the links between sex, gender and sexuality (Caudwell, 2006). The women's example reveals a move past simplistic dualism and essentialism, as their experiences within martial arts provide them with the discursive tools to construct an alternative ideal 'type' out of the pieces of both 'masculine' (powerful/combat proficient) and 'feminine' (aesthetic) codes. Importantly though, the constitution of their sex (being a normal woman) and sexuality (not being 'butch'/lesbian) was considered to arise out of this deliberate embodiment of the 'correct' gender (Butler, 2008).

### **6.3 Discussion: Masculinity, Femininity, and Subversive Gender Performances**

*Studies of embodiment in sport and fitness also highlight the need to place the relationship between sex and gender itself under more intense scrutiny. (Dworkin, 2001: 346)*

To summarise the findings presented in this chapter, it is evident that both men and women engaged with gender in a manner which included both challenging and endorsing specific aspects of masculinity and femininity. In addition to this, women were also explicitly engaged with masculinity, often balancing this with femininity in such a way as to appear as both legitimately, 'normally' female whilst also as competent, strong, and competitive martial artists. Their 'masculinity' was seen as a by-product of their dedication to training, and while no women deliberately wanted to become 'more masculine', the majority were not overly troubled by embodying it, as their 'feminine sides' militated against the negative perceptions often attached to female masculinity, notably homosexualisation and/or appearing as 'not real' women to others (Halberstam, 1998). Within this framework of reconciling differently gendered codes, the women told how they conceived of both masculinity and femininity not as singular, discrete constructs, but as open sets of characteristics from which one could draw, and ultimately become a 'well-rounded' person with elements of both being used to define one's character. While the male participants

did not discuss embodying femininity – implying, perhaps, that male femininity in this context offered little enhancement to their personal sense of prestige, reflecting the general hierarchy of masculinity as superior to femininity – their perceptions of masculinity were nevertheless similarly concerned with viewing gender as a fragmented and open-ended construction, evident through their selective embodiment of certain aspects of masculinity and outspoken criticism of certain others. Central to the criteria for selecting which particular aspects of gender to practice and embody, and which to reject, were the discursive meanings of martial arts, which defined these aspects as either helpful and legitimate or harmful and inappropriate. Finally, along with the selection of legitimate forms of gendered identity came a negative reaction towards those who differed from the sanctioned norms. Criticism and strategies of exclusion were common when dealing with people whose gender identities were in opposition to the normative, ideal type for men and women respectively within martial arts.

As such, it was clear that via their strong criticisms of both overly masculine and overly feminine characters, the participants had constructed alternative ‘ideal’ types against which people within martial arts were measured. Although there was an evident gendering of these characters, for instance as the women in clubs sought to distinguish themselves from the men through practicing a form of femininity in the face of the default masculine image of martial arts, the central aspect of this identity, which united the sexes rather than divided them, was martial arts itself. The most prized characteristics of a martial artist – quiet confidence, humility, acceptance of others, mutual trust, dedication to training, measured degrees of competitiveness, and so on – were often described as potentially creditable to either sex and as such, they lost their gendered meanings in the participants’ reckonings. For instance, both men and women played down the ‘masculine’ labelling of physical strength and fighting ability, as it was clearly something which both ‘normal’ (heterosexual) men and ‘normal’ (heterosexual/visibly feminine) women could embody. Belonging within martial arts did not, therefore, depend upon being a visibly gendered person one way or the other. As one participant put it:

“Being a real man? That means nothing to me, absolutely nothing... (A real woman?), it’s the same again, nothing. I couldn’t separate them out because they’re the same as much as they are different. You don’t need to be either to be good at kickboxing, to be a martial artist.” (Amir)

The most important criteria for acceptance and prestige within their gyms, therefore, were considered to be genderless and as a result of this, ‘female masculinity’ was not considered problematic, as ultimately it was not really conceived of as being linked to ‘maleness’ within this context. Tellingly, ‘male femininity’ was not even discussed by the participants, as the ‘feminine’ label which might have been attached to some of those characteristics valorised among the men (e.g. emotional openness, humility) was never done so. In fact, some of the participants alluded to the pretentious falseness of such labelling when they criticised other men’s machismo as a form of denial and evidence of a shallow egotism which actually undermined the masculine identity of such characters. By trying to ‘prove’ masculinity, these men in fact lost it in the eyes of the participants, owing partly to the fact that their deliberate and effortful ‘doing’ of gender effectively obstructed their practice of martial arts. So long as the meanings of their fighting abilities remained bound up in masculinist discourses about domination, sexual status, ‘alpha males’ and so on, the ‘true’ value of learning martial arts – to better the self, to deepen one’s personal knowledge, to develop one’s body, and so on – would be lost on them.

Leading on from this, the men’s own sense of masculinity depended a great deal on denying the masculine label as much as possible, because of the typical discursive connection between masculinity and these specific types of men from whom they wished to demonstrate distinction. Even though they were engaging in a discursive contest against these other ‘types’ of men, denying the deliberateness of their masculinity was a necessary step towards attaining it. ‘Masculinity’ became something of a dirty word, a label to be avoided. Although rarely named as such, the male martial artists’ ideal, ‘real’ man was one who did not care about being masculine in the sense of having something to prove about his masculinity to others; it was a form of masculinity which more or less spoke for itself. Such a man’s

deliberateness and purpose were considered ideally saved for pursuing a personal quest to become a 'better' person, better in the sense of striving for constant self improvement, but also in the sense of being superior to these 'others'. In this way, the gendered nature of the men's idealised type of identity was masked by way of its opposition to the very notion of pursuing a (male) gender to begin with, echoing, in fact, the essentialist notion that a man's masculinity arises from within him and is not something which needs to be socially engendered or deliberately practiced (e.g. Connell, 1995). This disappearance of the 'masculine' label was further strengthened by the way in which the men rarely distinguished themselves from the women with whom they trained, instead casting themselves as different to other, 'false' men and relying upon this distinction as their primary point of reference for constituting the superiority of their identities.

One particular contribution of such a masculine identity towards the subversive potential of mixed-sex martial arts is arguably that it enabled women's participation and attainment of success and equality. This is because it became personally meaningful and important to the men to accommodate and respect women within their gyms, training with them as equals and not insisting upon segregations in order to defend their masculine privilege, as with certain other previous examples drawn from male-defined sports, where defending male turf against females was a principle concern (e.g. Dunning, 1986; Messner, 1988). In this sense, the men's preoccupation with differentiating themselves from falsely 'masculine' men, while indeed echoing notions of 'deep masculinity' which imply essentialist reasoning (Connell, 1995), can be described as indirectly subversive because of the effects it had on the way in which the men related to women in their clubs. This was certainly not a smooth and uniform relationship however, such as regarding the issue of (not) hitting women as a particularly contradictory phenomenon, manifest as the men's practice of martial arts discourse clashed with the dictates of a paternalistic code of masculine honour. Nevertheless, there was sufficient evidence from those participants with the necessary experience to give precedence to the martial arts/equality discourse over the paternalism of traditional gender relations to suggest that following their experiences of mixed-sex martial arts, these pro-feminist sentiments can truly take



hold and become a part of the men's subjectivities. It must be noted that the limited extent to which the participants practiced this particular idea indicates that not all men within mixed-sex martial arts hold such viewpoints, and as per the accounts of the participants regarding the undesirable, 'macho' others within their clubs, it is evident that this potentially subversive form of masculinity is but one among several held by male martial artists. Yet due to its closeness to the centrally-important martial arts discourse referred to throughout this and the previous chapter, and owing to the fact that it was displayed by many self-identifying 'senior', experienced martial artists, this particular masculine identity carried the weight of officialdom, as the 'correct' way to engage with women and differentiate oneself from other men. As evidenced by the apologetic tone with which some male participants described their latent paternalism in sparring, recognising and even valuing the contents of this 'official' code of male conduct did not necessarily equate to embodying it.

As for the women's sense of gender, unlike the men they were far less hesitant to name their characteristics as either masculine or feminine. While their pursuit of martial arts prowess was similarly central to the women's identities, they did not have the same uncomfortable relationship with the label of 'femininity' as did the men regarding masculinity. In the context of martial arts, where the default masculine images discussed in this and the previous chapter shape participants' experiences and others' perceptions, it was important for the women, who all identified as heterosexual, to have a 'feminine side' which would sufficiently compensate for the implicit masculinity of their martial arts embodiment. This is because regardless of its evident superficiality as a principally aesthetic expression and of its somewhat conservative connotations as an example of compulsory heterosexuality, their femininity was a marker of femaleness, and as such was an important resource in carving out a niche for 'normal' women within combat sports (De Welde, 2003). It became a clear example of the way in which one's gender constitutes one's sex (Butler, 2008), and for the women interviewed this was always an important undertaking. Regardless of their sexual interest in men, it was considered personally important for the women to maintain a distinctive identity as 'real', 'normal', 'straight' girls and not to be cast as 'butch', 'lesbian', or otherwise

'abnormal'. It was also, however, a way to express distinction from men, and considered to be a source of pleasurable significance which women were fortunate enough to be able to enjoy without fear of the social stigma that would befall a man attempting the same. 'Being girly' was something to be enjoyed and celebrated, as well as a performative tool for protecting one's sexual status, and not considered to be evidence of patriarchal coercion (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003). Femininity was therefore for oneself as much as for others, confirming that this performance was an effect of both the women's agency to enact their chosen gender identities, as well as the structuring dictates of the discursive system of sex-gender-sexuality, and perhaps of compulsory heterosexuality, which gave this performance its meaning in a productive, rather than strictly punitive, sense (Foucault, 1977a). As Butler puts it, "we are radically dependent upon a cultural projection of our bodies in order to assume a sense of who we are in the world" (1998: 109). This feminine performance was one such consciously agentic, yet culturally dependent projection, which ensured the women remained confident that they were 'normal' in spite of their evident engagement with particular elements of 'masculinity'.

The overall effect of this performance then, was to simultaneously reproduce socially accepted feminine characters and styles among the participants and thus protect their preferred status as 'normal' and heterosexual females, and therefore also produce embodied evidence of the fighting abilities of 'real', 'normal' women. Despite its apparent collusion with the patriarchal convention of compulsory heterosexuality, such a production has obvious implications for the subversion of gender, as the conflation of fighting prowess, femaleness, femininity and heterosexuality issues a challenge to the essentialism of traditional conceptions of feminine normality (Caudwell, 2006). The construct of the sex-gender-sexuality of 'normal' women has not traditionally allowed space for combative prowess, owing to the vulnerability, passivity, lack of physical agency, and even 'rapeability' conferred through socially valued codes of heterosexually appealing femininity (MacKinnon, 1987; McCaughey, 1997; Dowling, 2000). For the women interviewed, embodying feminine style and genuinely enjoying and identifying with this gendered code could be done without the attendant physical weaknesses it has heretofore implied, as the

fragmentary and selective manner of their embodiment allowed them to choose those aspects which they could reconcile with their identity as martial artists. Tellingly, the men with whom they trained also recognised and appreciated this femininity, as did reportedly the significant men in their lives outside of martial arts (husbands, boyfriends, peers, etc). This approach meant that they were able to combine a (relatively de-masculinised) 'fighter' identity with a purposefully feminine one, founding a platform from which to challenge social conventions of feminine women as being inherently weak and violable. Symbolised by their hot pink fighting gear, the women were active in re-making femininity into something which maintained their status as heterosexual and female without inhibiting their appropriation of fighting techniques as they entered and made a home within what was previously considered the "masculine domain par excellence" (Menesson, 2000: 28). Thus, contrary to the criticism made by feminists that "doing femininity builds weakness" (Roth & Basow, 2004: 247), the female martial artists enacted a type of femininity that in fact incorporated strength into the discursive construction of 'woman'. Moving beyond the essentialism of binaries, whilst evading the discursive oblivion of being 'abnormal', 'not real' women, etc, their gender identities realise "the possibility that femme-ininity/ies disrupt normative sex-gender-sexuality" (Caudwell, 2006: 148). By maintaining distinction from men, and maintaining an image of normal heterosexuality, the female fighters pose a direct challenge to what is possibly the most profound moment of difference between 'real' men and 'real' women – the ability to physically dominate another human being (McCaughey, 2008). In this way, the women's adherence to femininity and purposeful differentiation from men supports the subversive value of mixed-sex martial arts, by broadening the scope of acceptable gender performance (Butler, 1998) as they claim fighting prowess as the legitimate property of 'real' women.

As a final point of discussion, it remains to be said that given the alternative content of the men's masculinity, and the clearly subversive implications of the women's reconciliation of femininity and fighting ability, the ways in which gender identities were produced among men and women in the gym nevertheless took on a hierarchally structured, exclusionary form. That is, the very fact that favourable or

ideal types were being constructed in the gym meant that certain, non-fitting masculine or feminine ways of behaving were cast as illegitimate and those who exhibited them were broadly criticised, pressured to change, or excluded. The production of 'correct' genders took place within a clearly punitive structure of power relations, as a master narrative (the martial arts discourse emphasising discipline, humility, respect for seniority, and equality among practitioners) worked as the standard against which martial artists' identities and behaviours should be measured. Those who did not adhere to the tenets of this discursive regime were cast as illegitimate and did not belong, as the participants took it upon themselves to either correct and rehabilitate, or punish and exclude, those who had it 'wrong'. In Foucauldian terms, a set of power relations were "created, maintained, and exerted by the production and circulation of (this) discourse" (Andrews, 1993: 157). As gendered identities were meant to take second-place to the martial artist identity, incompatibly excessive displays of masculinity (machismo, over-zealous competitiveness, 'laddishness', etc) and femininity (passivity, hesitation, overt sexualisation, etc) were evidence that a person did not 'get it', was not 'serious', and was not a 'real' martial artist. Both male and female participants discussed using physical punishment – within the acceptable parameters of martial arts practice, but physical punishment nonetheless – in order to 'teach a lesson' and police these boundaries of acceptability within their clubs. Through physical beatings on the mat, calculated to instil enough discomfort and ill-feeling to deter any undesirables from returning, the "judges of normality" (Foucault, 1977a: 304) who constituted the 'correct' club membership would maintain not only the purity of the meanings of physical combat and martial arts, but also consolidate their ownership over it by denying these incorrectly-gendered individuals from progressing within their clubs and gaining in martial arts ability.

It is important to note that these particular *personae non gratae* were not being excluded based on arbitrary physical characteristics (such as sex), but rather on the degree to which they remained estranged from the dominant behavioural codes valued within martial arts. Because it was held that anybody can become a competent martial artist, exclusion was a result of failing to successfully incorporate

these meanings into one's identity, rather than a prejudiced refusal to allow access to training in the first place. Notably, within the Foucauldian framework of power as simultaneously both punitive *and* productive (e.g. Foucault, 1977a), the participants' accounts illustrate how the productive dimension of power is exercised over men and women as well as this punitive kind. That is, while learning fighting techniques and the other practical lessons of training, individuals within the martial arts clubs were also, in their own words, becoming 'better' people as they internalised the discursive meanings of martial artistry through their ongoing, meaningful experiences within it. Participants frequently told how their own attitudes and ideas were changed through training; a process of maturation and self-discovery was often evident through the personal narratives of both male and female interviewees, and this would often involve changing attitudes towards sex and gender following from the education provided by their experiences on the mat (as will be discussed at length in Chapter 7). This dual process of production/exclusion depended upon and acted to maintain the hierarchy of identities to which the participants often alluded, privileging adherence to a relatively de-gendered martial arts discourse as the most important aspect of one's personal identity, regardless of sex. In this manner, the discursive regime represented by mixed-sex martial arts worked to consolidate training cultures which enabled a particularly subversive form of embodiment to take place, whilst disqualifying anyone whose ideas might obstruct this process, and who failed to sufficiently transform under its influence.

Ironically then, it seems that this form of gender subversion, although heralded in this study and often in others as producing a great liberalisation and opening of the boundaries of gender, actually depended upon a concomitant process of exclusion, which was sometimes manifest through physical punishment – i.e. a more or less coercive, punitive strategy. Without this active policing of the boundaries of acceptability and the generally low tolerance of the 'wrong types' in their gyms, it was feared that the valued and celebrated outcomes of equal access for women and men would be undermined. Macho, 'laddish', paternalistic men would intimidate and trivialise women and distort the subtlety of martial artists' idealised masculinity; fearful, passive, hesitant women, and the so-called 'groupies', would set the wrong

example for others by presenting a conservative, rather than subversive, image of femininity within martial arts. Given these fears, the participants who spoke of exclusionary practices felt justified in using relatively coercive measures in order to defend the privilege of their 'superior' way of seeing and doing things, although the relative rarity of resorting to these measures would suggest that the adaptive, productive aspect of power was sufficiently efficacious to do the majority of the work in this regard.

The mixed-sex martial arts clubs thereby acted as sites for the production of a particular discourse of truth about bodies, and about the sexes, and as participants embodied this discourse and subscribed to its central ideas, one can say that these clubs were producing embodied subjectivities – that is, *people* – as much as simply discourses. Appropriating Foucault, Markula and Pringle state that “identity can be understood as constructed via *experiences* that are linked to the workings of discourse, power relations, disciplinary techniques and processes of active self-negotiation” (2006: 99, original emphasis). The accounts of the participants illustrate how such processes as these construct and maintain gender identities within their training cultures. In the next chapter, I will move the discussion of findings into the more explicitly embodied realm of the participants' experiences on the mat, detailing how the actual practice of martial arts in mixed-sex settings helps to shape, and is itself shaped by, the ideas so far discussed.

## 7

***Hitting, Touching, and Doing Gender:  
Mixed-Sex Martial Arts in Practice***

In this chapter, the discussion focuses on the practical aspects of mixed-sex training which have been referred to in Chapters 5 and 6. The major themes here include: the training outcomes for men and women who practice together; the controversies surrounding men's reluctance to hit women; the important role of embodied experience in learning about sex and gender; and the necessity of understanding and accommodating diverse perspectives on gender within mixed-sex martial arts clubs.

It has been suggested at several points throughout this thesis that the body holds a position of special significance in debates over sex, gender and sexuality. Competing definitions, classifications, and explanations of bodies have shaped these debates, playing central roles in different discourses about what it means to be male or female. Typically, in discursive constructions of sex and sexual difference in modern Western thought, the body is ideologically conflated with nature, being seen as a naturally-determined product of biological processes existing outside the realm of human purpose and control (Grosz, 1994). Applying this reasoning to sexual difference, structures of gender inequality which are explained through differences in bodies gain cultural legitimacy because of their roots in nature and, therefore, their insulation from political accountability (Haraway, 1991a; Butler, 2008). Challenging the logic of biological determinism regarding bodies effectively brings gender inequality back to a place where it can be critically analysed, as recognising that much of the sexed body is not produced by nature means that we become conscious of the fact that sex difference is something which we actively 'do', and therefore that it is something we can choose to 'do' differently – more equitably, justly, pleasurably, and so on (Butler, 2008). Making such realisations about sex

must, therefore, be partly dependent upon making similar realisations about the body, and training in mixed-sex martial arts classes provides opportunities to learn about one's own body and those of others. Through training with both sexes, one is able to experience first-hand the outcomes of martial arts embodiment for both male and female fighters. Subsequently, one is able to make fresh judgements as to whether or not certain observable differences between men and women really are fixed in nature and, by extension, just how much differential and unequal status of the sexes is justifiable as naturally inevitable and thus correctly free from political criticism.

This chapter is split into three subsections, including: a discussion of the apparent benefits of training together; the apparent difficulties of such integrated training; and the lessons about sex and gender which can be learned through this process. As with the previous two chapters, it will conclude with a discussion of the main arguments regarding the subversive potential of this particular aspect of mixed-sex martial arts.

### **7.1 *The Benefits of Training Together: Diversity as Necessity for Martial Artists***

*Studying coed subworlds... facilitates understandings of the contradictions and tensions that emerge as ideologies of gender difference and equal opportunity are simultaneously reproduced, challenged, and negotiated. (Wachs, 2002: 314)*

As mentioned in Chapter 5, mixed-sex clubs were not only considered 'normal' by the participants, but were also thought to be preferential to a single-sex training environment. This was partly owing to the fact that the social atmosphere of clubs was an important concern for the majority of the participants, but also because they considered training in diverse groups to be beneficial for their learning of martial arts. In some previous studies concerning women's uptake of martial arts, single-sex, female-only gyms have been identified as wholly positive, woman-centred, and even explicitly feminist-oriented environments which the researchers considered



more suitable for (most) women than an assumed 'masculinist' alternative of mainstream, 'male-dominated' gyms. For instance, Castelnuovo and Guthrie state that:

Not only do most women prefer training in a woman-only space, but those who began their training at (such a) dojo believe that had they begun in a male-dominated dojo, they would have quit because of a fear of appearing inadequate among men. (1998: 82)

They continue by pointing out that "these same women believe they now could train successfully in a co-ed setting" because of their improved self-confidence and faith in their own ability as fighters, yet emphasise the importance of segregation to establish the foundations of this sense of physical agency. In her review of several self-defence courses offered in the US, McCaughey (1997) criticises the mixed-sex martial arts classes she took for the lack of (male) coaches' sensitivity towards female needs, which were otherwise largely met within single-sex classes. She described one particular mixed class as having "an often condescending or embarrassing atmosphere", and stated that women "find it difficult to move beyond traditional gendered expectations and to exert themselves physically when men are present" (1997: 79). Agreeing with McCaughey, Hollander (2004: 206) comments on how such female-only, self-proclaimed 'feminist' classes "include substantial training in assertiveness (verbal self-defence) and discussion of psychological and emotional issues surrounding both violence against women and self-defence", while non-feminist, 'normal' martial arts classes may not recognise the value of such lessons to women. As such, female-specific pedagogical requirements, including explicit lessons in assertiveness, psychological and emotional coaching to 'un-learn' supposedly feminine passivity and fear, etc, are thought to be missing in mixed-sex, and non-feminist martial arts. While I do not mean to outright disagree with these authors' arguments, I do suggest that there is much value to mixed-sex martial arts which is possibly overlooked by advocating female-only classes for martial arts and self-defence, both in terms of training outcomes for women and men alike, and in terms of generating subversive discourses about gender based on the shared, embodied experience of training together.

