



No Longer a Girl

My Female Experience in the Masculine Field of Martial Arts

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Abstract This autoethnographic paper arises from my interest in studying contemporary masculinities in the city of Córdoba, Argentina. It describes my experience as a female in the masculine space of a karate dojo and is based on records from a martial arts class between 2005 and 2010. I have selected some of the moments that I consider the most significant to convey three elements: (a) life in the dojo, including rituals and specific practices; (b) the exaltation of masculinity and the trials that men must overcome; and (c) the experience of masculinity in my body as a woman who enters a man's world and strives to be a part of it.

Keywords: *autoethnography, martial arts, masculinities, sports*

Prologue: The Day I Was Born

The man receives a newborn baby in his arms. "Congratulations, it's a girl," the doctor exclaims. But the man is confused. He was expecting a boy; in fact he was sure his child would be a boy. He believed that his manliness could only engender a male child. It can't be a girl, he thinks. There must be a mistake. But there isn't. The doctor smiles, and the man doesn't. He knows he must hide his disappointment. The girl is crying her lungs out in her father's arms. Maybe she already knows she wasn't supposed to be what she is. The father thinks that a crying child can't be his. He was expecting a warrior, a hero, or maybe a famous soccer player. The girl will spend most of her life trying to fulfill her father's expectations. She will become a boxer, a martial artist, and a champion handgun shooter, but she won't succeed in making her father happy. Some things just can't be fixed.

Writing Autoethnographically

I am a sociologist, and for many years I have analyzed the representations of gender in the city of Córdoba, Argentina. This interest has led me to conduct dozens of interviews and focus groups. I have analyzed discourses obtained over the years from different theoretical perspectives. But few instances throughout my research have proved to be more enlightening than my experience as a martial artist between 2005 and the present. It was in the dojo—the karate practice space—where I could observe the extreme masculine practices as well as subtler ones that neither theory nor in-depth interviews were able to capture. When I became conscious of the wealth that the dojo had as an observation space, I began to keep field notes, from which emerged my feelings in a markedly masculine context. The dojo offered me textures, smells, feelings, and even physical marks of what I was interested in studying.

This paper is therefore based on ethnographic records that extend from 2005 to 2010. From all of this material I have selected some of the moments that I consider most significant in order to convey three elements: (a) life in the dojo, including rituals and specific practices; (b) the exaltation of masculinity and the trials that men must overcome; and (c) the experience of masculinity in my body as a woman that enters a man's world and strives to be part of it.

This text has two goals, one theoretical and the other methodological. In the theoretical dimension, the paper aims to shed light on the meaning within martial arts and the regulations of masculinity. In the methodological dimension, the article seeks to explore the practice of autoethnography.

Analyzing Martial Arts

While I was finishing this article I came across the latest issue of the *International Review of Qualitative Research*. The first article was Sara Delamont's "Performing Research or Researching Performance? The View from the Martial Arts" (2013). In the paper, Delamont refers to her ethnography of martial arts, explaining that she has investigated the discipline of Brazilian *capoeira* for 10 years and, more recently, the French martial art *savate*. While reading her article I found many similarities but also some differences between her research and mine. I think the principal parallel between our work derives from the notion that it is possible to reflect on relevant social issues from the observation of a small group. Delamont and I consider martial arts to be a discipline that illustrates social phenomena extending beyond the mere practice of the art. Delamont explains:

While I enjoy *capoeira* classes and focus a good deal on how it is taught and learnt, the research is not just about people learning and performing a martial art. All sorts of big issues are present, visible, manifest in every lesson. (p. 9)

In every *capoeira* class Delamont finds elements that allow her to reflect on “slavery, race, ethnicity, globalisation and glocalisation, habitus, transnationalism” (p. 9). My research, however, differs by focusing on gender representations within the dojo.

