

Adolescent Girls and the Martial Arts:  
Potentials for Strength, Power and Agency

by

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## Abstract

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Although strength related activities such as the martial arts can serve as arenas for girls and women to enact identities that challenge traditional gender roles and dichotomies, this is not necessarily the case. Using an activity theory framework that emphasizes the interrelated symbolic and material aspects of culture and identity, this research involves 5 adolescent female martial artists (in addition to the author) in the process of analyzing the Tae Kwon Do school where they train. This analysis used the reading, watching, writing, sharing and discussion of life stories, both of the girls and published by others, in order to develop a list of suggestions to help the school better serve female students and staff. A discussion of the institutional, group, and individual processes of development are included. While the participants valued their martial arts training as a space for the development of character and relationships, they did not necessarily see their training as a space where traditional gender stereotypes (regarding strength, power, and physical agency) were challenged. The analysis suggests that in order for martial arts schools to better realize their potential for challenging traditional gender dichotomies, gender must become an explicit object of martial arts activity.

## Acknowledgements

This text represents a process that began long before I enrolled in either graduate school or Tae Kwon Do. As such, it entails a list of contributors, advisers, collaborators and supporters that is far too long to include here. While acknowledging the countless people who have influenced this work, I would like to mention several key individuals from the distinct worlds of the Martial Arts and Academia who played especially important roles.

From the world of the CUNY Graduate Center, I must first recognize the support and guidance of my adviser, Dr. Anna Stetsenko. I was lucky enough to have Anna as an adviser from my first day of graduate school; her guidance without a doubt shaped my understanding of and perspectives on learning, development and Psychology. As I progressed through this research, her feedback and suggestions helped me to develop the theoretical framework that goes well beyond informing this work.

In addition to Anna, Drs. Joe Glick and Suzanne Ouellette provided invaluable feedback as I conceptualized, designed, implemented and wrote about this research. In unique ways, both Joe and Suzanne asked questions that, although not always easy to answer, were always necessary in order for me to move forward and eventually finish my dissertation.

My readers, Drs. Wendy Luttrell and Darryl Hill, provided additional perspectives and voices in the process of refining and revising this text. Comments of both Wendy and Darryl have provided food for thought that will continue to challenge and motivate me.

The world of Martial arts has provided numerous inspirations across all aspects of my life. Each of my instructors and students, especially the females, provided motivation to challenge stereotypes about women and strength. Despite no longer training at the same school, I am happy to call many of them close friends. Though we did not always see eye to eye, my head instructor demonstrated a dedication to the martial arts and his students that is rarely seen and which I greatly admire.

I will forever be grateful to the five girls who participated in this research for sharing pieces of their lives with me. I can only hope they learned a fraction from me of what I learned from them. For me, they represent the best of what I experienced during my time training and teaching in Tae Kwon Do – a sense of responsibility to something greater than oneself.

Finally, I would like to thank some of the individuals that are present in any world that I inhabit, as I bring them with me everywhere I go. My mom and dad have supported me in everything that I do, and I do not doubt that this work would be impossible without them. Thanks to my five siblings, my early years saw no shortage of opportunities for sparring. If I consider myself in the least bit strong, it is in no small part to them. And last but not least, I must say a special thank you to Sean, without whom I never would have stepped foot into the dojang. This work reflects countless conversations, training sessions, and everyday moments together. I look forward to many more.

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## **I. Practical/ Theoretical Foundations**

### ***Introduction and Role of Researcher***

"Concerning the limits and limitations of the women's game – why should we believe there are any?"

- Helen Wills Moody (quoted in Fein, 2005, p. 75)

I had no dreams as a child (or teenager) of becoming a black belt. I did not watch kung fu movies (or any “fighting” movies) and imagine myself the heroine. I did not have a foundation in meditation or any of the Eastern religions and/or philosophies associated with the (Eastern) martial arts. In fact, before starting my training in Tae Kwon Do at the age of 25, I had never thought of training at all. When my boyfriend suggested we study a martial art, I was somewhat reluctant to say the least. I had seen enough of his Jackie Chan, Bruce Lee and Donnie Yen movies to know it wasn't for me.

So I am left wondering, at times, how (and why) Tae Kwon Do has become such a significant part of my life. From a somewhat reluctant participant to a “martial artist,” the path from white belt to black belt was definitely an unanticipated one. But if I reflect on my journey in the martial arts, I know that there was never a time, once I started, that I questioned my participation or felt I had made a bad choice. True, I questioned the methods of my Tae Kwon Do school, and was conflicted by some of the practices of my instructor(s), but it was the questioning of someone who was a part of the practice, not of an outsider.

What seems to emerge more than anything when I consider my participation in Tae Kwon Do is what I'll call, for lack of a better term, physical agency. Through my

training, I have been able to *do* something physically. This is not to dismiss the physicality of our everyday lives, but there is something different about activities that stress the physical capabilities over everything else in order to challenge oneself physically. In a way that is shared with other “fighting” sports, Tae Kwon Do tests your physical conditioning and spirit against another’s, relying on emotions and ways of being (aggression, strength, “gameness”) that are often off limits to girls and women in our society. In addition, Tae Kwon Do does so in a way that does not try to disconnect the mind and body. Studying a martial art requires that you be present both physically and mentally in the activity – I am not controlling my body, or overpowering it, but I am existing and acting as my body. In this way, training has allowed me to learn about myself in new ways through my experiences.