### **7.1.1 Women 'Needing' Male Partners**

In this regard, it was almost unanimously agreed upon by the participants that training alongside men was beneficial for women learning martial arts. Recognising that the majority of the senior martial artists in their clubs tended to be male, many of the participants felt that there was much women could learn from men in terms of technical, strategic and other practical expertise which tended to 'belong' to men more than to women. That is to say, the predominantly male memberships of most clubs meant that should women train in female-only gyms, there would be a corresponding lack of experienced senior members from whom to learn:

"You usually get more male seniors, like I'm the only really experienced woman in my club right now, so it's good to have the men here otherwise it wouldn't be very good for new people who need to learn." (Marie)

"Martial arts is mostly done by men, I think most clubs are like this. If it was just women (in a club) then you probably wouldn't have enough people to learn from, definitely wouldn't be enough instructors, you'd be missing out." (Simon)

In these instances, it was not any specific male quality which was equated with better training, but rather a function of the fact that martial arts club memberships tended to be 'male dominated'. Some participants, however, also felt that particular aspects of men's ways of practicing martial arts were beneficial to women in training. Men were considered in these instances to be useful training partners because of the example they would set for women in taking training seriously and pushing both themselves and others to improve:

"There weren't many girls in my (MMA) gym to be honest, which was good actually because I always feel like boys usually push you a bit more in training." (Sara)

"If you're training with boys sometimes you do find that they're more likely to take it seriously, less likely to relax and slack off. So training with boys can be quite beneficial in that sense." (Suzie)

“I wouldn’t say this about all women but some of them do set a bad example, I mean they might not really throw themselves into it... But you rarely see that with men, so it’s good for women like me to have lots of eager partners and that usually means men.” (Louise)

Aside from identifying a general tendency for men to be more serious and dedicated training partners than most women, it was frequently claimed by the women that training with men was a necessary element of their training for self-defence. This was because it was believed that sparring against men lent a certain realism to the practice of martial arts for self-defence, given that most women (and men) felt that they were far more likely to be attacked by a man than a woman in ‘real life’. Lacking the experience of facing a man was therefore thought to undermine the applicability of the participant’s martial arts abilities to self-defence situations, owing to the physical and the psychological demands of fighting against a male opponent:

“In terms of advantages for the girls, it’s good for them to work with guys to get an idea of what it might be like to be attacked, because men are the most likely attackers.” (David)

“If a guy grabs hold of you, and can hold you tighter, and generally be larger and stronger than you, and you can feel that and need to adjust to that, well it’s more realistic to what a real situation would be like, the kind of thing that might happen on the street.” (Andrea)

“It helps you build the confidence you need. If you fight girls but you believe that girls are weaker then you’re like, ok, so I can fight girls, beat girls, but there’ll always be that question, if I fought a stronger guy could I do as well? We kind of override that by fighting guys, so yeah I think it’s important to know that you can hurt guys and can take hits from them.” (Beth)

The sense of realism associated with fighting against men has its roots in the participants’ assumptions about the gendered character of ‘real life’ street violence, which was portrayed as an exclusively male vice. This association was never explained by the participants as anything other than self-evidently true. Regardless of the possibility of being attacked by adult women (or other assailants, such as children or even animals) the participants’ acceptance of this particular discourse

about gender and violence meant that in order to answer their fears about their own physical vulnerability, female martial artists felt that it was necessary to train and spar with adult, male partners. This necessity is also recognised in some single-sex martial arts courses, such as the 'Model Mugging' courses discussed by McCaughey (1997), which had women practicing techniques in intense engagements with male instructors who played the part of 'attackers'. In terms of the positive psychological outcomes in women's lives discussed by many authors who have advocated participation in martial arts and related self-defence programmes (e.g. Guthrie, 1995; McCaughey, 1997, 1998; De Welde, 2003; Hollander, 2004), the necessity of practicing alongside men was paramount for the participants' sense of physical agency in a world where the perceived principle threat to their safety came from men. That is to say that regardless of who might attack them (and indeed, if they ever would be attacked), training with men made the women feel as though they were more ready to handle physical confrontations. This improved sense of confidence and belief in their own strength, even as an end in itself, was thought to be an important outcome of the women's training:

"Knowing that I'm not just a weak, little girl like people might think is really good and I feel like that makes things better if you know what I mean, like it makes you feel more like you're in control and can be safe just by yourself."  
(Keeley)

"I like feeling strong, I think as a woman it's very important to know how strong you are, and I think a lot of women don't know how strong they are, they lack that in terms of like, their identity and whatnot. They just think that men are strong and we aren't, so they need to learn this really." (Sylvia)

Aside from the necessity of experiencing fighting men, which taught them the psychological as well as physical skills required to stand up to would-be (male) attackers, the women interviewed often expressed a great deal of satisfaction associated with successfully sparring against men. Although few had experienced competitive victories against male opponents (given the relative rarity of mixed-sex competition), sparring with men was fairly common and all of the female participants had, at some point, sparred against the opposite sex in training.

Particularly for those who had performed well in these exchanges, they held an extra significance given the gendered dimensions of their expectations about fighting:

“When I first hit a guy? It felt awesome! Definitely felt great, I’d recommend it to any woman!” (Helen)

“I had a roll with a guy the other day, and he’s 90 kilos and I’m just under 60, so yeah when I got him, got him a few times actually, he said ‘oh you’re so good!’ And that’s brilliant... Beating somebody who’s so big, it’s amazing, especially if it’s a guy, a big muscular guy... And like with cocky guys, the ones who don’t think you should be doing it, it’s really good beating them, showing them up.” (Rachel)

“Yeah I think you do get a bigger sense of achievement when you hit a guy, because you see guys as being better, you know. So when you first land something it seems like, yeah, I actually did it! Because you often think that girls can’t do this stuff.” (Sara)

“It always makes you feel really good if you’re against a boy, because with martial arts there is a bit more reputation attached to the boys than the girls if you know what I mean. So if you are fighting a boy and you control them, they’re not dominating at all, it does make you feel good, stronger.” (Suzie)

Therefore, fighting against men was not only a way to develop their martial arts skills, but also a way to enhance their feelings of pride and accomplishment as the women embodied a counter-discourse of female strength and fighting ability. Although drawing on traditional, hierarchal gender discourse to frame their victories as more meaningful, these experiences powerfully demonstrated to the participants that they were not limited by any innate physical weaknesses, and that the power differences between sexed bodies were clearly open to contestation through training. Fighting against men afforded them the opportunity to realise feminist discourses of female empowerment and physical equality through *actually embodying them*; the psychological significance of such victories, as they became a source of personal realisation against the accepted norms of a sexual hierarchy privileging men, must therefore not be overlooked.

### **7.1.2 Men Learning Through Sparring Women**

The necessity and value of mixed training for women was therefore never in doubt among the participants, as both men and women commented on its productive and useful outcomes. In addition, it was also common for them to make arguments supporting the usefulness of female training partners for male martial artists, although for different reasons and with lesser importance placed upon it. For instance, some participants argued that it was important for men to train with women in order to learn better control in sparring practice. Given the tendency for men to be physically larger than the women with whom they trained, size and strength differences meant that male partners were often physically advantaged when sparring and so would have to exercise greater control so as not to hurt their smaller female counterparts. Learning this control was considered an important training outcome because having full command over one's own bodily power, being able to measure force correctly, and even to know when and when not to attack, was a central part of what it meant to be a martial artist:

“I find it different, practicing with women. Because they're smaller you can't go with the same force as with a heavier guy but you can go for technique more, you know, practice your control, your defending, that kind of thing. It's all important, you can't always rely on power so yeah it is useful to spar women, lighter people, yeah... Learning that control is really a big part of doing martial arts.” (Ed)

“Because I'm a lot bigger than them I always say, 'you attack me, I'll defend', give them a sense of how to hit someone big without me beating them up, you know... And like, If I was in a fight or a situation where I got injured and weren't able to use my hands or feet, how would I get away, how would I get out of a corner, spinning, protecting your head and stomach, you know, that kinda thing. So I benefit from it still, even though I'm not really fighting back.” (Claude)

“It helps (men) learn how to control their techniques, because they can't just use force against girls, it wouldn't be fair. It's always gonna be better training when you're always working with different people, all different sizes and abilities and stuff, it makes you better all round if you can do that.” (Sara)

These accounts echo the findings of Guérandel & Mennesson (2007), whose investigation of judo found that mixed-sex sparring was only regarded as legitimate by men (in terms of both sexual and judo-specific etiquette) when it took the form of a *technical* contest, rather than one of overt physical power. Given that the male participants in my study tended to believe that men in martial arts were most usually stronger, more powerful, and therefore more effective fighters than most women, they would describe positive training outcomes from 'normal' encounters with women in these terms. In this sense, the majority of women were not, generally speaking, able to test most men's fullest abilities, but rather would give them the opportunity to develop a specific aspect of their art. Thus, even though in these instances the superior abilities of male martial artists were more or less taken for granted, the fact remains that the men were seeing the women in their clubs as useful training partners whose input helped them to become better all-round fighters. The women were thus not just being tolerated by male martial artists, as was found in some previous studies (e.g. Mennesson, 2000; Lafferty & McKay, 2004), but rather they were valued as training partners who brought something uniquely beneficial to the men's training. One cannot deny that this value remains within the typical discursive limits of hierarchal sex difference, but that the men consider women to be useful partners in their projects of embodying greater combative ability represents a shift in gender relations away from the dismissive, trivialising discourse which has previously limited women's acceptance and ability to assimilate within mainstream (male) combat sports (see Chapters 3, 5 & 6).

It should also be noted that in the majority of these instances, the differential approach which men took to sparring with women was framed with direct reference to the size, weight, strength and experience differences between them, and not simply as an arbitrary judgement based on sex:

"It all depends, it depends on their weight, size, experience, stuff like that. It's not just a sex thing, because the minute you say this is how it is for women and this is how it goes for men there'll be a couple who come along and break the rules." (Amir)

“Well I would say that people take it easy on me because I’m a lot smaller than them, not because I’m a girl. You know, you make a difference there, when it’s a difference in size or in experience, not gender.” (Evelyn)

Therefore, while it may not be fitting to describe this phenomenon as ‘subversive’ (since it does not directly challenge the basic gender discourse of male physical superiority), neither would it be accurate to suggest that it entirely re-affirms traditional hierarchal gender differentiation. Being a reflection of general trends in physical characteristics and martial arts competence, and not a default position taken by all men towards all women, means that men’s positive feelings towards women as ‘technical’ sparring partners should be considered as a contextual element of mixed-sex martial arts training culture which frames even the lesser-able female participants as legitimate club members and useful training partners. Recognising that “because liberal strategies have been successful, they may pave the way for more radical changes” (Hargreaves, 1994: 29) means that women’s acceptance and legitimacy as martial artists, at whatever level, opens up possibilities for more subversive practice and embodiment, as they are afforded the opportunity to learn and develop the skills needed to become more effective, powerful fighters/athletes (McDonagh & Pappano, 2008).

One such possibility surfaces when, aside from the apparently normal experience of partnering with a woman who was smaller, lighter, and therefore generally less powerful than them, men would sometimes experience training with women who were not at any such overt disadvantage – either through their physicality or through the compensatory value of their technical fighting skills. In these instances, the training was considered to be equally beneficial to training with other men, if not more so, because not only would a skilled/powerful female martial artist test their fighting abilities, but also provide an opportunity to spar against someone with a unique set of physical characteristics and competencies:

“It’s about training with everyone really, because everyone has a different body and a different set of abilities... If a woman is really good at martial arts and she’s smaller than you then you will have to fight her differently to how



you'd fight someone who's really good but bigger, or the same size... all of it is a learning opportunity." (Jack)

"You learn something different when you fight anybody... I don't often feel that I'm not able to contribute something to the men I train with, especially the less experienced ones, I know they can learn from my skills... (and) they have to think differently to roll with me, as a woman." (Rachel)

Aside from the physical aspects, the psychological difficulty of fighting a woman, as discussed before and as will be returned to shortly, was also something which men may need to overcome and could do so through training:

"If a man's never trained against a woman, what will they do if a woman attacks them, and they're all like, 'I can't hit a girl' or something? I know men don't want to hit women and that's good, I mean you shouldn't want to hit anyone, but you might be in a situation where you have to, like if they're going mental, gonna hurt you or your friends, so you should know how to get over that." (Evelyn)

In sum, it was broadly agreed upon by the participants that mixed-sex training was beneficial in terms of martial arts learning outcomes, because it gave both men and women important experience of fighting against a diverse, physically and psychologically challenging set of opponents. While the most importance was often attached to women's need to experience fighting against men, framed as either 'realistic' training for the street or even as 'overtraining' for weight-graded competition against other women, many of the participants also felt that men could benefit in certain ways from sparring against women as a part of their everyday practice. Tellingly, the specifics of how men could benefit from female training partners were most often articulated in a way which more or less took for granted men's default discursive status as inherently superior fighters. The majority of male participants thought that women's contribution to their development as martial artists came through the way in which men needed to 'hold back' more than usual in sparring them. Nevertheless, some of the participants felt that sufficiently competent female martial artists could, and did, provide the same kinds of challenges to men as would their male contemporaries. Thus, while the normal

experience was that taller, heavier, stronger men would often spar with women in a limited capacity through which they would focus on honing their technical abilities and learning how to control their power rather than outright fight, there was space within the participants' narratives for women to transcend the assumed sex hierarchy and become men's equals, or even superiors. In so doing, the women became more and more attuned to the ideological centre of the 'physical feminism' advocated by proponents of women's self-defence (e.g. McCaughey, 1997; De Welde, 2003; etc). Beating men at what might be considered 'their own game' demonstrated to the women that their female bodies were not the weak and fragile limiting factors that traditional, hierarchal gender discourse claims them to be (Dowling, 2000). Through their embodied experiences, women gain powerful insight – Messner's "dramatic symbolic proof" (1988: 200) – of the actual fighting potentials of their bodies, relative to those of men. Were they not training in mixed-sex environments women, and importantly, the men they train with, would not be able to experience these kinds of profound realisations, as their segregated experiences would leave space for the women's abilities to be dismissed and trivialised as merely good 'for a woman', leaving men's default superiority intact (McDonagh & Pappano, 2008). In terms of both the physical and psychological outcomes of their training, it was clear from the participants that they felt training together was necessary to reach their fullest potentials, especially for female martial artists.

## **7.2 Problems in Mixed-Sex Training: The Issue of Hitting**

*The tension that results from the difference between common sense and knowledge of one's own bodily experiences is compounded by widespread bodily ideologies about what women's bodies should (be and) do. (Dworkin, 2001: 334, original emphasis)*

Despite these frequent statements in support of mixed-sex/integrated training, such practices did not come without problems for the participants. In fact, for some, integration represented key challenges which at times could obstruct the development of both men's and women's martial arts ability.

### **7.2.1 'Holding Back': Male Honour as Sexism on the Mat**

As mentioned previously, the problems associated with mixed-sex training principally coalesced around the tendency for male training partners to 'hold back' when practicing with women. While most routine martial arts practice requires a certain degree of restraint, it became problematic when men would *excessively* withhold themselves from 'properly' engaging with female training partners, who they would assume were not adequately strong or resilient enough to be hit with the same intensity as other men. The key aspect of this phenomenon is therefore not that men were simply holding back – indeed, it was widely agreed that good, sensible training necessitated the withholding of power in any kind of sparring or partnered training – but rather that they held back more against women than they ideally 'ought' to do:

"I think it's really common that as soon as they put the pads on and can hit really hard, (the men) back off, they won't spar (with women) like they ought to." (Jack)

"I think in general females tend to be less physically strong and less able to withstand physical force as male partners. So I have to work at a less forceful degree and take into account their sizes and strengths more than with a male opponent." (David)

"It's funny, you see it a lot, this mental block for guys to hit girls, you'd have a guy who's only been sparring for three months against a girl who's been training for more than four years and can clearly handle herself very well, and he'll still think 'oh, it's a girl, I better go light on her', even though she can take him out easily." (John)

As noted previously, the reservation felt by most of the male interviewees when sparring women was often a function of the fact that the majority of the women they would spar against or otherwise practice with were smaller, lighter, and 'less tough' than themselves. Yet it was also not uncommon for them to describe a hesitation towards hitting women which was not necessarily based on these physical attributes but rather stemmed from a basic assumption about the sexes which made

them physically uncomfortable when it came to sparring women. That is, even accounting for all other differences, the woman's sex would itself become a limiting factor in their engagement:

"I do find that personally I wouldn't hit a girl as hard as I would hit a guy, I do pull back, you're just more conscious of hitting a girl I think." (Steve)

"When I was in the really 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." (Andy)

In these and other cases, even in spite of their knowledge about female martial artists' abilities, or their desire to win a competitive fight, the men told how they could not bring themselves to strike a woman with sufficient force to 'hurt' her. The hesitation they felt was deep-seated, something which they found difficult to move beyond, and was often recognised as an effect of the dominant gender discourse which they had been learning since they were very young:

"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, so you have to deliberately try to move past that." (Ed)

"It's one of those things you get taught right early, don't hit a girl... It don't make sense in martial arts because you know they're not weak really, so it's a weird situation and I think a lot of people don't know how to deal with it so they like, avoid it." (Elliot)

Some of the women interviewed had a similar perspective on why men would feel hesitant towards sparring with them, describing the lessons of childhood as playing a central role in shaping a gendered perspective on the appropriateness of hitting:

"They have to cope with the fact that for their whole lives they've been told not to hit girls... I think they find it quite hard when they come to martial arts clubs and you're supposed to hit people and there are girls there. They're taught their whole lives that girls are weaker and can't take a beating and you

can't just tell them to get over it and expect them to drop it straight away."  
(Beth)

Furthermore, some of the male participants described the difficulty of separating kicking and punching women from meanings drawn from discourses of domestic abuse or rape, which was underscored by men's apparent understanding of feminism and its supposed imperative that they behave respectfully and decently towards women. In much the same way as McCaughey (1997) describes (radical) feminist aversions to 'male' violence as harmful to women's empowering embodiment of combat techniques, some of the men cited an understanding of anti-rape, anti-violence, and even anti-sexual harassment discourse as a problematic element of their own and other men's practice with women who wanted and needed to be hit and/or grappled with:

"All that close personal contact, people sitting on you, sweating on you, at first I was like, what the fuck! This is really weird, and people think oh god, is it sexual? Is it wrong?' Even when everyone says 'it's ok, go on, give it a go'. If you worry about that kind of sexual stuff, and as an instructor you've got to think about how people might perceive it, like especially men touching women, well you have to be careful." (Andy)

"It's like, you don't wanna hit a girl, you know you shouldn't. But I know they can take it and it's weird to think that they're wanting you to hit them or whatever, like they want to spar with you but you really can't hit them like you can another man. It's one of those things, you know, you hear about it in the news, about men hitting women, abuse, it's just like you don't want to be one of those men. It sounds stupid to compare it but that's what comes into your head when you think ok, I'll really hit her this time." (Elliot)

"I think it's just that I'm a lot more conscious about hitting a girl in certain places, hurting her, like in the chest, I think if I hit her too hard anywhere but definitely there, it's not right. I don't want to hurt anybody and 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 with doing that." (Steve)

Most of the participants framed this type of behaviour as the outcome of gender socialisation, and they referred to masculine propriety and the correct, 'honourable'

way to treat women (as discussed in Chapter 6) as being the reason behind such difficulties in sparring. This suggests that, as with some men from Guérandel & Mennesson's (2007) study, gender discourse took a place of prominence above martial arts discourse in determining the 'correct' way for men to behave when sparring with women. Highlighting the inconsistency between this type of masculine honour and martial artistry, Andy stated that:

"My Dad always used to teach me, you know, 'don't be violent towards women, don't hit people when they're down'. And now, I mean I spar against women, and I do a sport where you're supposed to get people on the ground and hit them, obviously it's a difficult thing to just walk into and do." (Andy)

Interestingly, instances of holding back against women were also evident in some of the women's accounts of their approach to sparring, as they too described being more hesitant to hit female partners than male ones. Even in cases where the women themselves were very critical of men's reluctance to hit (as will be discussed shortly), they also reserved themselves more when fighting another woman, although not without providing a rationalisation similar to the size/strength and experience arguments outlined earlier. Yet gender remained as a structuring element of these approaches to sparring, as the women assumed that men at similar levels of size, experience and ability were less likely to be troubled by being hit than were their female contemporaries:

"Well if it's a guy I would have to say I go in harder, but if it's a girl, well I feel like I'm bullying them if they're not as good as me... I don't feel like a bully with the guys so yeah, I go harder against them." (Sylvia)

"I (hold back against girls) if they're smaller and less experienced. I know how I first felt when I started and I don't wanna put them off... You need to let people walk before they can run. It's not the same for men though, they won't be put off if they get hit, I'm pretty sure." (Sara)

That women should also differentiate their sparring intensity based on their partners' sex indicates that in spite of both recognising the fallacy of discourses of female frailty (through their own bodily self-awareness) and through being

frustrated at being treated as inherently weaker by the men, the women nevertheless reproduced this very behaviour themselves. However, when they explained these practices they would always indicate that their own understanding of sex and gendered subjectivities meant that they would empathise with other women's potential fears and hesitations, and as such a default position of caution – as stressed by several of the men – was necessitated by their awareness of *others'* feelings and acceptance of this traditional, hierarchal gender discourse. As such, even when they had transcended such discursive limitations themselves, these 'rules' continued to feature as a part of their everyday practice of martial arts because of their uncertainty about how other women were thinking, and what exactly they were ready for (or not) with regards to being hit. This particular phenomenon will be discussed in more depth later in this chapter.

One further extrapolation of the problem associated with (not) hitting came when, in some instances, men's unwillingness to hit women became routine enough that women felt as though they had little to offer such men when sparring with them. By holding back and failing to engage fully, these male partners would leave the women feeling as though they were not appreciated or needed, undermining the otherwise inclusive nature of mixed training:

“When this guy was holding back... well I hated it because I didn't feel that it was fair that he didn't get to train properly.” (Andrea)

“I feel like it's a one-way thing and I'm not really happy with that, you know it kinda makes it a bit pointless... Sometimes you're better off not pairing up with guys because you know that if they're like this then they're better off without you.” (Keeley)

“Until recently this happened lots, and I never liked the feeling that I wasn't helpful to them. When they stood back and didn't do anything it made me feel like I was wasting their time.” (Jenny)

These women's sense that they were not positively contributing to the training outcomes of their male partners were thereby often cased within the context of how

the men would behave towards them. By noticeably holding back more than the women felt was appropriate, such men undermined not only their own usefulness to female partners who needed higher-level sparring, but also the confidence which the women had in their own ability to contribute meaningfully to the men's training. While none of the male participants reported ever feeling as though women were not useful partners to them (even when they felt that they had to hold back a lot more than against another man), the women themselves were sometimes left feeling as though the men would be better off without them. In this sense, the problem of 'holding back' could, despite its relative rarity, become a frustration to the development of women's fighting abilities, confidence, and enfranchisement within martial arts clubs. As such, the embodied performance of the discourse of female frailty and male toughness, in a setting where both sexes were intent on enhancing their fighting abilities, would threaten to undermine the learning outcomes for both men and women. In this way, traditional gender discourses could have fairly constraining effects on the practice of mixed-sex martial arts.