Delamont (2013) and I describe how a martial artist’s bodily habitus must be reeducated to keep up with a practice that is so imbued with foreign culture. She emphasizes the need of British martial arts students to adapt to the graceful movements of *capoeira*. She writes: “Serious students of *capoeira* in the UK acquire a new bodily habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) and a new embodied performativity” (p. 6). I point out that the same thing happens with karate but in reverse; those who practice karate in Argentina must control their bodies to be in line with Japanese rituals. In our Latin American culture, repressing spontaneity is one of the challenges that karate brings out.

The main difference I notice between Delamont’s work and mine is the way we approach performance when studying martial arts. Delamont (2013) resists the use of performance as a way to develop and show her work. Unlike her, though, I embrace performativity in the field and also as I write these pages. In this text I intend to show how “performance and performativity intersect in a speaking subject with a gendered and racialized body” (Denzin, 2003, p. 190) as I believe, with Denzin, that “performance becomes the vehicle for moving persons, subjects, performers, and audience members into new, critical (and) political spaces” (p. 198). Practicing karate allowed me to use my body to capture the *sensation* of manliness. I also reflect about the loss of femininity in a masculine space considering my experience. My research practice¹ is more similar to Delamont’s partner, Neil Stephens, who “has been learning *capoeira* for four years, taking two classes of 90 minutes per week for 45 weeks of each year” (Delamont & Stephens, 2008, p. 63). Stephens “articulates his tacit, embodied, experiential knowledge, transferring it into the verbal, analytic sphere” (Stephens & Delamont, 2006, p. 320). Like Stephens, I have developed and absorbed knowledge of the martial art. My reflections are shared in the following pages.

Practicing Karate: New Words, New Rules

All my muscles ache.

I have a huge bump on the right leg and bruises all along my forearms.

*I don't complain nor moan.
 My spirit is strengthened.
 I feel like one of them: I am no longer a girl.
 (Field notes, May 2009)*

Full contact karate is an aggressive type of karate, characterized by its objective to *knock out* the other participant in a regulated fight. Like many other Asian disciplines, karate has strict rules, and the first one states that in the dojo students shall not waste their time. Strict discipline is related to a vertical hierarchy, which is dominated by the *sensei* (master). The colors of the belts of the *dogi* or *karategi*, which is the traditional white suit, indicate the experience of its bearer. White corresponds to beginners, and the colors transition toward the black belt. Hierarchy in karate is extremely important. The discipline requires intense concentration from students, who must avoid making mistakes while they are in the dojo. This style of karate, like all traditional martial arts, has its own operating rules that give power to its members and the positions they occupy. Faults in the dojo's etiquette are tolerated in the first classes (beginning students may ignore certain rules), but usually they are not allowed for students who have already trained a considerable time. Disciplinary mistakes are often interpreted as attitudinal faults, and they are reprimanded by the master.

This emphasis on rules has a clear objective: The individuals who share the dojo should act as a cohesive unit. The group goes beyond the individual's desires, and it is a part of the lesson to be in tune with the discipline of the dojo. Extreme or uncomfortable conditions such as cold, heat, or thirst are always ignored; in the dojo the individual is not important, the group is.

The Practice

Mondays are special in the dojo because all students train more intensely. Here I am, full of energy, carrying my heavy backpack. I go to the ladies locker room and get ready to train. The class begins in 25 minutes, and the first thing I do is to exchange my push-up bra for a sports bra: 80% lycra and 20% elastane, it crushes my chest completely. Then I put my *karategi* on. It is two or three sizes bigger than usual for me, but I need extra room to (a) move comfortably and (b) hide my feminine shapes. Then I tie my hair in an intricate braid. I look in the mirror and am satisfied. I am neat and comfortable, my figure is straight all around, and no aspect of my femininity is revealed. If my face wasn't visible, I could be perceived as a skinny boy.

Getting into a dojo means entering a special world. The first thing that stands out is the row of shoes and slippers pointing at the door, the Japanese way. It is absolutely forbidden to enter the *tatami* (floor of the dojo) with shoes on. The idea that the mat should not be contaminated with dirt from the outside can be read in a literal way (the place where people put their hands and face should not be dirty) or in a symbolic way (the mat separates us from the world that must be left behind to practice karate). This mat introduces its visitors into a nonordinary reality. Students must leave behind their Western ways to become part of a millennial world, assuming its Oriental traditions. Therefore, crossing the line of the mat with bare feet means to enter a sacred world that enables its visitors to be extraordinary, becoming even better than they are outside the dojo.