Growing up closer in age to my 3 brothers than my 2 sisters, it was more likely that I would be found playing stickball or roller hockey than dolls or dress-up. I was always pretty active, and although there were differences between how I was allowed to participate in sports and my brothers, these differences were not enough to keep me from playing.

As I got older, I started to participate in sports less and less. Although there have been strides made within organized female sports (especially after Title IX), it is still somewhat accepted that sports (or at least serious sports) are not for women. This is true even as girls and young women are more and more active and accepted within the world of sports. So while seeing young girls play soccer in parks and schoolyards has become quite common, the biggest exhibition of soccer skills (i.e., the world cup) is exclusively male. And while girls and young women adorn softball and little league uniforms along

with their male counterparts, you will not see a women trot out to the pitcher's mound wearing an MLB uniform, much less play in the World Series. In our society, women are usually assumed to be the "weaker" sex (especially physically), so if they do play sports, it is at a lesser level (as shown by the different rules for male and female sports such as in tennis), and often in sports that are designated "female" sports, such as volleyball and field hockey. So the "tougher" (though not necessarily more difficult), more masculine sports, i.e., football, hockey, and boxing, are often all but off limits for women. And there are consequences for those women who dare challenge these boundaries, including direct and indirect questioning not only of their "femininity" (She's not very ladylike, she's a tomboy, she's a dyke), but also of their "femaleness" (She's a man.)

This distinction is especially obvious when considering sports that include a violent or aggressive component (e.g., boxing, hockey, football). When in fact women (and men) do challenge the supposed boundaries between masculine and feminine activities, it seems that there is an attempt by some to "return to the ultra-masculine," with practices such as the UFC, where men test themselves against others and women are relegated to objects to be looked at, or narratives such as the David Finch's successful film "Fight Club" (1999) and Sam Sheridan's "A Fighter's Heart" (2007), which celebrate the "masculine" need to release aggression in some violent medium, without considering the possibility that aggression and power are not the exclusive properties of one sex.

What is most overwhelming regarding this often-accepted difference between the sexes is the perceived "naturalness" of these categorizations. The body, as differentiated by sex, is seen as natural, so while individuals can challenge the stereotypes, these

challenges are seen as “exceptions to the rule.” Men are supposedly stronger than women biologically. What is overlooked in these accounts is how the human body is constructed historically and socially according to ideas, beliefs and activities. The truth, however, is that sex is, as much as gender, a social construct. There is no “natural” or “biological” body that can be found if we strip away culture or history<sup>1</sup>, because the body and the social world are connected, and our experience in the world is always mediated by cultural tools, including ideologies that position the female body as “less than” the male counterpart, and body image, which mediates our physical existence with our psychological awareness. As Fausto-Sterling (2000) demonstrated in *Sexing the Body*, even the idea that there exist two distinct, clear-cut sexes is a result of historically situated, ideologically based practices.

What we find if we look at many of the dominant cultural ideologies (in the United States, at least) is the construction of female bodies that are passive – to be looked at and acted upon rather than doing and active. Women’s bodies are seen as lacking, as less than the male “standard,” and thus are positioned as needing protection, as less autonomous, and as less powerful or strong. The construction of female bodies is done in several ways, from messages in media, to the access (and denial of access) to various activities that allow for more or less physical agency. Even with today’s emphasis on physical fitness, the emphasis for women is still on how the body looks, not what it is (or we are) capable of.

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that this statement does not deny the importance of the body or of biology (and biological differences between men and women). To the contrary, a main objective of this work is to emphasize the importance of the gendered body. What is being said here, however, is that biology does not exist (at any level or moment) separately from culture. Hence, there is no “pure” biological body (or sex differences) that are not in some way intertwined with or informed by culture.

This is not, of course, saying that all women passively accept these ideas in the construction of one's own identity, or that these stereotypes apply to all groups of women; there is always room to contradict and challenge dominant ideologies. Identity is a dynamic, active construction, not simply a "taking in" or "socialization." The case has been made, for example, that many African American women, due to political, social, and economic circumstances, have developed a value system that includes being assertive, independent and strong (Vasquez & de las Fuentes, 1999). If, however, the underlying assumptions present in society (especially in what has been referred to as the dominant ideology) are not explicated and reflected upon, it is difficult for many women to find spaces to contest popular ideas, or to negotiate conflicting sets of values.

It is within this framework that I became interested in girls' participation in the martial arts. Considering common stereotypes and constructions of what it means to be female, how does participation in an activity that has been constructed as masculine allow for varied cultural tools that girls can use to transform themselves? In what ways is there backlash against their participation (both inside and outside of the school)? How is girls' participation structured within the martial arts? What do the girls themselves, as individuals and groups, make of their participation as lived, embodied experiences?