### ***7.2.2 'Hit Me!': How Being Hit is Considered Beneficial for Women***

For the women then, men's reluctance to hit them was most often experienced as a hindrance to their development as martial artists. Given that such men would not hit back while sparring, the women would lack the opportunity to develop both the physical and mental resilience required to cope with being struck, as well as the tactical nous with which to avoid being hit in competitive or 'real' fights. This meant that such training was considered to be unproductive for those women who had reached a level where their martial arts expertise required 'full-on' sparring in order to progress:

"Sometimes it's 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!" (Sara)



“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 for my first fight, you know, you gotta get used to getting hit, you can’t block or avoid every punch that comes your way, you gotta take it and move on... you get that false sense of security and you believe you’re doing better than you are. 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.”  
(Helen)

Further to hindering their development as martial artists, the reluctance of male sparring partners to hit them was interpreted by the female interviewees as reinforcing negative conceptions of women as being inherently weak and frail, and indicated that they held second-place positions as club members. Although recognising that adjusting for physical size differences was a necessary part of sparring with anybody, the fact that their femaleness should be considered cause for holding back to a greater extent was interpreted as patronising and unnecessary. Indeed, despite understanding the importance for men of not hitting women (as mentioned above), none of the women thought that this was a suitable justification for such behaviour:

“One of the boys, he’s a newer member, and the other day he just refused to strike at me, or kick at me, even after I encouraged him to and someone else did as well. And he just refused point blank to throw anything at me, and I got quite frustrated because even if nothing else I should be able to block strikes from an inexperienced fighter, but he didn’t even give me the chance to show that.” (Beth)

“They do totally hold back and are scared to hurt me... I like it that they respect me but 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.” (Keeley)

“It can be quite patronising when they don’t spar with you properly. You don’t get it often but it happens now and then, and the funny thing is, it’s usually the newer ones who aren’t even that good themselves... I won the (women’s) national championship last year and I’m not good enough for them to hit?” (Jenny)

Such frustration and feelings of belittlement reflect what McCaughey described as the “often condescending or embarrassing atmosphere” (1997: 79) within mixed-sex martial arts classes, or even the “constant paternalism and discrimination” faced by women boxers as described by Lafferty & McKay (2004: 252). While none of the women I interviewed believed that this problem was quite so entrenched as these other authors suggest, and it did not, therefore, undermine the perceived benefits of integrated training, it was nevertheless taken seriously as a potential barrier to their realisation of both greater martial arts proficiency and a sense of belonging and equality within the combat sports setting. This patronising, paternalistic attitude was thereby roundly criticised by the women, who would often describe openly asking their hesitant male partners to hit them:

“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.” (Beth)

“You can sense it when they’re holding back, and then I just tell them, it’s ok. Throw me, I want you to, I’ll benefit from it so do it properly.” (Louise)

For women to take such a position did not always negate the dilemma for those overly-hesitant men with whom they trained. Acknowledging that to be hit by a man is, in this instance, in a woman’s best interests, stands in stark contrast to the ways in which they otherwise understood directing physical force towards women. Although most of the women did not regularly have problems with reluctant male partners, those men who were unable to move beyond such reservations were a frustration to the women as they obstructed their progression in training and belittled the abilities they had already developed. When asking such men to hit or throw them failed (as it often reportedly did), the women described simply adopting the strategy of attacking and pressuring the men until a more aggressive response on the men’s behalf would become a necessity:

“I’ll be like, ‘come on guys, I’m here to train and you’re here to train, this is kickboxing and you’re supposed to get hit, nobody’s gonna benefit if you just dance around and avoid me, it’s a waste of time’... and if they don’t listen and refuse to hit me then I’ll smack them, pure and simple... If someone thinks I’m

not good enough for this then they'll have to find out the hard way that I am." (Marie)

"If they've 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. I think they see that they can do it to me after I do it to them a few times." (Evelyn)

For the men, as women's verbal demands were often taken as a cue to proceed cautiously rather than to let go of their sex-based reservation altogether, the more radical changes for which the women were pressing would instead often come around as a result of the more direct approach described by Marie and Evelyn:

"Even if they say they're ready for it, you still have to be careful because you really don't want to overdo it, it's better to underdo it than overdo it in these scenarios because otherwise you could end up putting them off (by hurting them)." (John)

"I think that if a girl said I'm happy with you going in hard and I want you to do this and that, and if they were retaliating with a lot of force, then yeah the sex thing wouldn't come into it, it'd be more about size, and the level of experience." (Claude)

"Well I remember when I first got beaten by a girl, she knocked me out I guess, elbowed me in the head. And that was a bit of a moment when I thought well, I should definitely take (women) more seriously and not feel weird about (hitting them) when they can hit like that." (Simon)

Following such direct, embodied realisations, some of the men expressed critical opinions of those who remained resolute in their aversion to hitting women. Experienced martial artists who would regularly, 'unnecessarily' hold back against female training partners were thought by the majority of the interviewees to be relatively rare, as the problem was frequently cast as an effect of inexperience within martial arts, and naivety of women's abilities. This supposed lack of understanding ultimately meant that such men would rely on dominant gender discourses, rather than a more 'enlightened' martial arts discourse, to make sense of mixed-sex encounters. As with other criticised elements of 'masculine' behaviour then,

paternalistic approaches to practicing with women were considered 'immature' and were thought to be incompatible with the true meanings of martial arts:

"I think because of my age and my level of experience I understand this better than a lot of the younger men (in martial arts)... There is this idea that men need to protect women, women need protection, but in (martial arts) it's different. We're here to learn and I think it's quite a mature thing to recognise this, that if a woman wants to get hit she can get hit, it's a part of the learning for everyone." (Jack)

"It depends on the level and the standard, everyone's different. But it's my more experienced guys that are generally better at sparring women, they'll control it and hit them properly without hurting them, they know what they're doing. The younger ones, they're the ones who have the problems." (Amir)

With all this considered, it can be said that the issue of 'holding back' in sparring (or other forms of partnered practice) represents a key moment in which the subversive value of mixed-sex training is tested and can potentially be challenged. The reasons which some of the men gave for their reluctance to fight against female partners with the same intensity as male partners of the same size/weight/experience (and the reasons which many women imagined guided men's behaviour in this regard) clearly draw upon a hierarchal gender discourse which posits that men and women are essentially, physically different in ways which cast women as weaker, more vulnerable, and thus less able to fight than men (e.g. Dowling, 2000). They also draw upon several derivative discourses concerning male propriety, informed by pro-feminist sentiments condemning rape, domestic abuse, sexual harassment, etc, all of which similarly frame women as the passive and violable victims of men's aggressive encroachments, while men are cast as the principal power holders who are thereby responsible for not aggravating or harming women in such ways (McCaughey, 1997). Therefore, despite the men's best intentions in this regard, the motives behind their hesitation to hit are implicated in discourses which reify the typical sexual hierarchy, and through the practice of 'holding back' they can deny women the opportunity to embody the same physical articulations of power as men. As such, their practices within training became one more instance of the "repeated performance of

discourses of gender” (Weedon, 1999: 122), helping to normalise – and thus naturalise – male physical superiority. Even though none of the participants actually agreed outright that all men are always physically superior to all women, and while most of them drew upon their experience within mixed-sex martial arts to actively contest this notion, the hierarchy it implies nevertheless remained as a structuring element in many of the participants’ experience of training in mixed groups, and was a notable, conservative aspect within their narratives about the practicalities of training together.

However, it is important to note that while this is a significant part of mixed-sex training, all of the participants agreed that ‘holding back’ was not an insurmountable problem, and was often only significantly problematic among inexperienced male club members. Indeed, in most of the male participants’ accounts, their own practice of this behaviour was described as something which had happened in the past, the product of a way of thinking which they had subsequently moved beyond. While it was reported to occasionally persist among more experienced groups of martial artists, here it was most often confined to a small, exceptional number and as such was not a widespread feature of the training culture of any of the clubs represented in this study. As one participant stated:

“There are different degrees of opinions on this, I knew one person who was always a gentleman, in the old way of thinking, not hitting women... but to my mind I’m like, progressive, you know, equal opportunities and everything, and that’s what most of us are like. (Holding back against women) is a very minority attitude... it’s something which most people will approach on a case-by-case basis and that’s how it should be.” (John)

Therefore, the hesitation which some martial artists felt towards hitting, grappling, and throwing women with force should be considered as a conservative moment which, rather than simply signalling the boundaries of the subversive possibilities of mixed-sex martial arts, also serves to highlight how many within martial arts actually hold subversive attitudes towards dominant, hierarchal gender discourse, given their largely critical reactions to the male paternalism which this behaviour showcases. As

with the critical stance taken towards 'excessive', typically 'masculine' or 'feminine' behaviours discussed in Chapter 6, the frustration and criticism which the women (and some of the men) directed towards men's paternalism suggests that this instance of traditional gender relations is seen as an out-of-place, even 'old fashioned' type of behaviour often associated with immature and inexperienced martial artists. In this way, it serves as a contrasting example of the gender discourse which they, as more 'mature', or even more 'real' martial artists, have come to reject, allowing for clearer articulations of their own alternative.

### **7.3 Lessons Learned Through Integration: Black Eyes, Changed Minds**

*These challenges to the construction of women by the dominant ideology as inferior are vital for women's sense of their own power as well as necessary to alter men's perception. (Bryson, 1990: 182)*

One of the central themes to all of the findings so far presented in this thesis is the notion that mixed-sex martial arts training involves learning different ways in which to conceive of, talk about, and live within sexed bodies. That is, the experiences of the participants from training with and alongside members of the opposite sex have led, to varying extents, to the learning of a discourse about sexual difference which largely stands in opposition to the traditional, dominant code otherwise structuring gender relations in the contemporary UK context. Training at martial arts in mixed-sex environments has, to a greater or lesser degree, provided men and women with the discursive resources needed to construct an alternative view of (embodied) gender difference to that which prevails in their society beyond the walls of the training hall. In this regard, the practice of mixed-sex martial arts training can lead to subversive transformations in the ways in which men and women think about, talk about, and physically practice gender relations. Such training highlights the fluid, performative, and inessential nature of gender identities; it demonstrates how the links between men, masculinity, and physical domination are culturally contestable; and it foregrounds the body as the site through which competing discourses about gender are produced, challenged, or 'proven'. It is this embodied aspect of learning

about sex and gender which I turn to now, in order to discuss how physically *doing* martial arts, and embodying the discourses attached to such practices, led the participants to profoundly challenge conservative, hierarchal discourses about sex and thereby generate subversive, alternative ways of doing gender.

### **7.3.1 *Learning About the Body, Through the Body***

Principal among the lessons which martial artists learn when studying their art is a renewed appreciation for the capabilities of their own bodies, which is commonly reported in the mainstream literature on martial arts (e.g. McCabe Cardoza, 1996; Twigger, 1997; Polly, 2007) and has been a consistent finding in the scholarly work on women's entry into martial arts in particular (e.g. McCaughey, 1997; DeWelde, 2003; Hollander, 2004). Most of the participants interviewed for this study, both male and female, identified with this particular phenomenon, citing martial arts as a simultaneously enlightening and empowering activity which gave them new insights as to their own physical capabilities and concurrently bolstered their sense of personal agency:

"I love it. I love feeling strong, feeling powerful. When you hit or kick hard, like on a bag or in sparring, you put all your power in and you feel the technique really connecting, yeah it's a great feeling, a real rush, I love it... I never would have known my body could do this kind of stuff if I didn't train at kickboxing... it's empowerment, I mean people use that word a lot but I think it really fits this." (Marie)

"With martial arts, you're learning new things, and then it's a really good feeling when you learn something new and you can feel a real improvement in yourself... As a kid I was lacking in confidence, I was shy and reserved, so yeah this is a real big confidence thing for me, made me much more confident." (Steve)

Such transformative effects on one's self-concept, leading to greater feelings of personal confidence, empowerment, etc, has been a consistent theme of this thesis and is well-documented in the wider body of academic research concerning

women's martial arts in particular. However, it is important to note at this point that training at martial arts in mixed-sex settings can also lead to better understandings of *others'* bodies as well as one's own. What is ultimately at stake is the effects of martial arts-based knowledge on altering the way in which male and female martial artists understand gendered bodies relative to one another, and the consequences of this for altering their conception of sex difference. Of particular importance in this regard is men's changing understanding of the possibilities for physical *power* contained within women's bodies; and concurrently women's understanding of the physical *vulnerability* of men's bodies. Citing their experiences in mixed-sex training, several of the participants drew a direct connection between what they had seen in the training hall and how their own and others' perceptions of gender had changed:

"You quickly learn that even without needing to be very strong, you can still hit hard if you need to. Even the little girls, you know? You can just imagine someone attacking this kid and getting walloped, being left thinking, 'oh I shouldn't have even tried!' I can't see how that wouldn't be in men's heads after they've trained with women for years." (Andrea)

"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. I think most of the guys in my club would say that the girls are weaker, and fair enough, biological fact, women are smaller than men most of the time... but then there are some girls who can quite clearly look after themselves even though they're smaller... and so (the men) hopefully will start to realise that women aren't just the weaker sex, we can hold our own, and that's quite important." (Beth)

"Well for me, once I'd learned about their abilities, it was different. I fought against a girl I knew in my club, 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." (Jack)

Frequently, it was felt that such changing understandings among men were necessarily the product of physical engagements with women which would result in men 'losing' to, or at least otherwise being tested by, their female



opponent/partner. As noted in some other studies, particularly those of Guérandel & Mennesson (2007) and Miller (2010), being beaten or otherwise physically overpowered by women/girls can be highly problematic for men/boys as it instigates a “potentially devastating disruption... to (their) sexed identity” (Miller, 2010: 170), which often necessitates redress. It was noted by some participants that ‘losing to a girl’ could be a very difficult, even emotionally testing experience for men:

“I had to fight a girl and I just couldn’t hit her... I was quite young at the time, maybe eight or nine, and (losing to her) absolutely destroyed me, I was in tears afterwards.” (Andy)

“I remember making this guy cry when I beat him in the final (at a grappling tournament). It was pretty hard for him... but it’s his fault he took it so badly.” (Louise)

“(Some inexperienced) guys really can’t handle it when I’m sparring against them, they’ll either back off completely or throw everything at me like they’re fighting for their lives... I think it confuses them that I’m a woman and I’m good.” (Helen)

The notion that being physically tested by a female opponent instigates ‘devastating disruptions’ to sexual discourse is more or less central to the thesis that mixed-sex martial arts can hold out the potential to subvert the dominant, hierarchal gender discourse. For the majority of male interviewees, being beaten or at least struck hard by a woman was often taken as a source of enlightenment, and for some was described as a revelatory, *road-to-Damascus*-style moment in changing one’s mind about mixed-sex sparring and the difference between the sexes in general. For many of the male interviewees, responding to this challenge to their sexed identities meant altering the way of thinking which was so ‘devastatingly disrupted’ by what would eventually become a ‘normal’ aspect of their training:

“You need to go through a few weird moments first I reckon, like how I got knocked out (by a woman) and then when you finally get it, you see it’s ok, it’s normal, that’s when you find that you change your mind and you approach it all differently.” (Simon)

“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. That’s how it was. I knew about the capabilities of the people I was sparring with because I’d felt them first-hand.” (Jack)

“I had to fight a woman in a grappling tournament... she submitted every guy in my category... (the other men) just laughed it off because she was just so much better than them. She’d been grappling for a long time... You couldn’t look at the way she beat them and say ‘oh, he should’ve done this, should’ve out-muscled her’, everyone looked at it and knew that she was just plain better, being a woman didn’t come into it.” (Andy)

Men no longer seeing their female sparring partners as women, but rather as simply other martial artists, represents a key moment in the subversion of gender within mixed-sex martial arts. Not being approached or understood as ‘a woman who does martial arts’, but rather as ‘a martial artist who happens to be female’, renders their sex a secondary, even incidental characteristic, and no longer the determining factor of how a (male) training partner decides to act when pairing with them. As such, sex is ignored in favour of the woman’s status as a fellow martial artist, and an assumption of physical equality based on their known expertise is invoked to explain how the men would thus behave towards them, against the normal dictates of gendered propriety. As men’s changing attitudes about women’s capabilities would always depend on the visible demonstration of female ability, it stands to reason that such subversive discourses of sex and gender are, in this context, clearly reliant upon experiences drawn from mixed-sex training. Understanding, discussing, and living within differently sexed bodies in such a way does not come about simply as an act of will, as some “ideological decision” on the part of liberal-minded individuals (Halbert, 1997: 21), but rather as a function of the direct demonstration of female ability which is made available to men when they train within mixed-sex clubs and are able to see, and feel, the fighting potential of the female body. The women themselves commented on how their visible, physical examples were the principal way in which they would make categorical statements about their ability to the men with whom they trained, in addition to inspiring the pursuit of similar martial arts competence in other women:

“You do sort of prove something to (men) when you beat them. They treat you differently after that, like some of them will be happy to partner with you or ask you for help more often.” (Rachel)

“In the sense of how I earned (men’s respect), I was just like, let’s spar, and I showed them what I could do. And when the (male) instructor gives us a routine which I think is like, inadequate, I’ll change it up and the people I partner with always really listen to me because they can see I know what I’m doing, they definitely take me seriously because they can see my abilities.” (Sylvia)

“When they actually see what I can do, it’s amazing the amount of, like how people’s perceptions change.” (Helen)

“I see it as my number one role at the moment, inspiring the talented young girls who come to the club... And I think one of the best ways to do that is to show what I can do, you know, and that usually means practice with the men, demonstrate to everyone that women can be just as good at jujutsu.” (Louise)

### **7.3.2 Reflexive Sensitivity and ‘Doing’ Gender Selectively**

While embodied experiences of fighting were therefore integral to the participants’ development of alternative gender discourses, recognising this also meant that they were sensitive towards those whose understanding had not been similarly shaped by an experience which was considered relatively rare among the general population. Many of the participants, upon recognising their own transformed understandings as a product of this process of embodied learning, were able to empathise with newer members who were uncertain about particular aspects of mixed-sex training. Echoing the perceived difficulty of marketing martial arts to women (see Chapter 5), many of the participants described the conflict between the two opposing ways of understanding gender relations which circulated among martial artists – namely, dominant gender discourse regarding the sexes as inherently and insurmountably physically unequal, and martial arts discourse suggesting that one’s physical differences and limitations could be transcended through rigorous training in

technical fighting skills. Many of the participants were attuned to the dangers of shocking newer club members with outright displays of disregard for traditional sexual propriety, and so would accordingly adopt gendered strategies for engaging with newer/younger (and particularly female) martial artists which differed from their own ultimate beliefs about sex and gender difference:

“You’re always a bit wary with (women) at first, you need to think about what they might make of it if you throw them straight into sparring.” (Claude)

“I know a lot of girls who start in this sort of thing are up against it because they really don’t think they’re gonna be good enough, don’t think they can fight... Especially the young ones, they need to be taught gently before they can come out of their shells and get stuck into it like (the senior female members) have.” (Marie)

“Sometimes I’m thinking about how they’re thinking about it, if you know what I mean, you need to understand what they might think if you just hit them.” (David)

“One of the big difficulties that I find here is that I don’t want the girls to get turned off by the aggression that I show them. But at the same time I do want them to learn the same aggression, so it’s quite difficult to see that and get it right.” (Sylvia)

There was thus a certain sense of responsibility attached to attaining this particular form of enlightenment. Not ‘putting them off’ was a central concern when describing how martial arts clubs could effectively socialise new, particularly female members into a position where they would be comfortable with learning, accepting, and embodying this subversive gender discourse, as well as the greater combative expertise promised by such embodiment. With low numbers of women in most clubs, and with club owners/instructors often using female/feminine-friendly marketing strategies to attract them in, it was generally recognised that a ‘sensitive’ approach was needed to coaching women into the norms of mixed-sex training. This would often necessitate a default position of cautious differentiation in their approaches to sparring, or even running segregated training sessions or one-off single-sex events to develop the beginnings of women’s self-confidence in martial

arts, reminiscent of the necessity of initial segregation as advocated by Castelnovo and Guthrie (1995).

The fact that men and women who had come to reject dominant, traditional gender stereotyping and sex differentiation were yet able to recognise the usefulness of pragmatically engaging in this particular discourse of sexual difference and propriety is indicative that the participants were becoming reflexive agents who were knowingly capable of *performing* gender differently. Contextually aware and strategically-minded, the men and women whose understanding of sex had been changed through their training were nevertheless able to switch back and forth, embodying one set of 'rules' about sex in one case, and another when the need for it arose. This would suggest that their learning about sex and gender incorporated not only a renewed self-awareness about their own abilities, nor indeed simply a better appreciation of the potential of others' bodies and a rejection of traditional, binary, hierarchal sex discourse, but also a practical understanding of the performative nature of sex and gender. Some of the men, for instance, described how they would alter their approach based on what they thought different women expected and wanted of them, as a man. As John puts it:

"You approach it on a case-by-case basis... There are those tougher girls that want you to hit them hard, you know they can take it, so you go in like you would normally, don't hold it all back... But if you're training with someone less experienced, less tough, you have to think they probably don't want you to hit them, they want that gentleman thing maybe, so you do that. If you don't get it right then they might not come back to training, so you have to be aware of these things." (John)

As mentioned above, several of the women also shared this view and were sensitive to the difficulties newer female members would face when starting to train at martial arts, and particularly when training in mixed-sex settings. Because of this awareness, the women would similarly hold back when sparring against other women, until it became apparent that their partners were ready for rougher action and would benefit from being struck or thrown with force:

“Some girls are a bit girly-girly, they need that confidence to be built up and I think people just need to be instructed differently, having someone just come in and swing at them won’t help... It takes them a bit of time to be brought up to speed like I am, so yeah you have to be sensitive to them and adapt to what they need at each stage.” (Evelyn)

Combined with the women’s contextual and selective negotiation of ‘femininity’ as described in Chapter 6, it is evident that the female participants similarly grasp the notion of gender as a performative construct, which they personally engaged with in a reflexive manner. Negotiating their own gendered identities and expectations as well as accounting for those of others highlights how the martial artists were aware of the inessential, changeable, and culturally-contingent nature of sex and gender. Regardless of their rejection of the hierarchal binary which defined conservative gender discourse, both the male and female interviewees were able to respect its importance in the lives of others and select strategies by which to engender a subversive alternative in their younger and more inexperienced training partners. This was achieved partly through accommodating this hierarchal discourse by practicing some of its dictates to what appeared to be appropriate and measured extents. As discussed here and throughout Chapters 5 and 6, examples of this include: using ‘feminine’ images and messages in their marketing to communicate a socially-valued association between women and martial arts, despite decrying excessive femininity as harmful to training; running single-sex or segregated training sessions in order to establish women’s confidence and enthusiasm for martial arts, despite the fact that mixed-sex training was always considered more productive; and ‘holding back’ when sparring female partners despite knowing what potential for combative ability lies within the female body. This engagement with traditional sex/gender discourse would ultimately suggest that in the face of a discursive system with all the appearances of naturalness and stability, the participants were becoming postmodern, reflexive agents of change, whose “complicitous critique” (Pronger, 1998: 281) of the traditional, binary sexual hierarchy was a deliberately insidious strategy to work towards its undoing in the context of the training hall. By reflexively managing their practice of sexed and gendered identities and behaviours, the participants hoped to encourage more women to engage in martial arts and

ultimately become the antithesis of the 'second sex' which dominant social discourse concerning bodies and combat sports suggests them to be. And in this role as complicit critics, these experienced martial artists lent strength to the notion that mixed-sex training can hold out the possibility for the subversion of gender.

#### **7.4 Discussion: Embodied Learning and the Generation of Subversive Discourse**

*Playing with the boys should be an option, if not the norm, for... all girls and women, if we are to become what we ought to be. (McDonagh & Pappano, 2008: 260, original emphasis)*

In sum, it is apparent that to the participants of this study, mixed-sex training is considered to be beneficial for both male and female martial artists for a number of reasons. It was felt that women benefitted substantially from training alongside men, owing partly to the fact that martial arts was principally a 'male-dominated' activity and therefore the majority of seasoned, 'serious' martial artists were men. It was also considered important that women experienced sparring against men in order to prepare them for the imagined reality of street violence if they intended to train for self-defence purposes. Without such experience, it was felt that women stood to gain little in terms of the enhanced sense of agency celebrated throughout the literature on women's martial arts. While men were also considered to benefit from sparring against women, it was often said that the principal advantages of sparring female partners involved the need for men to practice greater control over their power and technique, displaying a continued assumption of inherent male physical superiority. However, some of the participants described the ability of superior female martial artists to truly test male training partners in sparring, which could involve additional, useful lessons in psychologically equipping men to fight against women should they ever be faced with the need. As such, it was frequently felt that men and women needed each other in order to become well-rounded, 'complete' fighters. In spite of these advantages, the oft-cited assumption of men's physical superiority would often lead to a highly frustrating moment in the training

careers of women, as some men would refuse to treat them as equals and would excessively 'hold back' while practicing in mixed training. Feeling as though such behaviour stunted their ability to develop adequate physical and mental fighting skills, and feeling patronised and belittled by the assumptions underlying this treatment, many of the women interviewed identified this as a frequent problem with mixed training. Nevertheless, since excessively holding back was almost always associated with inexperienced male martial artists, and the women were often able to encourage change in this regard through visibly demonstrating their toughness and skill, it was not considered so great a problem as to overshadow the perceived benefits of mixed training. Finally, it was clear through the narratives of the majority of the participants that in addition to the positive training outcomes of mixed-sex martial arts, they were also learning new ways in which to conceive of sex difference, thanks to the lessons they were able to learn about their own bodies and those of others.