The white *karategi* makes us all equal, but the different belts show the level of experience each has attained through years of systematic training. This capital, expressed by the color of the belt, determines the positions and relationships among positions within the school. I have reached the level of a brown belt.² My position is better than that of most of my peers, except for the master and another student who has achieved my same rank. I am female, and many males who weigh more than 90 kilograms (200 pounds) greet me with reverence. Carrying that symbol pleases me, I must confess.

As I warm up I am constantly aware of the thick *karategi* touching my skin, the rubber mat under my feet, and the noise of the fan. Over many years I have learned to ignore perspiration under the heavy fabric. The entire preface before practice prepares me mentally for the activity, dispelling the thoughts and concerns that wait, along with shoes, in front of the dojo. The master is at the front of the room, facing the students. We are formed by hierarchies; the most advanced occupy the front, leaving the back of the room to the new students.

After warming up, the practice begins defying the students' physical endurance and mental toughness. The orders are accurate. The numbers indicate repetitions, and they are yelled in Japanese: *ichi, ni, san, si*. . . . Twenty bodies are doing the same thing at the same pace, relying on the shout of *kiai!* My master says this shout helps the participants breathe better, but I think it offers us encouragement. Twenty lungs are screaming together *kiai!* as 20 precise movements are performed at the same time: "*Ichi kiai! Ni kiai! San kiai.*" The pain of muscles is severe and the heat is oppressive, but nobody gives up.

The group becomes a single mass that breathes and smells like sacrifice. It never rests. The practice is automatic, a movement without thought and a repetition without conscience. The action is rhythmic and only stops when the master demands it,

neither before nor after. When a person has practiced karate for a while and his/her physical condition is good enough, the breath and physical movements assume the center of thought. He/she loses all outside-related concerns, such as work, a Ph.D. thesis, or dinner plans. The mind focuses on inhaling and exhaling. Every new lesson requires that the martial artist's bodily habitus be reeducated to keep up with the practice. With the shout of *Yamae!*, the action stops completely. In the silence of a few seconds of rest we can hear each other's heavy breathing, the rubbing noise of the *karategi's* fabric, drenched in sweat. Perspiration droplets strike against the rubber mat. During the short pause, the group breathes and recovers like one being. The teacher walks among students as we prepare for the next exercises. We train for a whole hour without rest. Before the end of the class, pairs of opponents face off in a battle of two or three minutes, sometimes intense, sometimes *very* intense, but never choreographed. Students must demonstrate how much they can hit and how much pain they can endure. The master referees the development of the encounter, but, above all, he watches closely, not only to correct errors but also, and primarily, to prevent injury to one of his students.

Fighting "Like a Man"

The master calls out the names of two of my classmates. I guess they weigh about 80 kilograms (175 pounds). Like most students, they are quite young, and their physical condition is great. The combat starts. The fight is intense, and the students aren't wearing protective hand wraps or gloves. This type of karate doesn't allow their use. During the first minute, the opponents kick and punch almost nonstop. A kick to the ribs produces a dry sound, and the recipient touches his side with a gesture of pain. He says nothing, but clearly he has been knocked down. The master immediately stops the fight and asks the beaten man: "Can you continue?" He answers "yes." I must say that in all these years, I have never heard anyone answer "no." We do not appear to be worried about our classmate, nor run to help him. Perhaps the student has a broken rib, but we will not call attention to his suffering because it would signify taking away his right to prove his manhood and fighting skills. Being a man practicing karate, he must be able to endure the pain. The student barely stands on his feet. I am sure he can hardly breathe and feels terrible pain, but he wills himself to continue. The fight resumes for only a few seconds, and then it is stopped by the master. The test has been overcome. The honor was at stake, but not the battle itself. The student has been able to prove himself a man. How important is a broken rib compared with a man's untarnished honor?