Given a perspective of development as a process of constant becoming – of realizing potentials and acknowledging limitations (neither of which are predetermined factors of individuals, but instead emerge within dynamic situations) – I cannot help but feel a certain privilege and responsibility whenever I take on the role of "teacher."

Although I am somewhat new to the practice of teaching martial arts, it is nevertheless

promising, even exciting, to consider the power that instructors and teachers of the martial arts have over the physical existence of another person.

A performance based, developmental approach to learning and development (Holzman, 1997) allows us to look at teaching not as a work of passing down knowledge or technique from one person (or group) to another but as a way of developing new ways of being (for both teacher and student). Teaching becomes an act of fantasy and imagination, in which I imagine my students as more developed or advanced than they are and then *treat them that way*, and imagine a society that supports and is supported by such individuals and create it. In other words, teaching and learning involves the creation of persons within and through the transformation of social practices: “[K]nowing and learning are rendered meaningful through their embedding as tools in identity development that represents an activist project of forming and carrying out purposeful life agenda aimed at contributing to social practices” (Stetsenko, 2010, p. 6).

Nothing is more frustrating as a student than to focus simply on where you are right now, especially if there is not a trusted other to convince you that you can in fact overcome whatever obstacle you are facing. As a female participating in various sports, including martial arts, it has been difficult at times to compare my own performance to male participants. Despite a theoretical belief that men are not inherently better than women at all things physical, a quick look around seems to show that most guys can throw the ball farther, run faster, jump higher, or do more push-ups than most girls. (There are always exceptions, but these again seem to be easily explained as just that – exceptions). To be fair, I am not sure that this observation is truly accurate; I am sure it is real enough to implant doubt in my mind about my own capabilities.

I believe that this doubt, within a structure in which power is unequally distributed, hinders young girls in their performance of sport and martial arts. If I compare my participation to that of my boyfriend, for example, I can see how we each carry different expectations to our training. While I am quick to assume that I can't do something, he is more likely to assume that he can do it<sup>2</sup>. This is of course not to say that he never doubts himself, nor has endless or unrealistic confidence (or that I constantly doubt myself). Nor is it to say that boys and men do not have perceived limitations on their competences. It does seem true, however, that these doubts are not tied to gender. I cannot remember the last time I heard someone say (while playing sports or training) that they can't do something because they are male, or question, "Why can't boys do that?" I have heard, however, "I can't do that because I'm a girl" or "I wonder why girls can't do that?" from students and instructors alike.

Imagine we could give girls the opportunity to "be who they are not" in terms of physical strength and agency. Imagine that we let them be strong and powerful – even if they are not quite there yet. Then imagine that we do not. What kind of difference would it make in the future relationships between men and women if we treated girls as if they could be as strong as boys, that they could be as loud, as powerful, and as independent as their male counterparts. The world of martial arts (and in a broader sense the world of sport) offers us a space to explore such possibilities, but this exploration is impossible without the reflective and critical gaze of students and instructors both. It allows girls to be strong, assertive, powerful, and aggressive without apologizing.

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<sup>2</sup> While the concept of self-efficacy is useful here (and will be discussed further in later sections), it is important to recognize this perceived competency as situated and social, and not as a characteristic (whether a strength or weakness) of individuals.

And so I became interested in how girls and women training in the martial arts create their lives and selves, through a history of mediated activity that is unique to each one but within a structure and activity that is shared. Although no two lives will be identical, they are all shaped by the ideas, structures, beliefs and knowledge of the culture in which they live (and interact with each other) in. It is my opinion that the more we see development as a continuous process of becoming, that we see the potentialities in young girls lives – not just physically, but academically, socially, emotionally – the more we must accept responsibility for what and how they are “becoming.”

In accordance with a growing number of researchers whose work is not framed as objective observation of social and psychological phenomenon, but rather as situated and personal exploration of such phenomena (Brown, 1996), the proposed research does not separate the researcher from the researched. In placing myself as a part of the process I am researching, I am acknowledging my own role as a researcher, and as a student and fellow staff member, as well as my interest in fostering new dialogic strategies for reflective critique and analysis of the participation of girls in the martial arts. Working together with the girls, an important goal is to allow for their voices to come through my writing and (re)telling of their stories. It is impossible to do this without expecting my own perspective and ideas to influence the process. I do not pretend to present an objective analysis or description of their lives and identities, but instead hope to present a process in which we worked together to share our story. I share my own interpretation based on the theoretical and practical framework presented here. Hopefully, my own perspective was made explicit enough so that any reading of the results will necessarily take it into account.

In addition to acknowledging my connection to the participants as a fellow member of the community and a part of the process, I also recognize that my experiences and reflections on them can never be the same as those of the girls. My positions as an adult, as a graduate student, and as a white female, to name a few, place me in a different relationship to the practice of the martial arts, to the people, rituals, challenges, and training, than the girls. Attempts were made in the analysis to allow the girls' voices to be heard, including the refrain from editing their contributions for grammar or colloquialisms. I believe the smatterings of "like" and "I mean" throughout the excerpts reflects the girls as they were during our meetings and reminds readers of the girls' realities as American teenagers<sup>3</sup>. In addition, the girls had a chance to read and comment on all written material from the analysis.