Although mainly explicitly critical (yet sometimes implicitly supportive) of hierarchal gender discourse which posited that women are naturally and inevitably weaker than men, the participants demonstrated that they were able to pragmatically perform the types of gendered behaviours which such discourse prescribes, as a way in which to ease the adaptation of new, inexperienced, and naïve club members towards ultimately learning and accepting a subversive understanding of gender based upon martial arts discourse about the body. To this end, mixed-sex training implicitly coaches martial artists to not only accept alternative discourses about the sexed body, but also to understand how gendered behaviours are culturally and contextually contingent, as they actively perform different discursive renditions of sex and gender towards realising their goals of attaining and propagating greater martial arts embodiment.

Central to all of these findings has been the primary importance of the body as the medium through which martial artists learn. Returning to the initial statement of this chapter – the centrality of the body to discourses about sex difference – it is abundantly clear that the body is equally important in challenging traditional,



hierarchical sex binaries as it is in the naturalistic justifications given to support them. Such justifications, as extensively criticised by many feminist sports scholars (e.g. Lenskyj, 1986; Hargreaves, 1994; Dowling, 2000; Heywood & Dworking, 2003; McDonagh & Pappano, 2008), have for decades (if not centuries) falsely claimed that women's bodies are naturally, physically incapable of handling the stresses of combat sports, and that therefore women ought not try to emulate the deeds of men in such arenas. Justifying physical segregations in this manner allows men to accrue status and prestige, reifying their power over women through the symbolic importance of a powerful and purposeful physicality, whilst insulating such arrangements from challenge through the apolitical discourse of 'nature' underpinning the body-centred rationalisations which defend them. Yet within the academic research literature exploring women's participation in martial arts, renewed understandings of the capabilities of their female bodies – previously imagined as inevitably weak, vulnerable, and inferior – have consistently been celebrated as the most significant and meaningful outcome of training, in terms of both the individual women's lives and for feminist understandings of the body. As McCaughey puts it, "nothing felt quite like knowing my body was capable of lethal force. It felt as if I had been let in on a well-kept secret" (1997: 86). Understanding one's own body in such a sense is profoundly empowering particularly when considered against a backdrop of a dominant social discourse which otherwise frames female physicality as essentially and inevitably weak, fragile and vulnerable. What is particularly poignant about mixed-sex training however, is that such realisations about female ability are not made outside of the relative context in which traditional sex discourse frames female bodies as inferior. That is to say, women are learning these same lessons about the power potentials of their bodies alongside men, allowing for the de-mystification of 'inevitable' male domination and the realisation that female bodies can fight back and hold their own against male ones:

"I think it's so important for us to learn how to stand up to a man physically... I'm not scared of that any more, since I've been sparring against men for years and I know what it's like to be hit, I'm used to the confrontation."  
(Marie)

Similarly, the effectiveness of mixed-sex training for the subversion of gender – meaning, in this regard, the establishment, practice and propagation of an alternative discourse about sex, bodies, and gender relations – is further compounded when not only women are realising the potentials of female bodies, but men are as well. When faced with physical evidence of women’s fighting ability (particularly when *actually facing it* in a sparring situation), it is very difficult for men to deny the abilities of women who fight. As men are similarly enhancing their combative ability through martial arts training, embodying a philosophy which suggests the possibility of transcending one’s natural, physical limitations through rigorous training in technical skills, they are equipped with a discourse through which to make sense of the visible abilities of the women with whom they train. What surfaces then, is an alternative discourse about sex and the body built on the way in which gender is being ‘done’ differently (Butler, 2008) within the training culture of mixed-sex martial arts classes.

This different ‘doing’ of gender therefore provides for the generation of an alternative way of conceiving of sex. If, as Butler suggests, “sex... (has) been gender all along” (2008: 11), then the gendered behaviours of men and women, and in particular their behaviours towards one another, are crucial to constitute an understanding of sex outside of the usual dictates of hierarchally-gendered society. Beginning with the active body, which is enabled within a context of equal access, acceptance of diversity, and ultimately sex integration in training, a subversive discourse is generated as men and women act in ways which confound old assumptions and set new standards for judging physical capabilities. This discourse was ultimately normalised within the narratives of the participants, whose accounts of mixed-sex training would often lead to statements concerning the irrelevance and disappearance of sex differences between high-level training partners:

“I just didn’t see it as hitting a girl, you see it as hitting another martial artist. That’s how it was.” (Jack)

This discourse was more or less normalised as the dominant way in which to understand sex difference within the training cultures of the clubs represented by the participants in this study, a fact reflected through the value-labelling inherent within discussions about the propriety of, among other problems, the issue of excessive ‘holding back’. As behaviours which derived from conservative, hierarchal gender structures were framed as either anachronistic oddities or as functions of immaturity and naivety, it was clear that the participants saw correct, legitimate, martial arts-appropriate styles of engaging with gender as those which fell in line with the more subversive, alternative view of sex. Accepting Foucault’s (1977a) assertion that privileged, dominant discourses are directly implicated in productive mechanisms of power, it is evident that this process of normalisation was an important step in facilitating the embodiment of greater combative ability (and hence, physical agency) among the female martial artists. Essentially, the routine performance of this alternative discourse about the body – derived from the fundamental meanings of martial arts and compounded through the observable effects of training on men’s and women’s bodies – generated the subversive possibilities of the activity via its subsequent effects on equalising men’s and women’s physical fighting abilities. Such embodiment, in turn, serves to reinforce the message of this very discourse, which was thus evidently passed on within martial arts schools from senior to junior members through an implicit pedagogy loaded into the way in which martial arts training was conducted in mixed classes. In this sense, gender subversion can be seen to be taking place “*within* the practices of repetitive signifying” (Butler, 2008: 199, original emphasis), as men’s and women’s equalised combative abilities were repeatedly demonstrated and embodied through integrated practice. While this process was rarely uncontested, it was nevertheless broadly accepted by the interviewees as the normal, appropriate way in which mixed-sex martial arts was done. As such, it is my contention that integrated physical practice is an essential moment in the contestation and subversion of gender within the context of mixed-sex training, which remains a possibility within the discursive parameters of martial arts.

## 8

### ***Conclusion: Mixed-Sex Martial Arts and the Subversion of Gender***

In this final chapter, I offer some concluding remarks in order to summarise my research findings and comment on how well they answer the question posed at the beginning of this study. I also briefly discuss the issue of sampling, and how the demographic biases within my group of interviewees impacted upon the analysis made. Finally, I address the potential usefulness of my work to different audiences, suggesting ways in which these findings might be relevant to certain interest groups, such as sociologists of sport, feminist scholars more generally, or indeed, martial arts practitioners themselves.

#### **8.1 *Answering the Question: Is Mixed-Sex Martial Arts ‘Subversive’?***

*While not every individual is a practicing philosopher, everyone can engage in a critical testing of the societal limits. The possibility to ‘widen’ such limitations opens up space for practices of freedom. (Markula & Pringle, 2006: 148)*

At the beginning of this thesis, a central research question was posed: can training in mixed-sex martial arts classes involve the ‘subversion’ of gender? The rationale for this question (including the definitions of both gender and subversion) was drawn from the examination of feminist theory in Chapter 2. The specific theoretical position which informed my question, and the work I undertook in order to answer it, drew on Foucault (1977a) and relied on several feminist theorists who have appropriated Foucauldian theory, including Butler (2008), Grosz (1994), Haraway (1991a) and others within the postmodern/poststructural-feminist (or ‘queer theory’) tradition. Specifically then, gender was conceived of as a *performative*

strategy enacted by individuals in order to produce and maintain a specific identity, in accordance with normalising and naturalising discourses of essential (and hierarchal) sexual difference. Gender subversion was imagined as the result of a particular type of transgressive gender performance, wherein individuals' embodiment would provide evidence against these essentialist discourses, leading people to conceive of sexual differences in alternative ways as they build different discourses to explain them. In Butler's terminology, it revolves around the generation of an "epistemic crisis that allows gender categories to change" (1998: 110), affecting not only people's subjectivities, but also the power chances which embodying those subjectivities affords them. The task for the research was to evaluate whether or not, and in which particular ways, this phenomenon was taking place within the context of mixed-sex martial arts.

In Chapters 5, 6 and 7, I presented data showing several moments of significance for this question, where traditional gender discourses were being challenged and reformulated, or alternatively supported and propagated. To begin with, and as was discussed at length in Chapter 5, there was a broad feeling among all interviewees that mixed-sex martial arts was 'normal', and neither the men or the women taking part in my research considered it 'inappropriate'. Indeed, and as some of the interviewees openly stated, there appeared to be a prevailing ideological leaning towards liberalism and 'equal opportunities' within the schools at which they had trained. Some elements of this liberal outlook included: the general prevalence of and preference for integrated training; the efforts made to appeal to women in clubs' marketing strategies; male and female participants bemoaning the over-representation of men in martial arts clubs; the opportunities for women to become competitors and coaches; and ultimately the normalisation of women's presence at multiple levels within martial arts. Such phenomena were not, however, uniformly experienced by all participants. In fact, it was simultaneously clear that certain conservative moments would frustrate the liberalisation of martial arts and impede the attainment of sex equality. These included: an institutional bias favouring men (in terms of greater competitive opportunities, more weight-matched sparring partners, and relative ease of acceptance as coaches); segregated training practices,

both formally sanctioned and informally occurring; the tendency among some men to not spar 'properly' with women; and women's occasional feelings of disenfranchisement to which such conditions could lead.

The question of whether or not martial arts is as 'open' to women as it is to men is therefore difficult to answer with clarity. There is evidence to suggest that greater acceptance of and opportunity for women within martial arts is partly dependent upon participants' exposure to, and thereby appreciation of, women's abilities. Yet this is dependent itself upon the number of women involved and thereby upon the ease of access and availability of opportunity. And while such exposure was apparently common among my interviewees, this was not necessarily so among all involved in martial arts. Importantly, the resulting liberalisation which this exposure leads to is considered a vital first step in moving towards the possibility of generating more subversive gender practices, as detailed in much of the existing literature on women's sports participation (e.g. Hargreaves, 1994; Dowling, 2000; McDonagh & Pappano, 2008). The liberalisation of martial arts does not yet appear to be entirely realised, although its possibility certainly exists and can be seen to have had an effect on the martial artists interviewed here. Ultimately, 'equal opportunities' within mixed-sex martial arts have not been attained across the board, yet in those instances where they have been, there is evidence to suggest that they have led to more radical, subversive changes.

Among such changes, the production of alternative idealised codes of masculinity and femininity were observed (see Chapter 6). Following from what they had learned through mixed-sex training, the interviewees accounted for their own gendered identities, and discussed those of others, by articulating them around their experiences within martial arts. In some instances, this led to the apparent production of particularly gendered subjectivities which stood in contrast to the dominant norms favoured within patriarchal culture. Some characteristics of these changes included: a rejection and criticism among men (and women) of stereotypically 'masculine' behaviour, including hyper-competitiveness, machismo, dominance, etc; an expression of distaste among men towards male chauvinism and

the sexual objectification of women (particularly of female training partners); a critical reinterpretation of 'femininity' by women who largely rejected discourses of female passivity, weakness and inferiority yet also retained some other aspects of traditional femininity; and a tendency to coalesce notions of idealised male and female character around a shared identity as 'martial artists', drawing upon martial arts discourses to define what counted as a 'real' man or woman. Yet at the same time, there were certain aspects of the martial artists' negotiation of gender which did not stand in quite such contrast with the dominant structure of gender relations. These included: men's paternalistic sense of honour manifest through their reluctance to hit or 'hurt' women; women's occasional collusion with discourses of female frailty in instances of choosing lighter training or less challenging sparring partners; the evident 'compulsory heterosexuality' driving women's deliberate retention of femininity as a marker of difference from men and from lesbianism; and the disciplinary practices which self-styled 'correct' men and women exercised against those who did not adhere to the idealised form of gendered propriety in their gyms.

The significance of these particular forms of identity lie in three areas. Firstly, it was evident that the participants were all critical of the typically hierarchal, binary gender discourse which suggested men were *always* physically more capable fighters than women. Their criticism of this discourse drew upon their experiences of training to make sense of gender differently, and in so doing to support alternative discourses about sex and the body which explained the different forms of sexed embodiment taking place. This rejection of hierarchal gender discourse manifest itself in multiple ways. Particularly among the female interviewees, it involved an active, reflexive and strategic engagement with gender, suggesting that 'doing' gender correctly in this context led to an explicit understanding that gender was a performance, and one which helped to substantiate, to *make real*, one's sexual identity (Butler, 2008). As such, participants' evidently reflexive, constructive, and performative negotiation of gender, in a cultural context wherein specific complexities of sex and gender were pushed to the fore, signifies an experiential awareness of the changeable and ultimately inessential nature of gender, and also of its role in constructing sex

differences. Such understandings are what led some participants to dismiss the idea that there existed such a thing as natural, exclusively definitive 'real' men or women, explicitly stating that:

"Being a real man? That means nothing to me, absolutely nothing... (A real woman?), it's the same again, nothing. I couldn't separate them out because they're the same as much as they are different." (Amir)

Secondly, an interesting line of analysis extends from the evident resilience of compulsory heterosexuality in structuring the women's desire to be seen as 'normally' female. Substantiating their 'normality' through heterosexual femininity, the women interviewed often stated that they wanted to continue to be seen as women in spite of their martial arts practice and the evident 'masculinisation' this could imply. An oft-cited problem for female athletes more generally (e.g. Lenskyj, 1986; Hargreaves, 1994; etc), compulsory heterosexuality has been argued to stunt women's progression as athletes by preventing them from embodying sufficient levels of power, or exhibiting sufficient amounts of aggression, etc. Given that such attributes are often considered 'masculine', and that female masculinity is often taken to connote homosexuality, (particularly) heterosexual female athletes are pressured to avoid such embodiment and thus remain athletically inferior to more 'masculine' men. Yet what is particularly interesting in this instance is that the effects of this normalising, disciplinary discourse are actually operating in a subversive direction at the same time as an apparently conservative one. Whilst trying to remain 'normal', the women were able to accomplish a disassociation of the exclusive link between men/masculinity, fighting ability, and thus physical dominance, because they openly defied the received wisdom that women who are good fighters are 'masculine' and therefore 'not real' women. So long as their female 'normality' was practiced through largely aesthetic forms of femininity, there was felt to be little undue obstruction to their progression in training. As such, the retention of a conservative definition of sex-gender-sexuality, within the context of an alternative set of bodily practices and discourses, ironically gave rise to embodied evidence of the otherwise hidden combative abilities of 'normal' women. These



women's adherence to a doctrine of heterosexual normality thereby enabled them to produce proof of *all* women's abilities:

“In fact I think of myself as more of a woman because I see myself doing something for women, instead of just obeying a stereotype... I think it's feminism, you know, pursuing something for ourselves and showing that normal everyday women are capable of doing something which a lot of people say we're not. I think it's a good thing what we're doing.” (Rachel)

Thirdly, the disciplinary practices towards shaping 'correct' behaviours to which participants alluded make for a telling illustration of how apparently 'subversive' gender practices are institutionally produced in this setting. As discussed in Chapter 6, the techniques for engendering the desired subjectivity within new martial artists were twofold: club members would be exposed to visible examples of the 'right' way to think about martial arts, other martial artists, and the meanings of the body and of combat; and if failing to 'get it', non-conforming individuals would be 'muscled out' by way of painful 'lessons' taught on the mat and in the ring. Essentially, the participants would “punish those who fail to do their gender right” (Butler, 2008: 190). In so doing, they evidently failed to heed Butler's warning “to be careful not to idealise certain expressions of gender that, in turn, produce new forms of hierarchy and exclusion” (Butler, 2008: viii). Yet such exclusion made sense to the participants, given the disrupting and unhelpful effects of trying to tolerate either overly competitive macho men or 'groupie' women, and so became an acceptable way of policing the boundaries of normality within mixed-sex martial arts. Thus, while the interviewees' practice of gender was at times subversive of the *content* of hierarchal, binary gender discourse, in its *form* it more or less replicated the productive/punitive regimes of wider modern culture (e.g. Foucault, 1977a).

For those martial artists who managed to stay the course in such clubs, changes in conceptions of idealised gender were not the only transformative outcomes of their training. As discussed in both Chapters 3 and 7, one of the most profound effects of martial arts training is considered to be the growing realisation of one's own physical capabilities, and the enhanced sense of personal agency to which this can lead. This

is often particularly the case among women, for whom feminine embodiment otherwise largely defines combative physicality as inappropriate and unnatural (e.g. Lenskyj, 1990; McCaughey, 1997; Hollander, 2009). As such, it has already been widely reported that women's practice of martial arts is in and of itself subversive; for instance, the idea appears in the title of De Welde's (2003) paper, *Getting Physical: Subverting Gender Through Self-Defense*. But within the context of mixed-sex martial arts, there is more to be said concerning the possibilities for gender subversion than simply women's enhanced combative ability and sense of bodily agency. For example, my findings have indicated that when training together, the activity can be beneficial in the following ways: women's feelings of empowerment, along with their actual development of combat abilities, are considered to be greater when they are accustomed to practicing directly with men; a de-mystification regarding the bodies of 'others' can therein be accomplished, as women learn about the vulnerabilities of male bodies as well as the strengths of their own; and conversely, men are presented with evidence of female power and are thereby pressed to adjust their perceptions and attitudes towards women. Additionally, noting that their understanding is a direct product of experience enables men and women to empathise with inexperienced others, for whom they are able to adapt deliberately gendered strategies in training, easing them into the alternative realm of subversive gender practices. Yet as with the other findings, these are not universally experienced, and training together does involve its own conservative moments which hinder the subversive potential of the activity. These include: men's reluctance to hit women, as previously outlined; the assumption that women need male training partners more than men need female partners; and, particularly when training is segregated, there exists the chance that institutionally-structured differences in modes of practice (e.g. competitive participation) may become 'normalised' or even 'naturalised' to either sex.

Regarding the effectiveness of mixed-sex martial arts practice for producing subversive knowledge about the body and sex differences (and, indeed, subversive bodies themselves), it bears mention that this potential of the activity remains tied to the actual experiences constituting it. The principle, subversive value of mixed-

sex training, I believe, lies in the fact that it enables men and women to *physically experience* each other's bodies in novel ways, and it is the physicality of this activity which gives it such value. A recurrent theme in the findings, and a key element of the analysis in this thesis, has been the experience of learning through one's body, and of changing one's mind following physical exchanges on the mat. As McCaughey (1997) describes it, the 'physical feminism' of the activity provides for the opportunity to learn in first-hand, viscerally 'real' ways of the potential of one's own (and others') bodies. Enabled by an explanatory discourse central to martial arts participation, by which participants are able to make sense of the "epistemic crisis" (Butler, 1998: 110) posed by the "potentially devastating disruption" (Miller, 2010: 170) of women's powerful performances of combat, the direct experience of fighting the opposite sex is of key importance in constructing alternative models of gender. Re-appropriating Messner's phrase, mixed-sex fighting can provide "dramatic symbolic proof" (1988: 200) of female ability, and such proof underscored both men's and women's narratives of how their own perception and practice of gender had changed through the experience of mixed-sex participation. As demonstrations of this bodily power became routine, and encouraged practices which reflected its effective normalisation, a new mode of conceiving of and performing sex and gender came into being. Ultimately, it is these routinely performed encounters between men and women which led them to disassociate sex from fighting ability:

"I just didn't see it as hitting a girl, you see it as hitting another martial artist. That's how it was." (Jack)

However, without these experiences there was little ground upon which to base an alternative model of gender, as the discursive meanings of martial arts which stress the possibility of women's (just as much as men's) fighting ability lack the requisite bodily proof to sufficiently challenge dominant gender discourses. It was reported that those involved in mixed-sex martial arts who lacked adequate knowledge of women's abilities, such as inexperienced members, perceived the sexes as distinctly, essentially and hierarchally different. Their corresponding behaviour thus helped to support traditional gender discourse, much to the frustration of many of the female

interviewees. And it was often felt that should such individuals continue to refuse to allow the possibility of training 'as equals' with women (or men, in the case of reluctant women), they would be contributing to the perpetuation of a traditionally hierarchal system within martial arts, which would continue to produce differently sexed bodies and subjectivities. In this way, seizing and capitalising upon the subversive potential of the activity would require use of the initiative, and was therefore something which needed to be deliberately chosen and enacted as much as passively experienced. Many of the women interviewed were particularly active in this regard, taking seriously their position as role models and even trail blazers, while several of the men were also proactive in this direction. While formal, institutional barriers may prevent any quick realisation of their goal, such as the general lack of provision of (and antipathy towards) mixed-sex competition, it is clear that a will to effect change does exist within these settings.

What is principally at stake through these experiences then, is the degree to which individuals are able to 'unlearn' the dominant, hierarchal gender discourse otherwise shaping contemporary sexual reality, whilst internalising a martial arts-based discourse which runs more or less in opposition to it. In spite of the prevalence of the latter, the reassertion of elements of the traditionally dominant structure is nevertheless witnessed time and again within the mixed-sex training setting, even among those who are relatively more experienced and otherwise appear rarely shaped by it. Given that "the reproduction of power at moments of challenge remains one of power's most insidious effects" (Wachs, 2005: 545), there are moments within this potentially subversive practice where conservative gender practices resurface and traditional sexual differentiation is reasserted. At times, these moments frustrate the potential for gender subversion, such as when men's paternalism denies women adequate training or competitive opportunities, thereby limiting women's abilities and hiding their potential from view. At other times, they inadvertently led to other avenues of challenge, such as when the perceived importance of appearing 'normally' heterosexual removes the association of women's physical power with 'abnormality', meaning female martial artists are

better placed to symbolically represent women as a group within the frames of reference existing in broader, heterosexist culture.

In sum then, it is my contention that mixed-sex martial arts does, under certain conditions, *offer the possibility for the subversion of gender*. From my findings, I would suggest that these conditions provisionally include the following: martial arts participation being as open to women as to men (in terms of opportunities to train, coach and compete); a correspondingly 'normalised' presence of women, particularly at the senior and competitive levels; the circulation of a shared and relatively de-gendered identity as 'martial artists' without necessarily having lost sight of (aesthetic) sexual distinction; the general rejection of typically divisive and obstructive gendered behaviours, such as chauvinism, machismo or overt and emphasised sexuality; a growing awareness of the deliberate and performative nature of one's own gender; and, above all, a broadly integrated physical training regime which gives ample opportunity for men and women to meet 'as equals' on the mat. Without wishing to generalise the effectiveness of these conditions to all within martial arts, it was apparent that they enabled my interviewees to construct narratives often based upon alternative gender discourses, which framed the sexes in a non-hierarchical and non-essentialist fashion. In this way, I feel confident in the statement that mixed-sex martial arts can hold out the possibility for the subversion of gender, albeit in an apparently partial and contested manner at present.