Then the master mentions my name. I hurry to the ring. My back is straight, and my fists are clenched by my sides. I am wondering which of my classmates will fight against me. I am nervous, and even after all these years the combat activates my adrenaline. I should clarify that in the practice of karate I have never been severely beaten. Within the social parameters for Latin American men, there is no honor in beating a woman. In our culture, women are considered weak, fragile, sensitive, etc. Maybe my gender has kept me safe so far. The master calls Luciano, a fellow much younger than I who is known for his ability to kick up to the face. I keep that skill in mind in order to defend my head. Luciano and I know each other very well, and we know each other's strengths and weaknesses. He is 13 or 14 years old and weighs just a few kilograms more than I. The difference is that he has trained in karate since the age of 10, and I began at 30. He is fast and very strong. I know this because we have fought against each other many times.

The master asks us if we are ready to begin, and he shouts the order: *Ashime!* Luciano approaches me without wasting time or energy. I sense his first move and raise my fists above my forehead; the kick hits my forearms but my head is safe. High kicks can be particularly effective, but they can destabilize the fighter. I take advantage of this situation to return the same kick. I am flexible myself. I aim at my opponent's ear and hit his head, though not too hard. The truth is that I do not actually want to hurt him. Quickly, Luciano responds to the attack with a kick to the thigh that I cannot defend, but even though I hear the noise I do not feel any pain. The muscle feels numb instead, but I keep fighting without showing that the kick had any effect.

Hiding pain is key in a fight. I respond to the attack with punches to the chest and the plexus, even when I know that these punches are not effective. They can annoy and distract, but they do not hurt a young man accustomed to fighting in karate. I know that kicks are my most effective weapon, and I discharge them in Luciano's ribs and legs every time he fails to dodge or block them with his arms. A punch in the plexus leaves me breathless, but I dare not show my discomfort. I struggle to breathe and prepare myself to continue. We are not in a championship, but my honor is at stake. I want to show how well-trained I am and what I am made of. I try to relax my diaphragm and regulate my effort. Distracted by the discomfort in my stomach, I cannot fend off the kicks and punches. I feel almost knocked out when the master shouts: *Yamae!* The fight ends. I am drenched in sweat, and I cannot breathe. Luciano and I sit down and nudge each other with sympathy, without the master seeing us.

Other bouts follow, until all students have had the opportunity to fight. Fortunately, no one has been seriously injured. At the end of the class, I mentally review the blows I have received, and my forearms are now red and a bit swollen. I take

a mental note that tomorrow at the university I should wear long sleeves as my arms will have purple spots. My beaten thigh begins to hurt. It will become purple, then green, and finally yellow before disappearing. I will not be able to wear skirts for a while.

The end of each fight brings an enormous sense of happiness and satisfaction. Every struggle is experienced as an obstacle to overcome, and each opponent is a new learning opportunity. At the end of the day some students have a bloody nose or a huge hematoma in the leg, and yet they laugh, showing off their bruises. This attitude makes them more respected in the eyes of the group. Far from showing concern for their injuries, they celebrate, which shows the genuineness of their manhood among initiated observers. Although they have fought fiercely, they don't hate each other. They need each other to learn. Interestingly, the overall feeling is that of being a family, where everyone takes care of each other.

Later, at Home

Once at home, I write what I have experienced in the practice of the day: "Modesty, perseverance, serenity, wisdom, and helping others." The precepts of karate are emphasized in the dojo, but we also bring this code of conduct to our family, work, and social lives. The discipline is violent, but it is regulated and not allowed outside the practice space. Karate is intended to be used only against those who practice the discipline. It is meant to deal with our inner selves and to defeat our weaknesses. Embodied, karate can be understood as a way of evaluating the world, as well as a way of behaving. It contributes to the creation of a very specific habitus (Bourdieu, 1999) that transforms itself during each training session. As Delamont (2013) says, martial artists "change their performativity, their bodies and often their minds" (p. 14). The discomfort that training produces can be invisible to others, such as muscle fatigue or obvious wounds, marks, and bruises. In the case of men, bruises represent trophies that signify masculine qualities in combat. In the words of Garriga Zucal (2005), wounds are signs of masculine endurance as well as symbolic signs of manhood (Bourdieu, 1999).