### ***Violence against women***

In the US, a woman is raped every 6 minutes; a woman is battered every 15 seconds. In North Africa, 6,000 women are genitally mutilated each day. This year, more than 15,000 women will be sold into sexual slavery in China. 200 women in Bangladesh will be horribly disfigured when their spurned husbands or suitors burn them with acid. More than 7,000 women in India will be murdered by their families and in-laws in disputes over dowries. Violence against women is rooted in a global culture of discrimination which denies women equal rights with men and which legitimizes the appropriation of women's bodies for individual

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<sup>3</sup> One of the participants, upon reading a draft about a year after our meetings, noted how "immature" the girls sounded in the transcripts. I imagine that if she was struck by this, a mere 12 months older than the girl reflected in these texts, that adult readers will also be reminded that they are reading the contributions of teenagers.

gratification or political ends. Every year, violence in the home and the community devastates the lives of millions of women. (Amnesty International, 2001)

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- Everyday four women in the U.S. die as a result of domestic violence (approximately 1400 per year)
- It is estimated that two to four million women are battered each year in the U.S.
- Women are 10 times as likely than men to be victimized by an intimate
- Approximately 132, 000 women report that they have been victims of rape or attempted rape. It is attempted that two to six times that many women are raped but do not report it.

(NOW, <http://www.now.org/issues/violence/stats.html>)

These quotes reflect a pattern of practices in which women are denied equal rights. This global issue reveals a history of oppression revealed not only in the prevalence of violence against women depicted in the statistics above, but also infiltrates the everyday experience of women in ways that are not reflected in these statistics and are not always as visible. Bourdieu (2001) referred to this as “symbolic violence, a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims” (p. 1).

Both the examples of harsh, extreme acts of violence identified above and the more subtle, “gentle violence” referred to by Bourdieu reflect a deep-rooted pattern of activity that situates women as victims of male aggression and domination, even (or sometimes, especially) by those males that are closest to them. “Violence signals

gender's hierarchy as well as its deep roots in historical, cultural, economic, and social structures, all reinforced by and intertwined with racism and class bias" (Eliasson, 1999, p. 6). The nature of this relationship, in which women are seen as passive and weak, as victims or in need of protection, while men are seen as either protectors or aggressors, is especially difficult to challenge because it is rooted in beliefs about the "natural" roles of men and women.

In 1994, the Violence Against Women Act was signed, providing \$1.8 million dollars to address the issue of violence against women. This act was one step towards recognizing violence against women as a national problem, as opposed to a personal or domestic issue (i.e., making the personal political). Attempts to address violence against women are still being made by groups dedicated to women's issues (e.g., [www.vday.org](http://www.vday.org)). These attempts still must face the popular myths that women are "natural" victims due to their inferior physical abilities, that domestic violence is a private, not public issue, that victims of rape and domestic abuse are somehow to blame for their victimization, and that violence against women is exaggerated by women's groups. In reality, the attempt to address the issue of violence against women can threaten the hierarchical power structure that historically has been used to protect men at the expense of women. What is less often emphasized, however, is that these attempts will continue to reinforce the power structure that they aim to destroy, unless the issue of the "naturalization" of the male/female dichotomy is addressed. Discussions of domestic abuse, for example, are often based on definitions of women as helpless victims, unable to defend themselves against their bigger, stronger partners. Working with this definition, domestic abuse is seen as a problem not because it is a form of violence, but because it is a form of violence in which

the aggressor has an “automatic” advantage. Despite the good intentions and desired outcomes, many approaches to fighting domestic abuse continue to place women as potential victims, at the mercy of the “morals” and discretion of men. In addition, psychological studies of gender difference exclude discussions of oppressive power relations and normalize heterosexuality (Fine & Gordon 1992).

In Masculine Domination, Bourdieu (2001) argued that processes of dehistoricization and eternalization result in the “transformation of history into nature, of cultural arbitrariness into the *natural*” (p. 1, italics in original). The current subscription to the male/female dichotomy, as it relates both to the material and ideological, is based on a disregard of development. The developmental process (i.e., political and social history) of differentiation of male and females is ignored, with the outcome (i.e., differences between male and female) thus being ascribed to natural differences (i.e., the genes, the brain, the body as a result of predetermined maturation instead of epigenetic development). When the developmental process is ignored, it is easy to identify these so-called “natural differences” as the cause (and justification) of social and cultural structures, especially those which otherwise might be seen as unjust (i.e., the exclusion of women from certain activities, the objectification of women’s bodies, unequal rights of homosexuals). In other words, “*it legitimates a relationship of domination by embedding it in a biological nature that is itself a naturalized social construction*” (p. 23, italics in original). These naturalized dichotomies infiltrate our material and ideological world, so that our cognition, our perception, our understanding, our actions are all conducted through the naturalized dichotomy, which “is all the more effective because it remains essentially tacit” (p. 27).