## **8.2 *Sampling Issues: Interviewee Bias and the Partial View***

*The strange, the incoherent, that which falls 'outside', gives us a way of understanding the taken-for-granted world of sexual categorisation as a constructed one, indeed, as one that might well be constructed differently. (Butler, 2008: 149)*

As discussed in Chapter 4, there were certain, unintentional demographic biases in my sample (namely an over-representation of whites and of the middle classes). Not considering these biases to be overly obstructive to my research goals, I felt justified within the theoretical influences guiding this thesis to continue the research despite

them. Yet two other biases emerged within the pool of interviewees which do nevertheless require mentioning at this point, as they have an observable bearing on the data gathered and therefore on the analysis made. These biases are towards heterosexuals (with all interviewees openly identifying as such), and what I will call here 'experts'.

Firstly, given that the theoretical leaning and thus the analytical framework I used in this study prioritises sexuality as a profound aspect of gender (notably in relation to the linkages between sex, gender and sexuality), it should be noted that my analysis is missing a potentially important part of the equation, as it were, by having only heterosexual interviewees. Although it is not the case that I have 'ignored' sexuality in this study, as to claim such would be to dismiss heterosexuality as a meaningful category of experience in its own right, I have nevertheless missed the wider picture of the significance of sexuality by not gathering data from self-identifying homosexual or bisexual martial artists. Yet because I do not have any data to suggest that homosexuality has a profound impact on the ways in which men and women practice gender within this particular setting, I cannot be sure how much of a drawback this bias in my sample is. Research into other sports cultures would suggest that broadening an analysis of sexuality would be illuminating (e.g. Wellard, 2002; Caudwell, 2006; Anderson, 2009a), but at present, the ways in which homosexual men and women experience the phenomenon of mixed-sex martial arts training are still unknown. As such, this presents a future challenge for expanding upon the findings presented here.

The other bias mentioned above presents more of an immediate problem however, inasmuch as my largely 'expert' sample of experienced martial artists would consistently construct 'other' martial artists as thinking and behaving differently to themselves. Principally, the notion of experience as a mediating factor in learning and embodying a martial arts-based discourse about the body, as opposed to dominant, hierarchal gender discourse, was paramount in all of the interviewees' accounts. This means that drawing my data from a group of experienced martial artists privileges this perspective whilst not adequately accounting for the 'other'

against which it is often defined. Inexperienced martial artists are therefore done a disservice by accounting for their subjective positions through the (often inferiorising) second-hand accounts of others, rather than allowing them to speak for themselves. This bias was exacerbated somewhat by the use of snowball sampling, as following each interview my participants were asked to recommend others for the study and would often do so based on who they thought would be a 'good example' of the issues we had just discussed. While intending to facilitate my research by guiding me towards participants who were highly experienced and who presented an interesting case of, for instance, women's involvement in competitive martial arts, my interviewees' good intentions further solidified the emerging bias in my findings. As such, alternative sampling techniques may have enabled me to gather a wider variety of perspectives. Overlooking the less experienced elements of the participants' clubs in this way meant that my research findings are inherently skewed towards the perspectives shared by those who are a) more experienced, and b) have some specific and even uncommon experiences (such as women who have fought in men's tournament divisions).

It must therefore be reiterated that what I have found and presented in this thesis must be considered to constitute a *partial view* into the world of mixed-sex martial arts training, rather than a microcosm suitable to be generalised to all who are involved. Yet I remain confident that this bias is theoretically justified, and even appropriate, for as Caudwell puts it, by its very nature "a feminist-queer analysis... cannot be viewed as an absolute, universal account" (2003: 376). For while this bias does represent a privileging of one particular set of perspectives, it must be borne in mind that these perspectives nevertheless represent a theoretically interesting case. Returning to the quote offered at the start of this section, investigating "the strange, the incoherent, that which falls outside" is recommended by Butler (2008: 149) as a productive means of enquiry into the socially-constructed world of gender relations. My sampling objectives and techniques led me towards collecting biased data at the expense of capturing all perspectives pertinent to understanding the significance of mixed-sex training. But this bias is itself considered a useful element of research into the subversive possibilities of culture as it explicitly highlights a case in which the

“taken-for-granted world of sexual categorisation... might well be constructed differently” (2008: 149). For future research then, the perspectives of those who do not ‘fit’ so well with the general trends in my interviewees’ subjectivities do bear exploration so as not to do too much of an injustice to these ‘others’. Nevertheless, at present I remain confident in my methodology for justifying my concluding statements offered above, that mixed-sex martial arts training *can, under certain conditions*, offer the possibility for the subversion of gender.

### **8.3 The Applicability of the Research: Locating the Audience**

I would suggest that the findings I have presented in this thesis can be thought of as applicable in the following three areas: in expanding the research base in the sociology of sport discipline; as a contribution to feminist studies of the body, physical culture, and the constitution of gender difference; and as a resource for martial artists who are interested in gendered behaviours within their schools and clubs, and particularly coaches who are interested in enhancing women’s access and opportunities.

Regarding the contribution to the sociology of sport, it is clear that up until now there has been very little research on martial arts (or combat sports more broadly defined) addressing the specific issues which I have covered in this thesis, and none at all within the contemporary UK context. Publications in the area of gender and martial arts have tended to focus solely on women’s/girls’ participation or men’s participation (e.g. Halbert, 1997; Hargreaves, 1997; McCaughey, 1997; De Welde, 2003; Woodward, 2004; Hirose & Pih, 2010; Miller, 2010; etc). While a few studies have referred to mixed-sex settings (e.g. Mennesson, 2000; Lafferty & McKay, 2004), only a small number have actually analysed combat sports training cultures with a perspective sensitised towards both men’s and women’s perspectives and experiences (Sisjord, 1997; Guérandel & Mennesson, 2007). By foregrounding issues facing men and women as they train together, I have explicitly set out to produce a piece of research which is fundamentally about *both* men and women, locating my



work within this small area of the field. While at times my analysis has been more concerned with women than with men (and vice-versa), the study as a whole highlights the importance of an integrated perspective on understanding the transformative, subversive potential of mixed-sex training. In this way, I aim to make a contribution to the sociology of sport in future publications by expanding on the relatively small number of papers dealing with mixed-sex combat sports which are already in print.

Secondly, I believe my work will be of significance in wider academic debates within the field of gender studies inasmuch as my data hold out an example of how physical cultural practices can potentially lead individuals to make 'subversive' changes in their gendered subjectivity. Following the call from Butler (2008), among others, to explore aspects of contemporary culture which exist 'outside' of the everyday experience of gender relations (and thus potentially outside of the repeated performance of dominant gender discourse), this research focuses on a relatively marginal area of contemporary British culture. Given that this marginality revolves around problematic/unusual gender behaviour, I feel that my work is relevant to feminist studies of the body in particular, as it directs readers' attention to an interesting, even 'exotic' cultural setting wherein gender is often 'done' and embodied differently in a number of ways. The phenomenon of women asking men to hit them, for instance, is theoretically interesting given a predominant trend in much feminist research to reject (male) 'violence' as inherently regressive and harmful (McCaughey, 1997). Yet the physicality of martial arts training is dependent upon rough, painful and potentially injurious exercises, and the subversive potential of the activity rests significantly upon women's ability to engage with it in this way, and to do so specifically with male training partners/opponents. Furthermore, since my research is contextualised as taking place within what has historically been a potent site for the construction of masculinity and male privilege (Messner, 1988), the subversive potential I have discussed takes on an added significance. As such, my findings represent a potential to contribute to debates over the body, physicality, violence, and the construction of sexual difference within the broader academic field, which raise some interesting issues for feminist scholars.

Thirdly, my work has some significance for those people with whom I collaborated in order to produce it; namely, my martial artist interviewees and those in similar positions to them. Of particular relevance in this regard is the way in which my female interviewees discussed the limitations of their training, including the problems they faced when attempting to become competitors and/or coaches, and the difficulties they sometimes encountered with hesitant male sparring partners. Particularly among the coaches whom I interviewed, there was a sense that making their clubs welcoming and accepting places for women to train was important, and so disseminating my findings in a manner which addresses this concern might be of use to them. That is to say that recommendations can be made following from this research which point towards a 'best practice' model for promoting integrated training environments which could possibly contribute to greater equality between the sexes, the beginnings of which is outlined below. Finally, there is the simpler matter of making the research openly available to the interviewees who expressed interest in it. As a particular depiction of the world(s) they inhabit, this thesis is potentially of interest to them and as such, the publication of my findings in a more concise, accessible form (such as a magazine article/feature) might make for a fruitful avenue of dissemination among this particular audience. Indeed, this would go some way to meeting the challenge implicitly posed in Chapter 4, to "(open) science to public debate" (Agger, 1991: 120) and encourage the (critical) consumption of my research among a non-academic audience.

#### ***8.4 The Applicability of the Research: Recommendations for Practice***

As a final comment on my research, and in keeping with the political imperative of feminist cultural studies work outlined in Chapter 4, I make the following recommendations for martial arts instructors who are interested in the gender subversive potential of integrated training. While all martial artists can take steps towards meeting this potential, instructors are typically more able to influence the atmosphere and types of behaviours within their clubs than are their students, and so are better placed to implement these recommendations. It also should be seen to

stand within the best interests of instructors to do so, because as already outlined, challenging hierarchal sexual binaries is considered to be of benefit to men and women in their training for martial arts, particularly so for 'serious' female martial artists whose progression as fighters might otherwise be hindered by adherence to the restrictive limitations which these binaries typically represent. The recommendations are as follows:

**1) Follow, or form, equality policies which promote women's participation**

As with many modern sports practiced in the UK, several martial arts disciplines are represented by governing bodies who have published policy documents outlining standards for coach training and proposing codes of conduct to promote equity and avoid discrimination, etc. However, many clubs do not operate under the direct supervision of such bodies, and for some styles of martial arts, formally recognised and government funded bodies do not exist, leaving them without clear, centrally-determined guidelines to follow. I would propose therefore that such clubs, should they try to train their own junior coaches, should involve some degree of theoretical information regarding sex difference and similarity in this training, particularly conducive to avoiding sexist or other discriminatory ideas and practices in the training hall. This would ideally also involve explicit attention to the special significance which combat sports hold for traditional gender binaries; that is, in constructing specific ideals of masculinity and thus posing some problems in this regard for both female and male practitioners (see Chapter 6). While none of my participants reported overtly 'sexist' instructors as having featured in their experiences (with the exception of some comments regarding tournament organisers), it was widely accepted that environments built upon 'liberal' outlooks, or 'equal opportunities', were useful in terms of providing good training for all and also in fostering an atmosphere conducive to more subversive challenges to hierarchal gender ideology (see Chapter 5). Instructors should therefore be aware of the usefulness of combating sexual discrimination, towards the attainment of such inclusive and open atmospheres in their clubs, as a starting point for their teaching in mixed-sex environments.

## **2) Make good use of female seniors**

A recurrent theme in my participants' narratives, the visibility of senior female martial artists goes a long way in providing evidence of women's abilities at martial arts, particularly to junior club members whose understanding of sex difference is otherwise typically articulated around a belief in male physical superiority. This association is likely to be compounded in situations where clubs are taught by male chief instructors (as appears to be normal among my sample) due to the fact that male leadership leaves the dominant association between men, masculinity and fighting relatively unchallenged. As one way to combat this, instructors should be prepared to call upon their more experienced or accomplished female club members to assist with teaching, give demonstrations, or become instructors themselves. The increased visibility of tough, skilled, and competitive women that this allows for becomes a potentially useful medium through which to begin to challenge the sexism structuring many novice martial artists' expectations about sex, gender propriety, and fighting ability. This is accomplished through 'normalising' an alternative view of women as leaders and teachers in martial arts, via both the demonstrations given by the women themselves, and the evident trust in their skills which the coach implicitly professes by using them to help teach.

## **3) Promote inclusive atmospheres in clubs**

While this may not be as immediately practicable as are some of these other recommendations, it stands in the interests of instructors to foster environments which emphasise inclusion and acceptance for all, and this has particular relevance for the subversive potential of mixed training when it is applied to the matter of gender identities. Recognising that martial arts ability is not related to a person's embodiment of a particular gender is to further challenge the privileged status of traditional conceptions of masculinity, opening space for various different 'types' of men and women to excel as martial artists. Specifically regarding women, embodying particularly 'feminine' aesthetics, considered visible signs of their heterosexuality and thus, 'normality', was important for the majority of the women I

spoke to, and rather than simply affirm the continuing hegemonic status of heterosexist binaries, this actually serves as a useful point of promotion for martial arts by showing that 'normal' women can achieve just as can anyone else. Making provisions to allow for a variety of expressions of gender identity by their club members – so long as this does not impede training outcomes – is a potentially subversive act in its own right, by allowing for fighting ability to become normalised as the shared property of both 'masculine' and 'feminine' individuals, and thus going some way in helping to redefine contemporary meanings of femininity. Some practical steps which might be taken here include purchasing (or selling) pink gloves and pads, relaxing dress codes, or otherwise simply remaining aware of the importance and usefulness of diversity.

#### **4) Recognise usefulness of mixed training for all**

Typically, it was felt that the majority of martial artists tended to view integrated training practices as more useful for women than for men. This assumption fed into understandings of men as essentially better at martial arts than women, fuelled by the implicit 'realism' of self defence concerns and strategic 'overtraining' for women fighting in female competitions after training with male partners. Yet, as outlined in Chapter 7, most of my interviewees suggested that men also stood to gain from training with women in specific ways, which might be lost on practitioners if the benefits for women are the sole focus of integrated training. Thus, coaches should avoid framing integrated practice as only good for women, and encourage male partners to approach such exchanges as fruitful learning opportunities as well.

#### **5) Be prepared to integrate training as much as possible**

As discussed throughout this thesis, the primary route to accomplishing 'gender subversive' practices in martial arts is, in my reckoning, the provision of opportunities for both men and women to experience integrated training as frequently, and in as many varieties, as possible. Principally though, the activities in which men are typically assumed to hold 'natural' advantages – such as sparring or

other rough types of contact-based practice where strength and aggressiveness are increasingly important – are of great significance in this regard. Instructors should avoid segregating these types of activities based upon assumed male superiority; whilst taking account of factors such as size/weight and experience, they should not allow notions of gender propriety to interfere with match-making in these types of scenarios. For instance, an instructor might recommend students choose sparring partners based on size similarity rather than insist men pair up with other men and women with women. As documented in Chapter 7, mixed-sex exchanges on the mat are a potent site for the contestation and redefinition of sex discourse, and so should be allowed to operate in this way as often as possible.

#### **6) Temper ‘subversive’ activities with reflexive sensitivity**

The fact that not every martial artist is ‘ready’ to take part in fully integrated, mixed-sex training was reported by the majority of my interviewees, who typically referred to the hesitant approach to engage in such activities shown by novice men and women in particular. This calls for a sensitive approach on the part of instructors, who should try to find a point of balance between, on the one hand, promoting integrated training settings, and on the other, avoiding ‘putting off’ newer members who might be shocked by, for instance, the sight of men ‘hitting’ women. Tailoring their approach to meet the specific requirements of individual members may not be entirely practical in all situations, but needless to say, instructors should be aware of – and try to reduce – the potentially negative impact on novices that such full integration might have. Gradually exposing newer members to the practice of mixed-sex training through avoiding integrated sparring for novices could work well in this regard, leading towards eventual integration as martial artists begin to adjust their expectations about men’s and women’s different/shared capabilities. Ultimately, the degree to which segregation is usefully practiced should be a strategic concern, rather than stem from instructors’ own beliefs about essential sexual difference which, if formalised throughout training, risks reifying the sexual hierarchy which mixed-sex martial arts might otherwise challenge.

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## ***Appendix 1***

### ***Interviewee Training Biographies***

**Amir** is 43 years old, British Asian, and teaches kickboxing full-time. He owns and runs a kickboxing gym and has coached many fighters to an international championship level. He started kickboxing over 25 years ago, having previously trained in kung fu. As an early pioneer of the sport in the East Midlands, Amir has become an important and well-known figure in British kickboxing over the course of his career.

**Andrea** is 25, works as a researcher, and is White British. She began practicing choi kwang do aged 22. Outside of martial arts, she regularly competes in ski racing events, and two years ago entered the Miss Universe GB contest.

**Andy** is 30 years old, White British, and works as a full-time mixed martial arts (MMA) coach. His gym is well known in the MMA community and has produced several top professional fighters. Andy has been practicing martial arts for 24 years, and in addition to coaching at his own gym he regularly travels to teach seminars around the UK. Before taking up Brazilian jiu jitsu (BJJ), Andy trained and competed in karate.

**Beth** is 24, a high school English teacher, and is White British. She has been training in kung fu for three years and has competed at two national tournaments. Before taking up martial arts, she played football for her school team and also practiced ballet.

**Claude** is a 25-year-old chartered accountant. He trains in kickboxing and has done so for seventeen years, having been involved as a boy through his father's club. He has trained with several different clubs, and now helps instruct alongside his father. Claude also plays football for a minor-league team. He is White British.

**David** is 23, a postgraduate engineering student, and is White British. He has been practicing martial arts for seven years in total, beginning with learning karate from his father as a teenager and going on to practice both jujutsu and kung fu while at university.

**Ed** is a 29-year-old, White British musician and guitar teacher who has been training in muay thai for over three years. He has competed in several minor competitive fights and recently at a semi-professional-level tournament. He also participates in BMX biking and rock climbing.

**Elliot** is 27 years old and works as a retail manager. He took up martial arts at 14, practicing karate for several years and earning a second-degree black belt. He has recently started practicing MMA, hoping to be able to compete in professional fights. He is Black British.

**Evelyn** is British Chinese, 24 years old, and is a postgraduate science student. She has trained in several different disciplines of martial arts since the age of 16, practicing Chinese kickboxing, lau gar kung fu, and hung kuen kung fu. She holds a black belt in the former and has instructed this style for the past two years.

**Helen** is 29 years old, works as a sports therapist and personal trainer, and has been practicing kickboxing for four years. She has had one competitive fight and is presently training for her second. As well as competing, Helen has begun helping to coach at her gym, and also uses the club facilities to instruct a pole dancing class. She is White Australian and has lived in the UK for ten years.

**Jack** is 34 and teaches maths and physics at high school. He has trained in kung fu for 15 years, and has run his own club for the past 6. Outside of martial arts, Jack has also competed in swimming for over twenty years and has competed in international sailing competitions. He is White British.

**Jenny** is 24 and works as a technical assistant for a sports technology firm. She has practiced hung kuen kung fu since she was 16 years old, and won the UK women's national championship in this discipline aged 22. Jenny is British Chinese.

**John** is 27 and works as a researcher at the university he previously studied at. He has been practicing taekwondo since the age of eighteen, where he chose it as an option for his Duke of Edinburgh award. He has since trained in the same university-based club for several years, and is now one of the club's instructors. He is White British.

**Kate** is 24, White Norwegian, and works as a sports development officer. She has lived in the UK since she was 18, and has been training in taekwondo for over ten years. Kate has a first-degree black belt, has competed in national championships, and has been coaching for the past two years.

**Keeley** is 26 and works as a teaching assistant at a primary school. As a child, she practiced Judo with her father at a small club for six months, but more recently took up kickboxing, aged 21. She also practices and helps teach street dance. Keeley is White British.

**Louise** is a 32-year-old newspaper journalist. She has been training in BJJ for over twelve years, competing at national tournaments in both the UK and France. She has on several occasions competed in men's divisions, placing first twice, as well as winning multiple times in women's divisions. Louise is White British.

**Marie** is White British, 30 years old, and works as a personal assistant. She has been training in kickboxing for the past twelve years, and has been active in promoting the sport for women through running introductory courses at her gym, where she is an assistant instructor.

**Rachel** is 22, and has recently graduated university. She has been practicing BJJ for three years, as well as MMA, and has competed in and won several grappling tournaments. In one tournament she competed in a men's category and placed second. She has also been involved in organising and coaching women's classes at her gym and is a strong advocate for the development of women's martial arts competitions.

**Sara** is 23, White British, and works as a part-time kickboxing coach. She has been practicing martial arts for five years, including kickboxing, kung fu, and MMA. She has competed in several small tournament events in her various different disciplines, and aspires to become a full-time kickboxing coach.

**Simon** is a 28-year-old high school PE teacher. He began martial arts at eighteen, training in kickboxing for two years. He then took up karate, earning a first-degree black belt, and has been practicing in a small club ever since. He is White British.

**Steve** is 30 years old and works as a quantity surveyor. He took up martial arts aged 17, training in both kung fu and karate. He eventually focussed on kung fu, training with the same club for over 12 years. He holds a third-degree black belt and instructs regularly. Steve is British Chinese.

**Suzie** is a 22-year-old university graduate who has been practicing martial arts for many years. She took up taekwondo aged 6, switched to BJJ aged 16, and then to kung fu aged 18. She took up kickboxing when she joined university, drawn by the opportunity to compete at a higher level. Suzie is White British.

**Sylvia** is 19, of mixed Japanese-British ethnicity, and is an undergraduate university student. She has trained in muay thai for four years, and recently took up kickboxing and MMA. She has attended two summer training camps in Thailand, at both of which she has been the only female.

## ***Appendix 2***

### ***Example Interview Schedule***

The following sets of questions were used as a guide to facilitate the discussions I had with my interviewees. I did not always ask every question, nor ask them in this particular order, as sometimes the interviewees would pre-empt them, or raise points which made asking certain questions sooner than planned a more useful approach. As such, no two interviews were identical, although all of them were structured around the themes contained within this list of questions:

- Q1** How long have you been involved in martial arts? Which particular disciplines have you trained in? Which do you train in now, and which do you consider your 'main' one? Have you always trained in mixed-sex clubs?
- Q2** Why did you initially choose to do martial arts? What made you choose your particular discipline(s)? Who or what influenced your choices in this regard? What made you stick with it for so long?
- Q3** How does training with (or coaching) men and women differ? What are the general trends in behaviour/attitudes among men and women, if any?
- Q4** How does it feel to 'hit' a man/woman? Is it any different?
- Q5** Do you ever 'hold back' more when sparring against men or women? Do you know of this happening often in your club/school?
- Q6** Have you always been confident or anxious about sparring with the opposite sex? Do you feel differently now than you did as a beginner?
- Q7** Do you think there are any particular advantages or disadvantages to training in mixed-sex clubs which we haven't yet discussed?
- Q8** Do you think that martial arts is 'manly'? Do you ever hear people say things like that about martial arts? Why do you think people might say this? Do you think that training at martial arts can make a person more 'manly'?

- Q9** Do you find that men and women train at martial arts for different reasons? What are those reasons and why do you think that is?
- Q10** How do other people react to you when they hear you do martial arts? Are the reactions of other martial artists different from non-martial artists?
- Q11** How would you describe your own sexual preferences? Do you think that male/female martial artists are attractive? Do you think that doing martial arts makes you more or less attractive?
- Q12** What do you think makes a 'real' man or woman? Are these qualities things which you think you can learn through martial arts training? Are they qualities you imagine that you have or would like to have?
- Q13** Is there anything you would like to ask me? Is there anything you would like to talk more about, or something which I haven't asked which you think is important?



## **Appendix 3**

### **Sample Interview Transcripts**

Key: I = Interviewer R = Respondent

#### **Interview with 'Andy'**

I: Thank you very much Andy for agreeing to be interviewed. Can you start by telling me how long you've been doing martial arts and what types you've been doing?