A *yoroi* body

Yoroi is the Japanese word for armor. My *yoroi* body is the conjunction of my biological feminine anatomy and a masculinized body—a product of years of training in the dojo. It both looks feminine and functions as a woman's body, but it also has

masculine properties acquired in the karate practice. I only use my *yoroi* body for martial arts, and it has bruises, bumps, and scratches.

Outside the dojo bruises are something that should be hidden. As a woman, I cannot boast of a purple leg or swollen knuckles. When I leave the dojo and I find a visible scrape on my forearm, it is impossible for me not to ask myself: "What will people think?" "What will my students say?" Gender stereotypes have placed me in this predicament. As a woman, any explanation I give about my bruises would sound strange. Therefore, I think it is better to cover myself with clothing and avoid any comments. In the winter, karate marks remain hidden under the heavy clothes, but not in the summer. I have given up wearing skirts, and I cover my arms with a piece of lightweight fabric. And not using protective gloves has led me to abandon my long nails. I have also stopped wearing earrings because they are not permitted in the dojo. I cannot wear just any hairstyle, either. I need to tie my hair behind my head to be able to train comfortably. I do not necessarily miss these feminine trimmings, but I am aware that in becoming a martial artist, I have sacrificed most of them. Since karate is an intensely demanding martial art, all who practice it must transform themselves in various ways. As a woman, this transformation has additional implications. Gender norms that shaped my habitus are, along with my slippers, by the door and outside the dojo.

In accordance with social representations of gender, women have historically been positioned at the reproductive end of the axis of the division of labor. Female qualities include emotionality, dependency, and passivity (Fraser, 1997; Montesinos, 2002; Navarro & Stimpson, 1998; Rubin, 1998). Men have been considered to be the main providers and protectors of the house. Thus, two valued masculine features are the ability to exert physical power and even violence. Other important traits associated with masculinity are strength, endurance, muscles, and a hairy body (Brod & Kaufman, 1994; Kimmel, 1987; Martinez & Merlino, 2009; Pelias, 2007). The presence of violence among men appears in a diversity of discursive and symbolic forms, but it is always supported by, in Bourdieu's words (2000), the masculine anatomy. This means that in contrast to the traditional representation of the delicate female body, men's muscles are seen as natural proof of their capability for physical violence. I don't have large muscles, and I can't show off male characteristics. Therefore, the only thing I can do is hide my feminine qualities under my *karategi*-dressed *yoroi* body.

Final Thoughts

I have retrieved these memories and analyze them in the context of my research on gender representations. As my methodologies broaden I begin to read the

transcriptions of my interviews from a new angle. The interpretation of discourses produced by those who do not practice martial arts takes on new meaning that allows me to go far beyond what I had thought, based only on theory. At this point I question myself as a social researcher: How can we truly comprehend the deep sense that subjects describe in their practices from only the arid surface of recorded interviews?

Autoethnography demands that we radically change our way of thinking about scientific production (Deavere Smith, as cited in Denzin, 2006; Feliu, 2007). We should abandon our position as mere observers, to expose our doubts, weaknesses, and faults. I believe it is worth trying! Autoethnography provides the opportunity to understand that the social is deposited in the body. Of course, it is necessary to embrace an epistemological point of view that keeps us away, even momentarily, of the canonical models of observation. Autoethnography, as Ellis and Bochner (2003) say, allows a sensitive understanding of the meaning of what people feel, think, and do. And is this not what we as social scientists long for?

Before the end

My father lives by himself now. He and my mother separated two years ago. On my father's television set there's one silver frame with a picture of me in the dojo wearing my white karategi and sitting in the Japanese position of seiza. The photo was taken the day I won my brown belt.

Every time I visit him he asks: "Why aren't you a black belt yet?"

Notes

1. My embodied research experience is also similar to Wacquant's ethnography in the field of pugilism (2004).
2. Ranks are white, orange, light blue, yellow, green, brown, and, finally, black belt.

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