The effect of symbolic domination ... is exerted not in the pure logic of knowing consciousness but through the schemes of perception, appreciation, and action that are constitutive of habitus and which, below the level of the decisions of consciousness and the controls of the will, set up a cognitive relationship that is profoundly obscure to itself. (p. 37)

It has not always been the case, nor is it the case in all places, that men and women have been positioned this way. It is a cultural product, resulting from historically and socially constructed human activities. “Existing only *relationally*, each of the two genders [sic] is the product of the labour of diacritical construction” (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 23). Gender is not a static, predetermined trait or characteristic of an individual; it is instead a “component of ongoing interactions in which perceivers emit expectancies, targets (selves) negotiate their own identities, and the context in which interaction occurs shapes the resultant behavior” (Deaux & Major, 1987, p. 369).

An important component of such interactions is the human body – both as a symbolic concept and as it develops as each individual human being. Judith Butler suggested that “the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time. From a feminist point of view, one might try to reconceive the gendered body as the legacy of sedimented acts rather than a predetermined or foreclosed structure, essence or fact, whether natural, cultural, or linguistic” (Butler, 1988, p. 523). Individual and collective bodies, always within cultural contexts, become “gendered” as they act in the world. Several theorists, when addressing the issue of violence against women, have pointed to the way that women’s bodies are used as the space where power hierarchies related to gender are enacted. “Women have

been objectified and alienated as social subjects partly through the denigration and containment of the female body” (Grosz, 1994, p. xiv). “Misogynistic thought has commonly found a convenient self-justification for women’s secondary social positions by containing them within bodies that are represented, even constructed, as frail, imperfect, unruly, and unreliable, subject to various intrusions which are not under conscious control” (p. 13).

If we accept that the patterns of male domination reflected in the harshest examples of violence against women are also present in the most “gentle,” it is obvious that the task of combating the oppression of women is a much larger, more complex task than it is often credited, considering *the limitations of the possibilities of thought or action* that domination imposes on the oppressed” (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 41, italics in original). It is a task that cannot be accomplished “with the weapons of consciousness and will alone ... because the effect and conditions of its efficacy are durably and deeply embedded in the body in the form of dispositions” (p. 39). Instead, what is needed is the transformation of social conditions, which does not exclude the conscious mental level but also requires work at the level of bodily dispositions. But it is a task that can be done; gender is constituted and can be constituted differently (Butler, 1988).

Historically, women have been limited in the way they could create and transform themselves by what was made available to them and by them – what activities, what ideas, what literature, what images are presented in the media, etc. Jill Ker Conway (2006) identifies the period in which European women were cut off from accounts of women as political, as participating in warfare, as powerful, in the romanticism of the

18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup> In medieval times then, “women didn’t have any trouble thinking about women fighting and using physical strength for a political cause” (p. xiv), “the participation of women in street violence and political riots of one kind or another is a common theme through medieval and early modern times ... It was not unreasonable for a female thinker to speculate about the nature of rule by women” (p. xiii). I should add here that the obstacle to thinking about women in these ways cannot be separated from the inability of women (due to the limitation or exclusion from various activities) to actually do these things. In prehistoric times, for example, women were active participants in hunting and using weapons (Dowling, 2000, p. 7).

These images of women, in literature and stories, were not included in the education of women after the romantic period – when a new ideal of women emerged. Religion and science both worked during this time to espouse a new image of women, “a romantic notion of the female who was nonviolent, had no political motivation, and had to see herself as exercising power in relation to her sexual and generative functions and not her political status as a potential ruler” (Ker Conway, 2006, p. xiii). Medical experts advised women that physical activity could be threatening to their reproductive potential. “Many accused the male medical establishment of ‘using professional authority to repress women and curtail their activity by exaggerating, prolonging, and even encouraging their ailment, real or imaginary” (Dowling, 2000, p. 25). Women were believed to be “naturally” fair and innocent; exposure to physical activity or aggression could be damaging. Anything from too much work to too much cycling was said to be dangerous

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<sup>4</sup> Also in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, with the emergence of aesthetics as a literary subject, we start to see a systematic organization within the fine arts of female and male in terms of the beautiful (smallness, smoothness, cleanliness, lack of resistance, quietness, etc) and the sublime (vastness, roughness, jaggedness, heaviness, hardness, loudness). See Mattick (1990).

for the female reproductive system. Later, after the industrial age moved the center of work from the farm to the factory, women were physically separated from work and technology by being designated to the domestic sphere (unless, of course, they were needed in the factories).

Dowling explains the shifts in the lives of women using what she calls a “crisis in masculinity.” During the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century, a new social order was threatening the ideals and actions of masculinity. Urbanization “had gotten out of control, crushing farmers and small business men and robbing males of the manly capacity to provide” (Dowling, 2000, p. 23). Combined with a rising women’s movement both in Europe and America, the new order threatened male superiority. During times when it is necessary for women to be strong – to take on physical and political roles, women are granted access to such areas. However, as soon as this is seen as a threat to the social order (to male superiority) there is a backlash against women that relies on the romanticized notion of women solely as nurturers and supporters.