R: Well I started martial arts about 24 years ago, started with Shotokan karate, did that for eight years and got to second dan, decided to take a break through my teenage years due to ill health, got back into martial arts about twelve years ago, did some self protection and a bit of grappling, gradually since then have taught myself MMA and more grappling, been teaching that now for about ten years, gone full time professional in the last couple of years.

I: Full time coaching, or professional fighter?

R: No, no just coaching.

I: Ok. And what is it that first got you into martial arts when you were young?

R: *The Karate Kid*. I watched the film, wish I was old enough to say it was Bruce Lee, but it was that film and Jackie Chan. So yeah, jumping around the living room copying those movies, and I had a cousin who did karate so my parents took me to his club. So I started there when I was six or seven.

I: Ok. And what is it that kept you going in it?

R: Um, a lot of different things really, doing it from such a young age, I was really interested in it as a kid, used to read all the books about it and stuff. And it does kind of separate you out from the other kids, because most lads were into football, and I wasn't really fitting in with them to be honest with you, that kinda stuff, because I was so into martial arts, my social circle was a lot around martial arts so that was a part of it. And also the cultural stuff, doing Japanese martial arts is quite interesting because you start to hear about a culture that you don't really have any contact with. Especially when I was younger and people didn't have the internet, access to information about this kinda stuff wasn't that common so people didn't know about it. You'd have to speak to people about it. So learning about Japanese culture, the language, dressing in the gi uniform, that kinda thing, that was a big part of it when I was young because it was so different. It made you feel kinda special doing things that other people didn't do, and I was good at it. And that always helps with the appeal of something.

- I: True. And have you always trained in mixed-sex clubs?
- R: Um, yeah, I mean the sport that we're doing now, submission wrestling and mixed martial arts, it was pretty much just all male up until the last two years. There's a Brazilian jiu jitsu competition coming up, like next week for example, and it's the biggest in the country and there'll be hundreds of competitors there, and in the women's category so far there's twelve divisions and only seven women entering. Most of the divisions are either empty or have only one fighter, so the levels are just really low. When I did karate the levels were a lot more even and especially as a junior, we trained together a lot more, and as you get a bit older there tends to be a bit more separation, as the guys get stronger, especially as you hit like fourteen, fifteen and onwards. But when you're kids you all train together, so from the start, yeah, I was always training in mixed-sex classes.
- I: Yeah. When you were past that point of fourteen years old, when you split up, did you still train with girls, as like, sparring partners?
- R: Yeah, a bit, but there were a couple of incidents, my instructor's stepdaughter, I accidentally injured her and he went a bit mad. But then he said afterwards it's something that happens a lot, because of the teenage growth spurts, you get faster, stronger, have a different range, you're not used to it yet so he's seen it quite a bit. The lads are sparring girls they've sparred before when they were younger, but as they get that bit older, that bit stronger, they bully them around a bit more and they aren't used to controlling that yet. And also people become, like, they hit puberty, so the natural thing for an instructor is to separate boys and girls because, you know, I guess it's just being sensible, what they think's gonna happen I don't know, but it makes sense, and there's definitely that much more of a split at that age. Younger guys will go with older girls, young women will go with the women, won't be as much cross-over.
- I: You say you had that incident when you injured a girl, how did you feel at the time?
- R: Well at that time I didn't mind it, it was just sparring and it happens all the time, I was used to it. But getting told off by my instructor, who I respected, that sucked. But generally I was fine. The only bad incident I had with fighting a girl was when I was in the really young categories, everyone trains and competes together, and I had to fight a girl and I just couldn't hit her, I just stood there and let her beat me. I was quite young at the time, maybe eight or nine, and it absolutely destroyed me, I was in tears afterwards, because I'd done well and won two or three fights and then I had to fight this girl and I just couldn't bring myself to hit her. You know, my dad always used to teach me, you know, don't be violent towards women, don't hit people when they're down. And now, I mean I spar against women, and I do a sport where you're supposed to get people on the ground and hit them, obviously it's a difficult thing to just walk into and do. And obviously, yeah back then I just couldn't hit her and I let her beat me, and it completely destroyed me at the time, I didn't know if was supposed to try to win or let her win, and I didn't know what to do.
- I: Ok, yeah I understand that.
- R: Years later I had to fight a woman in a grappling tournament, and women usually do this because there's not many women competing so they have to enter the men's division. And

she was really good, she's competed in America and all over the world, and 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. \*laughs\*

I: Did you feel in any way hesitant because she was a woman?

R: No, not that one. Because she was so good, if I had taken the pressure off her for a moment she would've submitted me, she's world class. She's fought in America against Megumi Fuji and she's fought all over, she was really good. So I went a little bit easier at the start but when I felt how good she was I went all out, and I beat her, smashed her, submitted her in two minutes. But yeah, I didn't do it any differently. I started easy to feel out her game and then I knew I had to go all out. So I didn't feel like I did when I was a kid, definitely not. Because again as a kid I didn't know what to think, but at this point I knew she was a great athlete and that we were both there to win, we both knew the score, so I was a bit more mature with it really. So yeah. I mean we both knew each other, I was good friends with her fiancé, we'd all been on the scene for years, been grappling, everyone knew who she was, who I was, and we both just did the best we could, tried to get it out of the way. So yeah, I didn't have any hesitation about trying to beat her.

I: Yeah, yeah. The other guys that she beat, how did they react to being beaten so badly?

R: Well most of them just laughed it off because she was just so much better than them. She'd been grappling for a long time, she was a purple belt, first female purple belt in BJJ in the UK, her fiancé was also the same level and was a very respected grappler, they were key figures in their club which was also very respected, I think they were just like, oh she's just that good, it didn't matter that she was a woman. If it had been someone of less experience I'm sure they would've felt differently. But yeah they were ok. You couldn't look at the way she beat them and say oh, he should've done this, should've out-muscled her, everyone looked at it and knew that she was just plain better, being a woman didn't come into it.

I: Do you think there are a lot of women like that in this sport?

R: Um, no I find that the women's level is a lot lower than it should be. I've got friends, there's one girl who's quite famous as a mixed martial arts fighter who's known for her grappling, she's ranked number one in the world, but she can't hang with guys her size down here. And even Rachel, who's only been training a few years, she can hang with her on the ground. To me, the level should be a lot better. And it's hard to tell because women are generally a lot smaller and their upper body tends to be a lot weaker, so when they grip up on you, it can be quite hard to tell. I'll roll with two girls and won't think they're any good, but then they'll roll with someone else who's good and they'll beat them, so that size difference makes it hard to tell. But generally I find the level much lower than it should be, and I'll go oh ok, it's just because they're smaller and weaker, but then like this girl that I fought, she's small but she's exceptional. And I say well if she's that small and that good, then why aren't the rest of them? I look at the best people in the world and say well if they're so good then why aren't we, I believe in hard work, anyone can do it, anyone can achieve a really high level and I find that most of the girls are at a level where they should be much higher. And you know, it surprises me because I roll with two or three girls who've been fantastic, and then a lot of other people who are supposed to be good but they really don't impress me. I have a lot of

lightweight guys who've been training here less than two years who could easily be better than them. So yeah, the level should be better. But it is hard to tell because of their size.

I: Why do you think that is, that you've got some women who are exceptional and some who...

R: Well I think women tend to work with guys, because there's never enough women, and the guys go easy on them. That's part of it. And then girls tend to work with other girls who are inexperienced. So Rachel here, she'll roll with guys who go easy on her or she'll roll with another girl, and because most girls just don't stick with it very long and there's hardly any girls in it anyway, she's rolling with people who are either going easy or are less experienced than her. So that's definitely part of it. Maybe it's lack of encouragement in the club, maybe it's a biological thing, you know, having babies, giving up sport and giving up jobs to be a mother. And you don't get guys doing that so much, having those breaks. Part of all sport is having mentors, role models who you look up to and admire and follow, and there's not many of those for women in this sport. You get a few, but maybe they're the kind of woman who's big, strong, into weightlifting and stuff, haven't got kids, don't look like, you know, this is gonna sound bad, but they don't look like mothers, and they just train, that's their only focus, their thing in life. But then you get other women who maybe yeah, like the girl I fought, she was amazing, but I don't think she even trains anymore. And she's probably like, late twenties, early thirties, same age range as me and a lot of the guys I know are still training but I don't think she trains anymore. She's definitely not competed in a few years, I think she's moved away and I don't think she trains. So I think the longevity in the sport for women is a lot shorter, so yeah, they don't pass on that knowledge, they don't become role models, that could be a factor. But that thing in training, they're either rolling with inexperienced women or with men who are possibly going easy. Because the numbers are smaller, the range of skills are gonna be smaller. So there's one really good girl out of ten on the mat, and there might be ten good guys there but like, forty guys on the mat, something like that. It might just be that numbers game.

I: Ok, yeah. So when you're coaching, do you find that there's a difference between men and women, how much they put in, what they want out of it, so on?

R: Definitely, yeah. People come to it for a lot of different reasons. Guys tend to come to it because either their friends do it already, that's a big one, or because they've seen the fights on TV and want to be a part of it. Girls rarely have that, they usually come down, I mean I'm not really sure why they come but they definitely don't come down saying, I'm here because I watch fights and wanna be a fighter, or because their mates are already here. So their motivations are different and you can see that in the ways that they train, they don't just come here saying, I wanna fight. Usually when I'm explaining stuff to people, women will really focus on the problem solving aspect of it, particularly with the grappling, they really tend to like that problem solving, they come to me with more questions than the guys. They don't have the ego problems that guys do, guys tend to think that they know how to fight already, women seem to be way more accepting that they don't know anything, please show me. And at times that can be annoying because they'll just not even try to answer it themselves, like I don't know fighting at all and I need you guys to show me, but if someone answers the question themselves then they'll remember it easier, it'll mean more to them. And the men and women seem to be different in that, because women tend to ask a lot more questions. Partly they're more analytical but also they assume that they don't know it. And that can be a good thing and a bad thing, it means they won't make stupid, ego-based

mistakes and not ask questions when they should, but also they're not being as creative themselves. So that's part of it. But I say that and I've got a girl who comes down now who's a bit of a meat-head, she's really a nice girl but she's just like, yeah I wanna fight. And that's the first time I've ever had that, she plays rugby and captains a rugby team and she's strong, very athletic. All she wants to do is compete and fight.

I: Yeah, yeah. So, you mention about the guys who hold back when they roll with women, do you find that to be a particular problem?

R: Well because of the size and strength difference it's often the case, and then it's not a problem in some ways, because the women get to work their technique instead of getting mauled. And for your motivation it's good that they get that, you know, not get mauled all the time. So it's good that people work with them at their level, like I'd want someone to do with anyone who's smaller and weaker. But if they're thinking about competing, which obviously some of the other women there will go really, really hard when they compete and they need to be used to that. The ferocity when two women fight is usually a lot more than when two guys fight, the women really try to kill each other when they compete, and the guys often don't. Sometimes they do at the lower level, but mostly it's more disciplined, more controlled, definitely less emotional. Like, every competition I've been to and seen women fight, always there's at least one who cries, whether she won or lost. And I've seen thousands of men's matches and I don't think I've ever seen that, maybe once. And it happens every time women compete. And so that ferocity is a big part of it, and if they miss out on that in training then they won't be able to compete at that level. And it can give them a false sense sometimes of their level. But they do need the holding back, because otherwise they can't get any technical progress done, so it is good sometimes that guys go lighter with them. They'll get injured less, work their technique more, so yeah I wouldn't say it's a problem until you get someone thinking she's the best person in the class because people have been letting her win. But that applies for everybody, as long as they know that you're letting them work and letting them find technique then it's ok, because once they start to believe they're better than they are it's a real problem, it's never helpful. But overall I don't think it's a major problem. If guys did go really hard on them you wouldn't get them coming down at the end of the day.

I: Ok, yeah. Right, so we've talked about how men and women might train for different reasons, and you mentioned previously about the groupie aspect, could you tell us a bit more about that?

R: Yeah. God, ok. I have personal experience of it, there was a girl, and well it was a major, major problem at the gym. A girl came down who had been married to another instructor in the area and she came here and asked me out, and I dated her and went out with her for quite a while, and she turned out to be a total nutcase. I broke up with her, and now she'd never been to an MMA event or anything, just done jiu jitsu for a few years, and then she started turning up to UFC events that I'd been at, was fucking some of the UFC fighters, fucking opponents of some of my guys, just turned into a total groupie. There's other cases of a gym in Nottingham, where guys have been squad training, and a girl working on the desk in the gym has just taken one of the guys out and sucked him off in the toilets and then gone back, just because he's a fighter, then gone back and worked behind the desk in between rounds. And yeah, there's a lot of that, it's disgusting really, I don't like it. But you get a lot of skanks, a lot of skanks doing the sport. I don't know why, well I guess it's because with

this sport, it's so open and everyone's together, I mean you couldn't just turn up to a running club and run with someone who's world class, meet them for sex. But a girl could come down here and be training on the same mat as a world class athlete, and that's obviously, I mean if they admire someone in tennis and they're a tennis player, they'd probably never get to meet them, but a famous fighter, they could be on the same mat as them every week. And the guys, what with this being a testosterone-driven sport, the way guys are, if women are throwing themselves at them then they're gonna take them up on it. And that can cause problems. There's a couple of girls at the moment here, and the guys are sniffing around, and if they're single, it's well, sooner or later, I expect something to happen and then when it goes awry which it probably will, then one of them will end up leaving and it's usually the girl. And that's a big thing, I've got girls who are coming up in the game, and you know, it's not that they're skanks, they're just single and you know, they might meet a guy here and they're creating close bonds through training with maybe forty guys. So the likelihood that they'll end up with one is pretty high really. How often are they gonna see the same forty guys every day and be really close, like you are in training, physical contact, sweating on each other, you know. So I understand it's a possibility, but the ones who are total skanks and go after the fighters, go to the shows to sleep with the fighters, that just pisses me off. We've got a nice club, people bring kids here and stuff, it's a good atmosphere here. A lot of clubs, it's all bouncers and that, but here we've got a good mix, a doctor, a pharmacist, an art teacher, students, a poet, a total mix of people, a nice club. And when that stuff starts coming into it, it just gets really seedy. I mean I've heard of a girl who sells her sweaty training gear, stuff like that. She's married and was fucking a guy at the gym, and I just don't want that here. I've made a mistake myself, it's hard to say no when she's attractive, into jiu jitsu like I am, throwing herself at me, and we went out for a year, but it was a big mistake dating someone from the club, a massive mistake. I wish I could make a rule against it, ban them from sleeping with each other. Maybe one day there'll be a positive end to it, someone will fall in love and get married, but that hasn't happened yet, it's always ended badly, always. Usually they split up and the girl leaves, or they'll have a one-nighter and the girl will be too embarrassed to come down again, or she just tries to sleep with everybody and gets kicked out of the club basically. It probably happens everywhere, you know, in offices and that, you hear all the stories. Office parties, that kind of shit. But I just don't like it in the club.

I: Right, yeah. It's a tension you don't need...

R: Yeah, I love the sport, other people love it, if people are coming here for that love of the sport then that's brilliant. Obviously there's issues with the close personal contact anyway, especially when people have got partners outside the gym who don't train, I'm sure that's quite hard for them to understand. But that's a whole other issue.

I: Ok, yeah. So, we've talked a lot about the mixed training, so sort of more generally speaking, I would guess that there's a feeling among most people that martial arts, and particularly MMA, is a sort of a manly activity. Would you agree with that?

R: Yeah, yeah. The perceptions of these less traditional martial arts, I mean basically you've got the traditional martial arts which are usually, like, Eastern, based around forms, cultural stuff, and they attract more of a mixed sex crowd. And then the other side, like the combat sports which are a bit more Western, like boxing, wrestling, things like that, and now MMA, and they tend to attract a more male oriented group. Apart from Thai boxing and kickboxing,

which for some reason loads of women do. That's a marketing thing I think. But yeah, combat sports are more attractive to men, I think it's because of the grappling aspect and especially without the gi. The gi uniform, you get a lot more women doing that, because the gi is like a barrier. When you're wrestling in shorts and t-shirt, well all that close personal contact, people sitting on you, sweating on you, at first I was like, what the fuck! This is really weird, and people think oh god, is it sexual? Is it wrong? Even when everyone says it's ok, go on, give it a go. If you worry about that kind of sexual stuff, and as an instructor you've got to think about how people might perceive it, like especially men touching women, well you have to be careful. So people ask themselves these questions and then they find out it's not, eventually they know it's just training and it's nothing to do with anything like that, and that goes, and I've seen a lot of people grow as people, like with respect to this contact stuff, experienced wrestlers will hug each other, I know guys who'll come up and kiss me, there's no boundaries with it because you're used to rolling on the mat, they're not worried about what other people will think. But obviously for a lot of people when they first come in that's gonna be a problem, and the gi uniform, you get a lot more women training in that in BJJ, and I think that it's a physical barrier which helps them there. So MMA and submission wrestling both don't have a gi, so maybe that's off-putting, and then also the perception of it as being barbaric, not in any way like, when people see beauty in martial arts and think women can be beautiful in martial arts, but this is just like fighting, they think oh no, that's not something for a woman, that's not something they picture themselves as doing. Whether it's women's perceptions of themselves and of what they want to be like, or it's other people's perceptions and their fears of that, I dunno. But yeah definitely this is considered a male sport.

I: Do you think that those guys who come down and say oh, I wanna be a fighter, do you think that there's that sort of manly aspect that draws them in?

R: Yep. I mean, we get a range of people coming down. Those that want to learn grappling, the martial arts aspect of it, they're the ones I tend to work with more and stay with me longer. You get guys coming down to the gym and saying they wanna be fighters, they're usually idiots and won't do the work or stay with us long. They think they've got a strong punch and that's enough to prove themselves. We get a lot of these chavvy types come down and go yeah, I watch the UFC and wanna be a fighter. So I say yeah ok, two years of practicing your grappling, your stand up, the clinch, because it's mixed martial arts, you need a mix of skills from different martial arts, you need to be good at everything. And they go no I don't wanna do any of that grappling stuff, I wanna do MMA.

I: \*laughs\*

R: So I say yeah, but grappling's part of MMA. I make everyone who competes in MMA compete in grappling first, just about everyone has done grappling tournaments first before they do MMA. But a lot of guys come to what we have as the MMA class, and they only wanna do that and don't come to the grappling class, so they all wanna do that, wanna be a fighter, but very few of them will actually get in there and they definitely don't wanna put in the work that's required to be successful at it. And I don't want them to embarrass me, so yeah there's a lot of machismo but as soon as they get schooled in training, that's it, they leave. You definitely get a better class of people doing the grappling class than the MMA, and this has always been a grappling school. When our guys fight MMA, grappling has always been the focus we've set for them. Except for the professionals, which was weird, because

all the professionals I've attracted have been strikers who wanna learn how to not get submitted, they want my grappling knowledge for anti-grappling. But those guys, they're into the sport already, training, they just want the next level. So a lot of people have a good attitude, they're not full of it, they want to learn something and get better, so I can understand that. But then these guys just stepping in, saying they wanna do MMA and it's mostly just front, they're not prepared to put the work in at all anyway. We get a lot of that, but it's nearly all just that childish bullshit, you can see it a mile off and I just don't have the time of day for it. It's not how we train here, doesn't suit our club at all. I won't let them fight for my club anyway, they can compete if they want but they're never gonna represent me, I won't let them.

I: Yeah, yeah, that's fair enough. Do you get the sense that this masculinity that people think is attached to the sport, do you get girls coming into the club who try to like, avoid that, avoid being seen as manly?

R: Um... I dunno, I'm trying to think. There's so few women, and they're all, well because they're doing this they tend to be quite strong individuals because this is something that, you know, I guess society or their friends would suggest they shouldn't be doing. It's hard to make generalisations about them because they're all very, very different. A couple of girls here recently ran a class with like seventeen women in it, so there's a whole range of women in it, but those two are the main figures, they were teaching it. And then you've got one who likes to be seen as strong, athletic, manly, you know, she plays rugby and she's a strength and conditioning coach, all she wants to do is fight MMA, that's what she wants, to be in the cage and fight. The other one, Rachel, she's an English student, she's quiet, she's a vegetarian, she likes grappling and the technical aspect of it, and she doesn't like to be seen as girly but she wouldn't want to be seen as manly either, she's just her, who she is. And then there's women coming here from more traditional martial arts and you just see a lot of variety. There's a woman who's married to someone who trains here and has two kids, and she just sees it as another extension of traditional martial arts, adding to her game, her knowledge. She's a family woman, a mother, but she's totally independent of this feminine, masculine stuff. I think at the moment we've not seen it as a fear, avoiding masculinity, it's more that they're afraid of being around that, the type of man who's like that. So a lot of the women who come here just come to the women's classes, whether or not they've had bad experiences and that's why they wanna learn martial arts, or they just want to learn from women and be around just women. But the main girls, they're just very individual people, they are who they are, they're not masculine or butch, not like that, and I don't think they even care about that. They're just getting on with it, they're girls who hang out with guys a lot more and it's not something they're worried about. Maybe if they hung out with lots of girls they'd be the one who does the fighting, like, the masculine one of the group, but if they're the woman in the group of guys then they're the feminine one. So if Rachel is with a group of girls, she'd be the one without makeup and a dress, the masculine one, but with us she's the little girl in the group sort of thing. If we need a woman's opinion we'd go to her, sort of thing. So that's my experience of this, they're women who might hang out with guys outside the gym too, but it's not like they're really manly, they're still women.

I: Yeah. Ok, so talking about this manly aspect a bit more, do you think that for yourself, being very experienced and respected as a martial artist, does that make you think of yourself as being more manly?



R: \*laughs\* No. I'm really insecure anyway. I probably wouldn't see myself as more manly if I didn't do this, but no, I don't see myself as manly. I'm insecure, quiet, I like to read books and watch movies, you know, I've come down now listening to a philosophy podcast, I just wanna sit and chill and have a bit of a think. I'll have a roll around later, teach the class, go home and have a nice meal. I don't like, watch football, drink really, I don't go out with the lads. In fact, a weird aspect is that maybe when I was growing up I mostly hung out with girls and nerds, that's who I hung out with, now I have a couple of guys in this club who are proper lads. I travel with them sometimes and it's made me see how I'm not like them at all, the way they talk about women, and they cheat on their girlfriends, do all this nasty stuff to women, do other people think that's manly? I don't know, I don't like it at all. I was in America with them recently and they are fucking everything, they've got girlfriends, fiancées, pregnant girlfriends even, and they're fucking everything, two women at the same time, women in the same hotel rooms as each other, trying to fuck girls in the bed next to me, they're like, hitting on everything, all they can talk about all the time. I mean there's beautiful women around, I like looking, that's all good, but that kinda shit, talking about girls horribly, being really nasty to them physically and stuff when they're with them. For some reason these girls love it, I dunno, three or four of them fucking the same woman at once, that kinda shit, I dunno, do other guys consider that manly? But I'm just like, I'm nothing like them whatsoever. And again that's partly what I said earlier, doing martial arts from early on in life, it gave me discipline and that but it also separated me away from, well it mostly attracts people who are slightly off the mainstream, lads who are a bit geeky. Unless they do boxing, they might be you know, tough lads from rough backgrounds. But traditional martial arts, my background, it's mostly geeks, nerds, people who didn't fit in anywhere else, they wanted to do something different. It wasn't about being tough in these traditional martial arts, it was about learning the art. When I got into it as a kid, I wanted to either do dance, or do martial arts. I'd seen *Footloose* and *Flashdance* and those movies, I was like wow, dance, amazing, then I saw martial arts in *The Karate Kid* and said oh, martial arts, that's amazing, using your body to do something different, very solo things, mastering your own body, that kinda thing and I went to martial arts and a lot of people were the same. So I wouldn't think that that is anything to do with being manly. My whole life has been that so I see this as not being the tough guy. And that's why I don't compete now, it's not something that interests me massively, I don't need to prove anything to anyone, I do it for the art of it. So, being more of an artist, in my eyes, than a fighter. So yeah, I don't see myself as manly because I do this. And the contrast with the guys down here, that's made me see the contrast more than I ever have in my life, because I never hang around with people like that before. The way they behave just seems pretty extreme, so I see myself as even less like them. So I don't see myself as less manly but less of what most people think is manly. I mean they respect me, because I could kick their ass and because I'm their coach, they respect me. But they know I'm not like them, not one of the lads.

