Introduction

The martial arts, as a set of social practices, provide a venue for self-definition and transformation. While this process can allow female practitioners the opportunity to explore ways of being that are often denied them in our society (in relation to strength, power and physical agency), this does not happen necessarily or without being influenced by ideologies and practices that often position women in subordinate and limited roles. Women’s participation in strength-related activities (such as sports and the martial arts) can both challenge and strengthen patterns of male domination. (Brown 2008)

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

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

Figure 1. Green’s (1994) use of the “innovative strip” as a metaphor highlights that “bodies and minds are not two distinct substances or two kinds of attributes of a single substance but somewhere in between these two alternatives” (60).

Embodied Identity

- Avoid the dichotomy between mind and body that occurs when we posit the body as “natural” and the mind as “cultural” (Goffman 1974; Butler 1993).
- Identity/identity formation does not create anything over and above that which potentially exists in the natural development in... (Yalom 1980).
- Culture transforms nature to suit the ends of mind” (Vygotsky 1929).

Gendered Bodies

- “The body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time. From a feminist point of view, one might try to conceive the gendered body as the legacy of subordinated acts rather than a predetermined or foreclosed structure, essence or fact, whether natural, cultural, or linguistic” (Butler 1988, p.522).

Results - GroupWork

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

Naturalization

“Legitimates a relationship of domination by embedding it in a biological nature that is itself naturalized social structure” (Brown 2008, p.30).

Results - Individuation

That never actually goes to in, like, in my mind, and I don’t think I would... I never think about it, just because I’m a girl (I can’t do it). I just like, I just... my to report if I can’t do it, I just, I can’t do it. But just cause you know my body. I don’t know, I feel like my body works, but not because I’m a girl.

But I must admit that I partially believe in the idea of thinking as a skill. I sometimes I think about the idea of not being like the other people, but I can’t just say that I’m thinking as a skill. I’d like to think that the idea of “boys being better at this at times, perhaps as a justification for my disability of performing a certain tick or another skill.”

Sociocultural Construction of the Body (Becoming Female)

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

“You know some, like, uh, certain kicks right, we never like officially learned how to do, like, some really taught us. They’re just like, ooh, you do it like this. So then we try to follow as best we can, but then, nobody really tells us how to do it. You know?”

Positioning, Marginalization, and Objectification

- Girls as “other”
- “I like you, know you... I like when she eared guys’ he’s all out but when he was girls eard like, gender, he controls. He’s good.”
- Girls as “marginalized”
- “No, I think Instrcutor James prefers girls more because they do more of the business work instead of actually training inside the dojo.”
- Girls as “objectified”
- “...a sense of embodiment may be achieved only when there is a lack of awareness of the body part in question” (MacLachlan 2004, p.173)

Conclusions

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

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

Further suggestions include the creation of educational practices that would institutionalize reflective practices in order to further female practitioners’ development within the martial arts.

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

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

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

References

Brown, S. (2008). “Legitimates a relationship of domination by embedding it in a biological nature that is itself naturalized social structure.”