This “backlash” against women can be seen in several areas. Those of interest to this research are the regulation of women and girl’s access to power, strength, aggression and anger. (For work dealing with these different areas in relation to gender issues, see Brumberg, 1998; Cohen 2005; Deaux & Major, 1987; Dowling 2000; Freeman, 2001; Grosz, 1994; Lawler, 2001, 2002; Lawler & Kamienski, 2007 and Snortland, 1998). This regulation can be seen in numerous ways. Women’s access to activities that promote strength are limited – through institutional means, cultural norms, and various barriers in the physical environment. Instead of spaces and activities that promote physical activity and strength, women are taught to seek protection, to remain “safe,” rather than to

experiment with their activity in the world. The stereotypically “male” abilities and characteristics have been adopted as representing “strength” over stereotypically female ones. Women who do not fit the “appropriate” standard for femininity and/or femaleness face consequences such as being ostracized, taunted, or having their femininity and/or femaleness questioned. Finally, this regulation occurs through the continued reproduction of a gender and sex dichotomy that is reinforced by the social and cultural practices involved in defining oneself.

It is important to note, however, that while we have described a dominant ideology that places women as passive and weak in comparison to men, this has not been the case always, nor is it the case for all women. The research that has been done with adolescent girls of color (although limited and often flawed) shows that adolescent girls of varying backgrounds experience and relate to gender stereotypes in different ways (and also that gender and sex are constructed in different ways within various cultures). So, for example, “[a]lthough few empirical data exist, observers note that African American women are assertive, independent, self-confident, and sexually confident” (Vasquez & de las Fuentes, 1999, p. 165). When addressing issues related to masculine domination and/or female oppression, there is always a danger of reinforcing the dichotomy that has proven so harmful for women, or even creating a stronger category of “women as victim.” “[I]n this effort to combat the invisibility of women as a category feminists run the risk of rendering visible a category which may or may not be representative of the concrete lives of women” (Butler, 1988, p. 523). In this research, I have attempted to understand the development of individuals (including myself), groups, and institutions as situated and singular – to acknowledge both the social and cultural and the agency of

individuals. Based on my own experience within sports and the martial arts in the United States, I believe that issues surrounding masculine domination and the naturalization of the male/female dichotomy are extremely present and relevant for female athletes and martial artists.

What is necessary, then, is the transformation of social conditions so that the dichotomy of male/female, as it has come to exist in our society, is broken down. In place of this dichotomy, we need an understanding of gender and sex that recognize the historical construction of both sex and gender, of bodies, actions, ideologies, and psychologies, and thus recognizes and makes room for difference within and across genders. The socio-cultural framework, discussed in the next section, offers such a framework. Before moving on to examine how we can understand the development and performance of identity within strength and power related areas, however, I would like to emphasize a few key principles regarding the goals of my work in light of the historical construction of the male/female dichotomy.

The goal here is not to qualify male or female qualities as good and/or bad, but simply to understand how they have come to be. I do not mean to claim in any way, that characteristics that have been associated with femininity and females are in any way less desirable than those that are associated with masculinity and males, but simply explore how these categories are constructed in the lives of, in this case, female martial artists. In addition, the goal is also not to reinforce the dichotomy that exists between male and female, but to recognize the real power that such dichotomies have on the construction of identity in our society.

When speaking about the constructed dichotomy of male/female, and the power relations and social realities that are a part of it, I understand that I can only speak from within this construction. In other words, there is always the danger of reinforcing the very dichotomy I am hoping to “break down.” I acknowledge, for example, the presence of more than two sexes and genders (i.e. Fausto-Sterling), and that this work, in trying to capture the experiences of a specific set of girls, does not do enough to challenge the forced categorization of bodies and people as male or female.

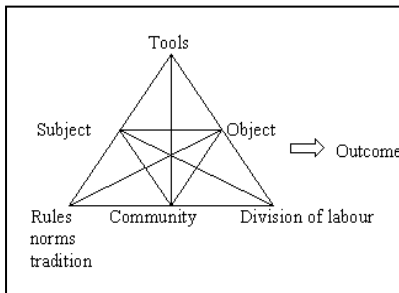
In exploring these qualities, we always must take into account the role of males and females. I do not aim to understand “females” or “femaleness” as its own separate entity (as if this was possible), but to see how it exists in lived experiences, which necessarily involve all genders. In suggesting that current representations and constructions of gender are problematic, I am referring to issues in the real lives of women and girls, not to any correct or underlying concept of gender. By examining current ways of conceptualizing gender, I hope to create new possibilities to view gender as a source of potential (of constant becoming) rather than as a limitation or lack.

Finally, although I aim to emphasize the falsity of the mind/body dichotomy, our vocabulary and language often reinforce the idea of an agency that is beyond the body, that is constant and continuous rather than agency as the body, constructed and performed. Despite attempts to avoid separating the mind from the body, I acknowledge that the language of this written text may at times fail to honor the unity of the mind and body.

## ***An Activity Theory Approach to Identity***

According to socio-cultural activity theory, human beings cannot be understood outside of the human activities of which they are a part. These activities are by definition historically constructed and object oriented, so that they take into account historical changes in culture, social relations and motives. They must, therefore, take into account the historical and social constitutions of gender.