I: Yeah. Do you find that other people who don't do martial arts, do you think that they see you as a martial artist and think that you might be that kind of man?

R: Yeah, oh yeah there's a lot of misconceptions. When people see who I train and what I do, they assume I'm a fighter, that I compete and that's the kind of person I am. I'm a competitive person, but the idea of fighting in the cage in front of thousands of people holds no appeal to me, and that's quite different to what people assume. They always ask me, oh so you fight? So that's one aspect I guess. Who knows what they actually think of you, I don't know what their impressions are really. Don't know how you could ever know really.

Maybe because of what I do... well it depends on their level of knowledge about me, and their perception of what MMA is too. If someone says oh, he teaches cage fighters then of course they'll think oh he's a really tough guy. If they say he's a lifelong martial artist who teaches and coaches some fighters, they might think oh he's just into it, I dunno. Depends on their perceptions I think. I don't know, I guess a lot of people who abbreviate it to that cage fighting thing and might think it's all manly. Some women might think it's barbaric maybe? They might think oh that's terrible, but then again, phwoar, eh does fighting. So at whatever level, subconscious or not, I don't know.

I: Right, yeah. And we've talked about this before, about the women liking it, women finding martial arts guys attractive. On the other hand though, do you think that female martial artists are considered attractive by men?

R: Um, depends whether it's men within or outside the sport, there's a big difference I think. Maybe outside the sport you get guys who are into that kind of thing, I put up videos on the internet of my girls' fights and we had eighteen guys compete, one of the guys had a big fight against an instructor from another gym, it was a big, controversial match, and it's been talked about on forums and stuff. But one of the girls, her match which really wasn't that big, it's got twice as many views on youtube. So... there's definitely guys out there who wanna see that. And when you look on the search thing on youtube, what people are searching for, mixed wrestling, mixed grappling, that gets us more hits than anything. I've got a guy here who's fought in front of thousands of people, been on American TV, and his videos get about the same views as a regular woman who comes down the gym. So there's definitely guys outside the sport who like it, there's a whole sexual subculture, and I know women who've been in this sport who've made a living out of it, wrestling guys wearing a bikini. They go to a hotel room, wrestle these guys, beat them up a little bit, they make thousands. So there's that extreme aspect. Regular guys, some will find athletic women attractive, some won't. And within the sport, well most of the guys are really, really into the sport, and so they're used to their wives or girlfriends or exes complaining about training, so to meet a girl at training who's really into it, got that in common, they'll be like, wow! Even an average looking girl in the sport, they're seen as the most good looking woman, there's websites about them as well, you know. So even if they're not really that good looking normally, being in the sport and being at least a little bit attractive, guys will love them. And it's been used to market our sport, when you get an attractive fighter, like Gina Carano, she was used massively to market the TV show she was on, she was on all the posters, that sort of thing. She's good, but she's not the best, and there's a girl who totally kicked her ass, Christine Santos, who's a big, muscular, aggressive, manly-looking woman, who's brilliant, and she's a really nice woman, I've met her and she's fantastic, but she doesn't get anywhere near the publicity of the more attractive women. So guys, yeah, marketing-wise they know guys like it, and then there's the weird guys who like to watch the wrestling for the sexual aspect of it, and then there's guys who are involved and if a woman's into the same things you are then I'm sure that's the same with anything. If you're into photography, your wife always nags you to put the camera away and then you're out and some woman says wow that's a nice camera, what lens do you use? You'd be all like, my god that woman's amazing, you know. So maybe that's part of it as well. Guys have different tastes, you know. There's more variations in sexual attraction than anything, right? More differences in that than anything. All different degrees of it.

I: Right, yeah. Now one more thing I wanted to ask really, and it's a bit more abstract, now we talked about manliness a few minutes ago, but when people sort of go oh, he's a real man, what do you think that means to you?

R: Well if someone's saying it to me, it's whatever their interpretation is. And that could be any range. If I'm saying it or thinking it, it's another matter.

I: So what do you think?

R: What do I think is manliness? Fuck, that's a hard one. I don't think it's one thing so, it depends on context. If we were talking about, you know, family, and what makes a real man, it's about being a good dad, then it's about that. My dad's really nice, honest, stand-up guy who looks out for his family, so to me that's being a man. If you're talking about fighting, being tough, being a man in that aspect, if someone says oh who's like the toughest fucking proper man in all this then that's one thing, if you're talking about in, you know, um... general culture over here in the UK I guess is the lad thing, you're a man's man. Football, drinking, fucking around, and that's not me, I'm not into that. To me, manliness is just such a horrible term because it's so open to interpretation obviously. To be honest, it's such an open term, manliness, it doesn't mean anything to me. It's a non-term, it doesn't mean anything. If you were talking about an aspect of it, toughness, something like that, it's a different subject. What it means to be a man, other than biological I've got no answer, other than having a penis and testicles, which differentiates you from women, well guys will see it as any different thing. So culturally it seems to be something I'm not interested in. I don't ever look at people and go oh that's manly and that's not, it's not a thing I use, I just don't have that concept in my head. The only aspect of it to me is the lad thing which is a problem, because I'm not like that it puts me outside the social group at this gym. So people who aren't like that are kind of isolated, or they're in a relationship where the relationship is the biggest part of their life. So... the lad aspect of what you call manliness is the only thing that comes to mind. So to me yeah, it doesn't really mean anything. Ten different people will give you ten different ideas. The only way I could really go is what differentiates a man from a woman physically, maybe, and then build that up, so the biggest, the strongest. But it really doesn't fit in my thinking like that, am I manly, it never really occurs to me.

I: Ok, that's a good answer, yeah. So on the other side of that, say if I said she's a real woman, what do you think that means?

R: Ah, see now that is something you use. Because you look at women, like, real woman? Womanly? Feminine?

I: However you want to interpret it.

R: Well context is important again, because if you're talking about family, motherhood, stuff like that, and if you're talking about fucking someone then it's a whole other thing, attractiveness, things like that. And again it would be... it's weird, yeah, if I'm talking about this it would be like, the biological differences and then just taken to extremes in the culture. But manliness, I would think what makes someone manly, and then taken to extreme. But with women I think the other way, it's like, a feminine woman, you know, not old, they'd take the most care of their appearance, maybe they haven't got the manliness aspects, like

are they not big, not aggressive, have they not got those things, rather than taking it to extremes, does that make sense?

I: Like are they just different to men.

R: Yeah, well it's more the differences, the things that like, maybe identify a guy, hopefully they haven't got those things. So maybe it's not so much a woman being an extreme of feminine, but it's more like are they not manly. I've been out with girls, liked girls and respected girls who most guys down here wouldn't look at. Who were short, overweight, but they were nice girls and I liked them, they were cool. But a lot of the guys here go for girls who are fit, big tits, preferably fake, blonde hair, you know, fake tan, that stuff. To me, that's really not what I like but again I'm taking feminine to mean what I find attractive, which is probably chauvinistic and horrible, but... yeah what makes a real woman? Do I find them attractive \*laughs\* I dunno, maybe that's a fault of mine, or a guy thing, but like my first thought is what do I find attractive, not what makes a strong woman, what's womanly, I dunno. Big tits and long hair, I dunno. \*laughs\*

I: Ok, great. Well that's the end of my questions but is there anything that you think I should've asked on this topic, something you'd like to ask me or anything like that?

R: Probably will think of something in a bit, um... no, I mean, well it'd be interesting to hear what guys' perspectives are of women training, and then what women's perspective is, and it might be worth, I dunno, probably covered it but asking people what they think those differences would be. That's quite complex, um, I dunno. Maybe as a coach there might be some specific things you'd like to ask about coaching people but I probably rambled about it all anyway... um... no, not sure what you're looking for beyond this. Or well, there is the thing about marketing that is quite a big thing, and I don't know what we said before but that's something which I always think is really hard and something where it's different for men and women, something which clubs always struggle to do.

I: So how do you market it to men and women?

R: Now this is a strange thing, I've been advised many, many times that the way to go with women is self defence. And that that is the main reason, I mean people train for different reasons, and usually it's a combination of things, fitness, self defence, wanting to fight, and it's always been the general thinking in martial arts that you market to women through self defence. And because of the grappling aspect, well with guys fighting is usually a striking thing, people will get hit, usually a lot of aggression and shouting beforehand. With women it's more likely that someone will get grabbed and pulled somewhere, sexual assault, that kind of thing. So grappling is clearly important. But I find it really hard to market this to women in that way and personally I find that would be almost off-putting, like when I've heard from women who teach jiu jitsu to women, like, the high-level women, they say they got into it through the intricacies of the sport and that they market to other women through the problem-solving intricacies of the sport, because they know that the self-defence aspect doesn't need to be said. If you've got someone in between your legs and you're working to escape from them, a woman doesn't need to be told that yeah, this could be useful if a guy's raping you, and if you imply that then it'd make them feel uncomfortable. So I try to never even mention the self defence aspect to women, even though the general thought is that you should market it that way.

- I: Yeah, right. I've come across that a lot.
- R: Yeah, and some people do self defence courses for women and then take the women from that through to the combat sport stuff, and that's something I would consider, having an all-round self defence thing, teaching everything from avoidance to verbal dissuasion, through to physical stuff, and then be like ok, we've got grappling classes and if you want to come along, you can see the self defence application of that and it'll be good. A six-week self defence course isn't gonna make you a fighter. And then leave it up to them. But in an actual grappling environment I try not to mention it because it's bringing up something they already know, there's no point. And particularly in grappling, I find it hard to market it that way because if you're there to grapple there's no point in making people pretend they're being raped, that changes it and makes it really weird. I don't know what they're going to enjoy and so I prefer to assume that they will enjoy it like I do, the art aspect and so on, but I've been taught over the years to make allowances and treat women differently in this respect. And to be honest I've found that having a fitness component in the classes is what really gets them in, and it's what they talk about the most afterwards. Like, Rachel recently did a women's class and did an hour of good, solid grappling technique. And then the other girl working with her has tacked on the end, just for marketing purposes really, a fitness circuit. The next day on facebook all they talk about is oh yeah, I'm really sore, that was a great workout, they enjoy the grappling but it's the fitness aspect that they focussed on. And obviously you get more women doing kickboxing classes than any other martial art and when you see these classes, obviously it's not actually kickboxing. My girlfriend did kickboxing for two and a half years at a respected club, and then when I came to do some stuff with her here she'd never actually sparred, she'd done padwork and thrown thousands of kicks but never actually had someone properly hit her, it was like ok, so I think the fitness aspect is a massive part of it. So the self defence, well you just don't need to bring it up because they know it already, and the high level women have said already in interviews that you just don't need this, they know already, you don't need to say it. So with our sport and with martial arts generally, it's an interesting question, how to market it to women, but I haven't really got the answers yet, and in and of itself that says it's a complex thing because it's very easy to market to guys. They're definitely very different. It's much easier to market to guys, they see UFC on the television and want to be fighters like those guys, it's an easy association for them, but not for women. Over time, I'm gonna keep trying different things to get girls in, and if I ever get the answers I'll let you know, but at the moment I've got no idea about how to market to women.
- I: Yeah, we have the same problem in my club to be honest. We always go with the self-defence line because it's the easy option. We run self-defence classes and that gets a few women in, but yeah, it's never clear cut.
- R: My problem with the self defence thing is that self defence courses and actual self defence are two different things. I've trained under a guy who's had a lot of experience in street fights, like a lot of experience, and the guys training with him have had that too, and it's everyone training from experience there, of actual fighting. And the people I've brought here to train with us they've had proper fights, bitten off fingers, stabbed people, full-on fights and they know what real fighting is about, and if a woman wants to defend herself against a man it's not gonna be grab their wrist and twist their wrist, it's not gonna be that, it's just not gonna happen. Like, if that happened, you'd have people showing examples like

oh yes, this woman did this wrist lock on this guy and you know, it doesn't happen. Women get attacked and get hurt. Real women's self defence, and what they want to be taught are different things. They get told yeah, you just grab him like this and he'll fall over and stuff, and no, guys are gonna be bigger, stronger usually, and if they attack you they're a criminal who thinks they can beat you, they're probably a repeat offender, like they know what they're doing, they're more experienced at this than you and they're gonna use deception or intimidation to get you on a back foot, scare you, use a knife to intimidate you, and if you don't know how to deal with that then you're fucked. Or they'll lie to you, offer you help, trick you and then attack you. Lure you somewhere and attack you. And dealing with that kind of thing, a full on fight or assault, it's different to what we see being taught, grab his wrist. That ain't a fight, that ain't a fight at all. You don't need to do that, if you can run then just run. Someone grabbing your neck and dragging you to a bush, that's a fight, and dealing with that is a whole different thing. I've said about biting people, and that's your best option really. I've said to women in the class, if I full-on attacked you now, most things ain't gonna do you much good, even if I didn't have training, if I full-on went fucking mental on you now, tried to smash your face in, there's not a lot you can do about it, even if you've done karate for a few years it ain't gonna do you much good, I'm bigger, stronger, and if I'm a criminal I might have done this before and know how to do it. You're not ready for it at all, you've never experienced this and I'm used to it. So fingers in the eyes and biting is gonna be a major, major thing for you. Animals bite because it causes most damage most quickly, and that's it. And the amount of women who say to me, I would never bite anyone, and I go ok, so a guy's raping you, probably gonna kill you, steal all your money, and you won't bite him? They go, no. And I say well there's nothing I can tell you then. You wanna hear, just hit him here and he'll go unconscious. Well that ain't gonna happen, you ever seen a fight, ever been in a fight, ever had someone try to fill you in? Someone try to kick your head in on the floor? So I've heard people saying oh there's loads of money in women's self defence courses, but I couldn't do it because I couldn't bullshit. I'm not a street fighter, I don't go out there to fight, I talk my way out of trouble, but I've been around it, lots of my guys worked doors and stuff like that, not so much now but people still do, and I spend time with them, and I've had some proper challenge matches from people from other clubs and things like that, you know. I know that if you're smaller and weaker and have just done a five-week course, and I didn't tell you the full-on truth, you won't have a chance. But they don't want to hear it. What they really want is just to feel a bit more confident. They don't want the truth because it will just make them more scared, and women are usually already scared. Women go to self defence to get away from feeling scared most of them time, oh I hit the pads, I feel great! And that's fine but I couldn't lie to them and say oh yeah, just do this and you'll be fine. It's gonna be a fight, I could teach you how to win that fight, it won't be pretty and you will get hurt but you'll win that fight, you won't get raped or killed, you'll cause some serious damage to him and you'll get away, he won't try it again, and to me that's the way to go. But yeah.

I: So that sort of watered-down version...

R: The watered-down version is what they want. It's like the kickboxing, most women I know will say yeah I've done years of kickboxing, but they don't hit each other, it's not actual kickboxing, it's boxercise or whatever. They think they're training but they're not. To me there's only two important things to training really, it's fun, but the other side is that you have to get better at doing things against a resisting opponent. So your pad work, it's fun and that's great, but it also has to be making you better if you were sparring someone full-on.

So those drills should be making you better at that, because that's what fighting is. It's doing stuff to someone who's trying to stop you doing it. So if you're having fun but not getting better at doing it to me while I'm trying to stop you, then your training is worthless to me. It's gotta be fun as well, otherwise it's a chore and you might as well go find something else. So you should be doing fun drills but you should be doing it so that it makes you better against a resisting opponent, and I do find that most stuff and especially stuff for women is watered down to the point where it has just the fun and fitness aspect, nothing to do with actually applying it. And I get it from some guys too, years and years of padwork and you spar with them and they can't actually hit you, so what was the point of all that padwork? Fitness and fun, great, but it's a martial art and you're supposed to do it to someone. So you know all these submissions, great, do one to me, I'll try to stop you while you do it. If you wanna go full-on, I'll win, because I train to be better at doing stuff to people who aren't letting me do it. Most things, especially self defence are watered down, and when you do get full-on training, like this guy I trained with used to run what he called animal days, full-on fights. And people looked at it and said oh my god! But that's what you need to do if you want to be ready to defend yourself in a real fight, you need to do aspects of it. You do that kind of thing ten times over you're better at it already. That's training, that's real training. Getting better against a resisting opponent. And maybe just doing it against pads will make you more confident, and that is an important aspect of it because I think for women, usually a guy won't attack a woman who seems to be really in control and confident, but guys might fight another guy they think looks like a cocky fucker or something. For women that doesn't tend to happen so much, but I'm not gonna trick them and say this confidence booster is real fighting, when it's not.

I: Right, you're not gonna sell it as something it's not.

R: No, no. Self protection, there's aspects I could teach them, awareness, that sort of thing, yeah. But real fighting, I won't pretend it's that when it's not, because if someone is trying to fill them in, or rape them, kill them, you know, that's a fucking fight. I won't lie and tell them they can handle that if they can't.

I: Ok, yeah. Well thanks a lot Andy, I think we'll finish there.

R: Yeah, ok. Otherwise I'll talk all day!

## Interview with 'Helen'

I: Ok Helen so thanks for agreeing to give me an interview, if we could just start off with a bit of background information about yourself, how long you've been doing martial arts?

R: I think, um, about three and a half years now. And I didn't have any fitness background before I came here, and I wasn't very well actually, and my doctor said to me, one of the things that you can do, if you don't wanna go on medication, then exercise. And I don't think he thought I would take it seriously, but I did, I started running, and then I saw kickboxing, so I came, loved it, yeah, fell in love with it, and it changed everything for me. To go to train be a personal trainer, because I wanted to integrate it into my everyday life, and yeah, it changed everything for me, absolutely everything. So that's my background. So yeah, within three and a half years I've accomplished quite a lot.

I: When you say accomplished a lot, what do you mean?

R: Well, compared to, I mean I changed everything about my lifestyle, so from being a dental nurse, I retrained, went back to college, yeah, just changed everything, changed my career, trained really hard, and the last thing I'd done was gymnastics when I was about eleven, so it took me full-circle back to getting fit again, stopping drinking and smoking, eating really well, being so much more self-confident, yeah it's been really good for me.

I: That's great, yeah. So, within the kickboxing have you done it competitively?

R: Yeah, yeah, from when I started, um, three and a half years ago, I did the six-week beginners course and it absolutely killed me, it was awful, I hadn't done anything before, but now three and a half years later I've had a competitive fight and I'm getting ready for my second one now in two weeks' time. So yeah, that's my background.

I: Yeah. Did you enjoy the competitive fight?

R: Ah yeah, it was hard work but I was buzzing, and I was like, get me another one as soon as possible. So I'm training really hard for that now.

I: Yeah. What is it about kickboxing that made you choose this other than a different sport or fitness thing?

R: I can't say that I necessarily saw anything that motivated me. The weird thing about this place is that I always saw the kickboxing sign on the roof, so I'd seen it loads of times, and when I started the fitness thing I was running and it was quite boring. And I think I had an idea but I didn't know anyone else that did it, it just appealed to me and I don't know why. I just came and tried it and from the sessions, I think being able to have that release, I mean when I first started it was just for fitness and not to pursue it in any way, but just mentally to have that release of putting your energy and frustration somewhere was just really positive for me. So it stopped being about fitness and started being about being able to put all of that somewhere, and somewhere positive as well.

I: Yeah, cool. And I suppose that enthusiasm you have come on quite quickly after you started?



R: Oh yes, yes! Yeah. I think it's also about people encouraging me so I remember Amir saying to me like after the second week we did of beginners, he said you've got a really natural jab, real natural technique, and we tend to like to do things that we know that we're good at, and so that really, really helped because I thought ah, wicked. So I just took to it, and when people recognised and said you're really good at it, that helped me stay.

I: Yeah. When you did the beginners' course, was it like, the ratio of the sexes was it even...?

R: Oh yeah it was quite even. And still even now, for the beginners, like for the fitness side there's quite a lot of women. I actually came with a male friend, and he dropped out like in the third week and I still carried on. And I help out with the beginners now and they're, like fifty-fifty, sometimes even more women so sixty-forty, but as you get into the advanced classes, I'm the only woman that trains at the moment, otherwise it's fully men. But to start off with there's quite a lot of women that are just doing it for fitness-related reasons.

I: Yeah. So similar to the way you first got into it?

R: Yeah, absolutely, definitely.

I: Ok. So when you got to this more advanced stage and you're training a lot more with the guys, do you spar against the guys?

R: I do, yeah. But unfortunately, um, I mean I think it's really helpful for me, but men have such a different technique to women, women are more aggressive and obviously they're much lighter. Whereas men select their shots more and conserve their energy more. So it doesn't really relate to when I'm fighting a woman in the ring. But at the moment because I'm training with the other fighters in the gym, and they all need to train for the competition that's coming up so I don't get to do any sparring, because the sparring they need to do is more heavy-handed than what they can do with me. So in that sense I lose out and I do lose out quite often. So even when you do do sparring, if the fighters need to train really hard they won't waste their time sparring with me, because they need really good sparring. So I only get sparring when there's people free, so I do feel it, and it's a shame because I need sparring at the moment and there's nobody to spar with.

I: Yeah. Do you think that's a problem for a lot of women in kickboxing?

R: Concerning this club and for the time that I've been here yeah, I would say so, there's definitely an imbalance. Because I can see the guys sparring and I'm like, fuck, I need to have sparring but I can't get any in. And then I know that when I've had women here, they come and go. And when I have partners in it's such a godsend that I have someone that I'm able to work with, but for some reason or whatever they don't hang around. But I can do so much more when I have a partner that I can work with. And Amir will use that more, as soon as someone comes he'll be like, right, you two partner up because he knows that I need it. He always gives me the time I need, it's very good, you know he cares about it. But when I don't have that partner I'll lose out and my training is slightly different, they'll do loads of sparring and I'll do pad work, so it's not balanced really.

I: Yeah. Have you ever like, wanted to spar at that level with guys, like when they're going quite hard on each other, have you thought you could probably...

R: Yeah, and there are certain people that I have, and I will spar at that level, but for injury-wise, when it's close to the fight and Amir doesn't want me to get injured anymore, then that's a risk that he can't take so if I'm not competing and not due to fight then I will go heavy-handed and do some heavy sparring, I love it, absolutely love it. And um, yeah, I think I get a benefit from sparring the guys, and there are some guys that are my weight as well, and to spar with them that's fine. But it's to do with injury risk, and if they need to train to fight then they won't spar with me.

I: Yeah, because they need that higher level...

R: Yeah, and the guys that are fighting now they are all heavyweights and they, like the two that are training, they're ninety-five kilos. And they should take it easy with me anyway otherwise they'd completely annihilate me. And there's other guys, other fighters in the gym, where it's more balanced and we can go heavy on each other and they still feel like they're getting something out of it. But for what we're training for now, I can't spar with these two fighters, they're too big for me.