In his research and writing, Vygotsky (1978, 1986) emphasized the mediated nature of human existence, stating that all human interaction, whether with objects or with others, is mediated by cultural means, tools and signs. The social activity of humans constitutes the basis for what becomes the psychology of the individual as well as society. According to Vygotsky, all mental functions exist on two planes, first interpsychologically, or between people, and then intrapsychologically, or within the individual. The zone of proximal development, a key concept within this theory, is defined as the difference between what an individual can do with help and without it. Because the emergence of individual psychological functions can be found in the socially constructed activities of the community, to understand one's identity we must look to the cultural activities of which they are a part. Engeström (1999) elaborated on the idea of mediated activity by distinguishing the difference between individual actions and collective group activities. In order to understand how individuals' participation is structured within activities, we need first to elaborate the diagram below, which depicts the structure of collective activity:



**Figure 1: Engeström's Activity System**

Figure 1 outlines each component of collective human activity. When we take human activity as the unit of analysis, we can no longer look at human beings as isolated individuals, but as one component within human activity that also includes instruments, objects and outcomes, rules, division of labor, and community.

In the model, the individual refers to the individual or subgroup whose agency is chosen as the point of view in the analysis. The object refers to the 'raw material' or 'problem space' at which the activity is directed and which is molded and transformed into outcomes with the help of physical and symbolic, external and internal mediating instruments, including both tools and signs. The community comprises multiple individuals and/or subgroups who share the same general object and who construct themselves as distinct from other communities. The division of labor refers to both the horizontal division of tasks between the members of the community and to the vertical division of power and status. Finally the rules refer to the explicit and implicit regulations, norms and conventions that constrain actions and interactions within the activity system. (Center for Activity Theory and Development. (Center for Activity Theory and Development, 2003)

The activities that I am interested in here are those under the realm of sport, specifically the martial art of Tae Kwon Do. Considering the naturalized construct of masculine domination outlined above, sports and the martial arts can serve as a space for transformation of gender dichotomies, especially through the participation/contribution of females. Both the historical construction of male/female and the individual development of gendered selves are “tenuously constituted in time” – only appearing to be continuous and essential. “If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style” (Butler, 1988, p.519). Traditionally male dominated activities can, therefore, serve as spaces for creating this “different sort of repeating.” Stetsenko’s (2009) review of personhood as an activist project takes Butler’s position of repeated acts a step further by conceptualizing a unified life project as the path to personhood. In other words, the relationship between acts (or deeds) can best be understood as a process of being and becoming that is defined by collaborative transformative acts. Key to this is the meaning that is constructed of the world and the self.

The goal of this research is to look at the development of both individual and group identity. At some points, individual girls’ lives that are participating in the martial arts are singled out for analysis as the source of agency within the activity system of the martial arts. At other times, I look at how the girls, as a group, develop a collective identity. Both levels of analysis take into account the dynamic, multiple and dialogical characteristics of development.

The work by Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain (1998) details a theory of identity that is based upon the works of Vygotsky and the literary scholar Bakhtin. This practice theory defines identity as “the constitution and interpretation of personal action in historically circumscribed, though never closed, venues of social activity” (p. 42), so that the self is understood as always embedded in social practice, and always being (re)created. This theory of identity is harmonious with concepts of gender that emphasize gendered bodies and selves as performative and continuously restructured.

Engeström’s (1999) distinction between individual action and collective activity is useful here, insofar as it allows us to see how one’s participation in a collective activity can be constituted by motives that may or may not be the same as the object of the collective activity. Because activity systems are always heterogeneous and multi-voiced, the distinction is an important one. Although each individual’s action is a part of the entire system, there is room for variations in the way individuals participate, taking into account specific circumstances such as individual history, social class, gender, power and status. According to Engeström (1999), the collective object of the activity may not even be consciously available to the individual; the goal of the subject may or may not be the same as the collective object. For this reason, it is important to specify where the level of agency is, and to understand how the individual (or group) that is identified fits into the collective system.

The self is constituted through mediated action, using available tools of identity – “discourses and practices ... [that are] differentiated by relations of power and the associated institutional infrastructure ... as artifacts or media that figure the self constitutively, in open ended ways” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 28). While these tools are

emergent features of social systems that are historically bounded, they do not act on passive participants in these systems. Rather, individuals, through a process called semiotic mediation (a term borrowed from Vygotsky), act within such systems. This process is understood as “voluntary control over behavior” that is mediated by cultural devices. This control over behavior is through “indirect means...and it requires a sustained effort” (p. 38). Through this behavior, we can conceive of a heuristic development of identity and agency, in which over time there is genesis of products, or improvisations, that come from experience. These products are then appropriated into heuristics for the next moments of activity, and so a pattern of social activity exists that is understood in a particular way by an individual, thus constituting his/her identity at a given moment. The influence of Bakhtin places all of the actions of the individuals as merely one part in a historical and continuous dialogue. Gender, as part of an ongoing dialogue, exists as such a cultural tool. As we have seen, however, the cultural construct of gender has been naturalized so as to appear to exist prior to the process of developing one’s identity, rather than as part of the process. “The tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of its own production. The authors of gender become entranced by their own fictions ...” (Butler, 1988, p. 522).