I: Sure. So when you first started sparring and in particular against guys, were you like, anxious about sparring with a man?

R: Um, no because the way we started sparring was that I was the attacker, I'd do the attacking and they wouldn't attack me back, and that's great because especially with one of the heavyweight guys, he'll just let you hit him, and I think that's building up the confidence. And as you get the confidence up, I think Amir is very clever in the way that he integrates me into the sparring. But yeah there were times when I would still get butterflies when I walk into the room. But that helps you, that little bit of adrenaline. But yeah in comparison to when I sparred against some girls, I feel more confident against the girls, I don't worry as much as if I'm going against a guy then I know that obviously they're harder, it's a lot harder.

I: Has it become easier for you as you've progressed?

R: Yeah, yeah I don't get butterflies anymore, regardless of who I'm going in the ring with. Used to be I'd get butterflies all the time, it's just training or whatever but I'm still nervous. But yeah, not anymore. But um, it depends who I'm sparring and what level it is but I'm hardly as anxious as I used to be.

I: Yeah. You said you first started sparring as the attacker, throwing hits and stuff, how did it feel when you first landed a good hit on a guy?

R: When I first hit a guy? It felt awesome! Definitely felt great, I'd recommend it to any woman! But yeah It was really good, some people I know they'll go like, oh sorry, sorry! I never felt that, if two people choose to get into the ring then you should expect to get hit. And then if they're like oh sorry! I'm like look, I know where I am, I'm in this situation to get hit, it doesn't bother me, I like it and I like to just carry on. If I'm expected to take it then I'm also expected to give it and I think that works vice-versa too.

I: Yeah, sure. So you enjoy the feeling of being hit?

R: Yeah, yeah. 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 for my first fight, you know, you gotta get used to getting hit, you can't block or avoid every punch that comes your way, you gotta take it and move on. Um, and that's really important so I do like being hit, but they need to know how to control their power. But there's a difference when some of them will just not hit me at all and then you get that false sense of security and you believe you're doing better than you are. 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. And you condition your stomach to take it too. So yeah I don't mind getting hit.

I: Yeah. This holding back thing, this has come up quite a lot in my research. Do you find that it's a big problem with the guys you spar?

R: Yes, yeah. And Amir is very particular about the people I spar, like if I'm sparring it's only experienced fighters that you can spar against, unless I'm not fighting so I can spar more guys because you do get more injuries that way. Because they don't know how to control their punches, and sometimes I've had some novice guys, they're new to the club and they see a woman and they don't know what to do. Mostly they'll like go into a shell but sometimes as well it's like they've got something to prove, and it seems like they have more to prove than if they're sparring against a guy, and they will go crazy, you know, especially if I'm moving and they find it's not as easy as they thought it would be, then they load it up so much and I don't mind getting hit, but when, like obviously you wanna prevent injury as well, and when it's not for any purpose, like you're not learning or exploring your ability, just trying to see how hard you can hit someone, that's no good. So yeah, those guys really can't handle it when I'm sparring against them, they'll either back off completely or throw everything at me like they're fighting for their lives. So I only get really good sparring out of really experienced fighters, because they know how to control it. So if I spar a novice I'll only go against someone of my own weight because I think it confuses them that I'm a woman and I'm good, and so if they go full out, I can go full out. So that's ok, but some guys are like, all ego.

I: You say these novices want to prove something, do you feel that they like, have a need to put you in your place or something?

R: Yes, definitely!

I: How does that make you feel?

R: At the beginning, to start off with, um, I would get really pissed off and I'd really wanna hit them hard to show them what I've got. But the more I've been exposed to it, the more I'm just, using my skill to move out the way, let them tire themselves out, let them try as much and not play up to it, conserve my energy as much as possible. It doesn't annoy me as much because I know I was there at one point and I know that it's part of the process. I've gone through lots of different emotions and things, like what I used to feel in the ring, so I know what it's like when I was first attacking, and I wanted to see how hard I could hit and everything was about power, and then you move and you're like well, let me look at my defences, and your objectives and goals change in the ring, so it doesn't annoy me so much now. I've learnt to use that attacking thing to improve my defence, and work on my movement instead of trying to attack them back.

- I: Yeah, so you've got on top of that emotional stuff...
- R: Yeah, I think sometimes some will filter through every now and then, someone will just you know, um, there's one or two, well there's one guy in particular that just, ugh, you know, but that's fine. Everyone else is ok.
- I: Ok. So there's this thing when sometimes the guys hold back too much and sometimes they put in a bit too much. When you're sparring with other women in particular, do you find that you approach it differently to sparring men, in terms of how much effort or so on?
- R: Um, yes. Yeah definitely. It's unfortunate because the women that have passed through this club, um, I know it sounds weird but because I've been training long, and people come in sporadically, I always tend to be more experienced than them, and I hold back and I need to have more control. But I really like that because it teaches me to have more control, because I need that, and if I expect the fighters to have that for me then I kind of really am watching out for other girls that may be lighter and less experienced than me, I kind of really take that into myself that I want to have more control, because that will make me a better fighter. But it's weird to have that role reversal. But it also feels good as well. And I miss it, because it's a good confidence thing to not be the underdog all the time. And kind of have it up on them for once.
- I: Yeah. So we've talked about the sparring issue, and you said that you've started to help with the beginners now, and do you find that when you're teaching, coaching, do you find that men and women students react to you differently?
- R: Oh yes. Yes! \*laughs\* yes, and there's definitely something to that. Um, yes, a lot of the men won't appreciate the fact that if I'm telling them to do something it's because I know what I'm doing, and they won't do it, they won't listen. But when Amir uses me for demonstrations, when they can see, instead of just me teaching, When they actually see what I can do, it's amazing the amount of, like how people's perceptions change, and then all of a sudden they will listen to you. It is quite funny and I know that's a big thing, one week they're not interested and then they've seen you do something awesome and they want to listen. But yeah, very used to that.
- I: Right, yeah. I think that's quite a common thing actually for women who coach, that initial thing when they don't listen to you until they see what you've got. So, we've covered a lot of stuff there, but do you think there are any other particular advantages to mixed-sex training we didn't mention?
- R: Um... I think it's made me work so much harder. Because you can't slack as much. Especially if you're against, you know, if you're training against guys, um, and like a lot of it has got to do with me, like I won't want to do push ups on my knees, I'll do full push ups, because I wanna be equal. But because of my body ratio it's harder for me to do full push ups than it is for them. So that's also driven by me, the coach isn't gonna tell me how to do push ups, but for me I wanna be seen as an equal so I do everything like they do, and it's made me work a lot harder. And to be honest what I think is the main advantage is that women are usually bitches in an all-woman environment, I've worked as a dental nurse and if you work in any office or whatever, women are nasty, not as open and friendly as men, and even though there's some kind of like, competitiveness, it's healthy competition, and I think men have this

natural thing for healthy competition, whereas women, their competitiveness gets personal and bitchy. So this is a really good environment to train in because men have a really good work ethic, working with each other, being friends and being competitive. Whereas women struggle with that, unless they're in a male environment, I find. I think, um, the pros and the cons go together, because the advantage of this week, like I've had no sparring but good one-to-one pad work, so I do get special treatment in a way, but that's only as a reaction to not getting similar sparring treatment. So even the disadvantage of not sparring much is balanced out. Yeah.

I: Yeah. What about any particular disadvantages then, other than the sparring difficulties?

R: Yeah, um, well the fact that sometimes I do feel like I'm last to, um, that everyone else will pair up and I'm always the last one, and the person who goes with me is like oh, who really wants to go with Helen, they think if they go with me they're not gonna get so much of a good workout. And that's not true at all, people find that out once they've been with me. Um... also I think it's a kind of a respect thing as well, so say for how guys generally relate to one another and to women, like they can be men, you know what I mean, they can be like ah, check her tits out! And that's fine, but I'm not allowed to be a woman but I can't be a man either, so I have to be quiet sometimes because I'd lose respect if I went ah, check that guy out, which I wouldn't do anyway, but it's different for them. So they don't wanna see me as being sexual at all, and I don't want them seeing me like that, so I have to be very, very neutral. That suits my personality really, it doesn't bother me, but it's still not fair.

I: Sometimes it's a bit too masculine?

R: Yeah, because they can be men freely and they can do that, and I don't mind, I prefer hanging out with men because it's probably healthier to be around them than some women. But obviously I don't want anyone to, um, start editing themselves around me, but still I have to edit myself and watch myself around them. Like they can all have affairs and flings and stuff with all the girls that come in and out. But as soon as, well, I made a promise when I came in here that I wouldn't ever get involved romantically with anyone in the club and it's the best decision I could've made, I'd recommend it to any woman training here or anywhere, never get involved with anyone in a club, it's the worst thing you can do. That's done me the world of good, because I know I've got much more respect through never having been involved with anyone than I know that the guys who've been involved loads and it doesn't bother them but to me it's an issue.

I: When you say more respect, you mean it's not like they see you as...

R: Well yeah, they're not gonna hit on me or anything. Yeah. I really like that because it gets rid of that attention, I mean when I first came here people tried and that, but it's kind of like law now, they know, just get on with it. It's not an issue, now. I'm here to train and that's it, people know that my sole purpose is that I'm here to train, nothing else. And it works, you know, it's an advantage to me as well.

I: Cool. Ok, so these next questions are a little more general, about your ideas and such. So, sometimes people might say, describe martial arts or kickboxing as being a manly thing. Would you agree with that?

- R: \*laughs\* no, not at all. But they say it all the time! I mean it's good to have a sense of humour but like I'll either get called a man, like Amir will say oh she's not a woman! She's a man! And then I'll get yeah, like, this is a man's sport. But of course it's not, I wouldn't say it is.
- I: It's just teasing?
- R: Yeah it's teasing, it's fine. But you see in a way though, it makes me feel better because it means well, I can do it just as well as you can do it, you know? So it doesn't bother me.
- I: Have you ever encountered people who said that seriously? It's a man's sport?
- R: Probably, yes, probably. I think there's definitely a few people that have come through, but in essence with the core of the fighters and everyone that's in this gym, none of those types of people stick around, their egos are too big and you can't have a big ego if you wanna train. And if your ego is too big then you just won't last, those types come and go.
- I: Do you think that the type of people that come to this gym, and particularly the women, do you think that some of those women and maybe yourself included, try to make themselves look different to the guys and act differently to the guys?
- R: What do you mean?
- I: Well I guess if there's this assumption that it's a manly thing do they like, is there a deliberate effort to stay feminine, that sort of thing?
- R: That's weird because I did buy a pair of bright pink shorts the other day! \*laughs\* Maybe it's started to encroach a little bit now. I've been so neutral for so long, and I know that I'm being accepted as being a neutral person, and before I bought these pink shorts everything I wore was black, I was trying to be accepted, to fit in, to be neutral. But I bought the pink shorts because I think I'm trying to still hold on to my femininity, um, and compared to some of the girls that come here, well their training gear is always different but I got my gear to look the same as the guys from the start so there was no distinction, no difference, um, to blend in. But now I'm trying to reach out a little bit.
- I: Why is that?
- R: I think because for myself, the more I get into this the more I know myself, understand and appreciate myself, have more self-confidence that isn't just external, it's about finding out who I really am. And I think that I am a woman, and even though I am in a man's world here, doing this so-called man's sport, I don't wanna lose my femininity. And it does have something to do with the coach saying ah, she's a man, and these things, it's just a joke but it still plays on my mind and I'm like well no, I'm still a woman. And I think it's important to recognise that I am a woman doing this sport, not to just think that I want to be a man doing a man's sport, because I am essentially a woman still. And I think that's taken me a while to discover that. When I first started I was willing to let that go and be accepted and be equal, so that I was ready to get rid of my sexuality for that, but I did need to do that to get to this point, I wouldn't have got here otherwise.

I: Yeah, I see your point. And something that's really interested me, that Amir told me you teach pole dancing...

R: Yeah, I teach pole dancing too, that's another part of me really. It's two extremes isn't it! \*laughs\* I did it when I did my personal training certificate, I didn't just wanna work in a mainstream gym, I needed something unique and different. So I did a two-day course in order to be able to teach beginners, so now I run six-week beginners' courses and then I taught myself, yeah. So I think through doing that I really explored my sexuality and everything, because I'm now teaching girls how to be feminine, and yet I'm a kickboxer, do you know what I mean? And that's spilled into it, and that's what I mean about discovering myself here, the different aspects and the different sides we have, and it all does just come together in the middle. It's all part of me. But yeah it is weird, I think some of the fighters are in denial, they don't recognise that part of me at all! I think they just shut it off, and it's alright because it's very separate, and I feel like that's separate. After I finish training, I have a shower, get my pole stuff on, but they all leave and the club becomes mine, and it's like my secret, and nobody watches it. Which is fun.

I: Funny, right. Have you ever felt like it's a contradiction?

R: Oh yes, yeah.

I: And you seem to really enjoy that fact, that you've got these two...

R: Yeah, I think I need it, because I suppose it's a bit personal, but when I came here I was like fighting against being feminine and being a woman, it's like it was so unfair that I wasn't a guy because I know if I was a guy I would've got a fight a year earlier than my first fight, because Amir just throws the guys in, and I thought it was unfair that he didn't do that for me. But I understand his reasons why, but I was like, if I was a guy I would've been fighting competitively long before. But I think I had to prove myself so much more, but yeah, I do feel like there was a big divide in me, and I felt like both of them were cons in a way, because I didn't know where my balance was. So it is quite extreme, it's like ultra-masculine and ultra-feminine, and as I'm doing it I find my own place in the middle. But yeah, I go from one to the next and it's weird! But yeah I really like it, it's coming together.

I: Yeah. That's very interesting to me. So yeah, back to the martial arts aspect, do you find that men and women come to this club to train for different reasons?

R: Yeah, so many of the women, it's so frustrating but they'll only do it for the fitness reasons and they won't wanna get into the ring. And a lot of them will say that they don't wanna hurt anyone. And that's weird because I don't wanna get hurt, I don't worry about hurting anyone else, because that's part of it. And I don't know why that worries them so much, you're not gonna hurt anyone that badly anyway! You're gonna hurt more, it's harder work for you and I don't just mean hits. I wanna feel the burn, feel the pain, I thrive on that. And they're too nice, they just don't do it but for the fitness element. And when you look at women and their technique, I think maybe because some women have done dance when they were young, their flexibility is better, their kicks are really good, and I think often women will be much better technically than some of the men, but then the men just come and have no technique, all just power. So the men come to prove that they're strong but the women come to keep fit. Which I don't think either are the right reasons for being a fighter.

But I think a lot of the men think oh yeah I'd like to be a fighter, like to do this or whatever, while a lot of the women say I don't wanna fight, no intent to get into the ring. I was the same at the start, didn't want to get in the ring, but then I saw another woman doing the demonstrations, and Amir introduced her as a girl fighter, that was a real motivation for me to see a woman, a young girl, really small, and for the coach to say yeah she's our only female fighter, I was like, I wanna do that, that's what I want. So I like to think sometimes that Amir uses me to motivate the women to something beyond just fitness, show them that there's something here that can be done. It's just, I wish more would do it, I need more sparring partners!

I: Yeah. So you've talked about how this has become a big part of your life, helped you find yourself, etcetera...

R: Big clichés! \*laughs\*

I: Well not if it's true! So, um, how do you think other people tend to react to you when you say you're a kickboxer? Especially those who don't do martial arts?

R: Yeah, well the first thing they'll go is oh, won't mess with you then! That's what they say, or I wouldn't like to bump into you in a dark alley, and I don't understand, if you did I'd go oh, sorry! Excuse me! You know, I'm still a human being, and it's funny because what surprises people is that when I started I wasn't confident at all, and when people see me now they think oh she must really know what she's doing, she must be really confident, and it's so weird because it's such a journey and I know all of the turmoil I've been through. And when you say it to people, I'm a kickboxer, they automatically think you must be very confident, that you must be willing to fight all the time, and that's just so far from how I know myself. They think you're harder, or you'll knock them out if they piss you off or something. But I'm so passive, so it's funny. And this is good because this is where I get rid of all that aggression, I don't take it out into my outside life.

I: Yeah. Do you find that men react to you differently to women?

R: Yeah, they don't take me as seriously and don't think that I train as hard as I do. Even my brother who's a boxer, even though he's come and trained with me once or twice, they still just don't realise how hard I train! I train hard! And guys will think that I'm the same as the women who come and do fitness, so they don't realise how much I put into it. It's different, yeah.

I: Ok. So sort of along the lines of how other people react, do you find that, particularly men, do you think they find you more or less attractive based on the fact that you're a fighter?

R: Um, I don't know, I don't think anyone's ever said it to my face. Um, I think like, at the club, oh, I think being called a man or like, I know it's an issue for me because my body has changed loads, and you know, my thighs are so muscular and my arms are big, and what other people see is that a lot of people nowadays train for aesthetics, whereas my body is a by-product of the training, it's not like I've been in here doing bicep curls and wanting to increase my shoulders, but because of my body type and just naturally building muscle really quickly, like my hypertrophy is big, but that just wasn't really an intention of mine. Especially as a personal trainer, people think you can have total control of that, like I must've



specifically wanted to look this way, which I don't. It's not a deliberate look, it's a by-product of the training. I love what my body can do, I absolutely love that, and I prefer it over the way my body looks. I mean I'd love to look more feminine and still be able to do what I do and have a nice body type, to have long and lean muscles instead of short and stubby, but I'm still much more happy and confident with what my body can do rather than what it looks like. But sometimes it can be an issue when I'm trying to be feminine. Like I can't get clothes to fit me, my thighs are big and my waist is thin, I've been trying to buy shorts for the summer and none of them fit me because they're massive here and really tight here! People will say to me oh you're really lucky you can wear whatever you want, but I can't! Can't wear skinny jeans or buy tops from Primark, because the arms are too small or it's big here, it's a nightmare! And that wasn't my intention because people might think that I want to look muscular and masculine but I don't, it's just a by-product of the training I've done.

I: Yeah. Does it really bother you that they think that?

R: Yeah it does bother me. It does. My thighs really bother me. But when I'm training, doing what I'm doing, it doesn't bother me. But when I'm doing pole dancing it's all about doing feminine shapes and looking very sexy, and it is about that, so I have to really work about making these feminine shapes as I don't look very feminine when I stand normally. I have a girl who does it who looks very feminine anyway, but is also what you do because for me that femininity relates to how you hold yourself instead of just how you look. So I really have to work at being feminine instead of just being feminine, you know, I don't think anybody is ever like, just feminine without trying. But I like having that side to me, I want to be seen as a woman and I enjoy the girly stuff, doing kickboxing is no reason to go without it.

I: Right. But it's worth it, that trade-off almost?

R: Oh yeah I wouldn't change anything, if I had a beautiful figure but couldn't do what I can do, my kicks, holding myself like I can? No way, I'd be bored. That's what brings it back to me and keeps me in it, because if I wanted to then I could just strip my thighs down and be thin, but I wanna have powerful kicks, I wanna be able to do what I do, so yeah.

I: Ok, so sometimes it might get in the way of the femininity thing but you're happier like this?

R: Yeah, definitely. Yeah.

I: Ok. So the other side to this question is whether or not you think that male martial artists are attractive...

R: \*laughs\* that's um... yeah, I think their body type is a lot better than bodybuilders, I don't like that, which is weird because like yeah, the mass that I've got on me I don't think is attractive to other people. So I think like, Bruce Lee, he's amazing, because he was small and really ripped, he didn't need that bulk. People with bulk, they don't tend to be fighters, fighters tend to be slight. And yeah I think that's attractive.

I: Ok, yeah. What about aside from the body, do you think that the fighter's character is attractive?

- R: Oh sorry am I being too superficial? \*laughs\* Um, yeah because I like the dedication, I know what it takes to train, I don't like people who, um, but yeah I like characters, like my boyfriend, he does muay thai, and we always fight about which one's better and I prefer him when he trains, when he's doing something than when he's gone to the pub drinking. I prefer that element of your character, like when you're doing something good with your time. Like one of my ex-boyfriends years ago had no physical activity, not interested in anything physical, I think people just generally feel better in themselves and if you feel better as a person then you live your life better. So I prefer people who are active, and it doesn't need to be martial arts, just something active, have goals and challenge themselves, have some kind of interest, some motivation. I think active people, I just get on better with them.
- I: Ok, yeah. So we talked quite a bit about masculinity and femininity and stuff, and if I was to say oh, he's a real man, what do you think that means to you, a real man?
- R: Um... I think that real men are not afraid of their own feminine side and sensitive side, and it's not about ego. A real man is someone who's confident but doesn't show it, who has less of a sense of ego and just... yeah. You know, I think that's a better character. Because I see loads of men, and they come here and it's all ego and it's bullshit, and you can tell that they don't know themselves, that's why they have all this ego. And so I think a real man is one who knows himself, and so usually that means he's older because I think you need to have some life experience in a way, to get a kind of essence of who you are. So if I think of man, I think of a mature man.
- I: Ok. And what about on the other side, what do you think a real woman is?
- R: Um, yeah I do think femininity, yeah, um, like well one of my clients, she'd be a real woman, like even the way she sneezes is so feminine, everything she does is so feminine! So dainty. But she's still got a strong character, she's not a walkover, she gets what she wants, she knows what she wants. There's no confusion about her femininity, everything is driven with this essence of, um, yeah I still think femininity has a power to it, it's just subtle. I think women can be very strong, um, but yeah I always think of a woman as being feminine.
- I: Yeah. Ok. So that's all of my questions, but at this point if there's anything you want to ask me, or if there's anything that you think I should've asked...
- R: I think I've given you loads! \*laughs\* Sorry, I think I've ranted on a lot and you'll have to type it all up!
- I: No, no it's fine, forty-seven minutes isn't bad at all, not the worst by a long way!
- R: Ah that's ok then. It's weird to think of, um, was that an issue for other people as well, the masculine and feminine side?
- I: Yeah, that's come up a lot, especially with girls who are more serious with their training, yeah.
- R: Do they say the same things about their bodies?

I: Yes, there's one girl in particular who I spoke to a while ago, she wanted to compete and she would, you know, put on the weight that was necessary to win competitions, and then immediately after she would crash diet to lose it again, and she was unsure of whether she was doing the right thing. I think it is quite common, especially for girls there is quite a lot of expectation about how you should be.

R: Yeah, yeah. My boyfriend said to me, ah, you know don't bulk up too much. And it's shit because if I keep training I can't really control where I bulk and where I don't bulk. Um, and then on the other side he's like, don't get too ripped. So he doesn't want me to put on fat, and doesn't want me to be lean, so like, I was like that's quite a hard, that's just all related to what I'm doing and what I'm expecting to do, it's not about the looks of it, but for him to say that... it's just made me more aware that what I do has an effect on the looks thing. But I think he's jealous that he's not ripped... \*laughs\*

I: \*laughs\* Don't get too ripped, I'll get jealous?

R: \*laughs\* yeah! I'll be like, where's your six pack then? But yeah it does make me feel better to know that I'm not the only one. I think women have got more of a social pressure to be feminine and sexy, whereas guys can train and be sexy just through training. But women train hard and then they're not sexy anymore.

I: An added thing to negotiate through.

R: Yeah, yeah. But to be honest like I said that's more of a social pressure, an external thing. It's got no relation to me inside at all. If I had a choice between the two I wouldn't change. I love my huge thighs, I know what they can do! I've sparred with girls who are lean and less weight, and they have no power, that's an advantage to me. So yeah. It's cool, I love them.

I: Yeah. Cool. Well we'll finish there then.

R: Ok, thanks very much!