All of these practices take place in what Holland et al refer to as “cultural worlds.” These social systems are socially organized and reproduced historical phenomena, which we may enter voluntarily or involuntarily, and which are developed by its participants. They are not static objects, but processes that include and form our lives as we intersect them. The martial arts school, or training area, is constantly being re-

created by its constituents. The process involves not only the current practitioners, but also the history of the practice in the world in general and our society in particular. In this way we can understand not only the individual as being produced through human activity, but also the social. “Then the self and society both appear as emergent properties (i.e. transformations) of the same reality – the social practice of material tool production, albeit differing in degree of generality, power, and, most importantly, role in genesis of social life, with the inter-subjective level of practice being historically and ontogenetically prior to the intra-subjective level” (Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004, p. 491).

By understanding what past theorists may have referred to as the “environment” or “context” as processes that are both shaped by and help to shape the lives of its participants, we can break down the dichotomy of individual/environment. Actions cannot be understood as simple cause/effect phenomena, but instead become complex systems of social practices. Within these figured worlds social encounters always take into account the position of the participants, located in specific times and places. Their significance comes from their re-creation. This re-creation is dependent upon the interaction and intersubjectivity of the participants. This concept allows us to understand how systems of power develop through the recreation of social interactions, while at the same time allowing for changes in the system through individual action within the cultural worlds. These worlds distribute us, the participants, by relating us to landscapes of action and also by affording such landscapes human voice and tone. There is no absolute separation between the participants and the social system, since the two are mutually constitutive. It is important to note how this allows for agency of individuals, while understanding at the same time that this activity is necessarily a part of a

historically constrained, socially organized and distributed world. So that agency cannot be understood as an a-priori, disembodied agency. Understanding social contexts as collections of dynamic, historical interactions will help to see how the world of martial arts schools is created by and creates the students, instructors and observers that enter them – what Butler refers to as an embodiment of possibilities (Butler, 1988).

In much of Vygotsky's work, language is emphasized as the ultimate tool that, originating in social interactions, becomes internalized (or in some later terminology appropriated, see Rogoff 2003) to produce individual mental functions (Vygotsky, 1978). The mind as an emergent property of the individual comes into existence through the abstract social world of word meaning. Equally important, however, is the physical reality of the human body, which like language and thought operates on both a social and individual plane. Gender, for example, "must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (Butler, 1988, p. 519). The relationship between the physical and mental/symbolic is best understood as dialectic, where the two are not the same yet not separate, but instead have the ability to interact and become one another (Grosz 1994). Each component of an activity system can be looked at as including both the concrete and abstract, and the self is no different. Ideologies, power relations, cultural norms, accepted and unaccepted behaviors are all communicated socially through both signs/language and physical/bodily interactions. Through these interactions, the individual self is constituted via the individual's actions within the various activities or cultural worlds of which he/she is a part. The self becomes the subjective product of human activity, understandable only within the "history and logic of functioning and

developing of human practical purposeful activity” (Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004, p. 484).

The self that is constructed consists of both mind and body – not as separate components but as intertwined aspects of the same being. The distinction here is not meant to refer to differences in biological and/or social forces; the self is “produced from within, out of, and as driven by the logic of evolving activity that connects individuals to the world, to other people, and to themselves” (Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004, p. 486). The notion of a “natural” or “biological” self that is embedded within, or acted upon by, social and cultural forces is no longer useful. Both the mind and body are produced from collaborative and transformative human activity, and both, as sources of agency, transform and further develop the human activities of which they are a part, and transform and further develop the self. The self is both product and producer within a continuum of human activity, one aspect of which is the process of becoming (Stetsenko, 2009). By emphasizing both the mind and body as mutually constitutive components of the self, we are able to move beyond both dualism and materialism as explanatory principles of the individual. The mind emerges from the physical and social action and interaction of the individual; the mind also has the capacity to act upon the social and physical actions of the individual.

The self, as understood here, is merely one moment within the flow of activity, within the constant process of becoming, “not stored somewhere in the depths of a human soul, but ... constantly re-enacted and constructed by individuals anew in the ever-shifting balances of life” (Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004, p. 493). The development of individuals is driven by our performances in the world. “Children learn to talk and use

language by performing development. They create who they are by being who they are not” (Holzman, 1997, p. 74). In the same way, martial arts students learn to be “martial artists” by performing (and they learn to be “female” martial artists by performing). This collective performance by students, instructors, and observers works to create “martial arts.” From this perspective, learning changes not only what we know but also who we are. If we are in fact, becoming who we are by acting as who we are not, then identity no longer makes sense as a static, constant being, but only as a dynamic, ever-changing state of being.

By emphasizing both the mind and body as equally important components of the self, we can overcome embedded ideas about the power of mind over body. These ideas are especially dangerous to women, as the realms associated with mind (reason, intellect, objectivity) have been associated with masculinity while ideas associated with the body (reproduction, emotions, subjectivity) have been associated with the feminine.<sup>5</sup> When men are associated with the body, it is usually a relationship that stresses control - the body becomes a machine that is controlled by the male, which is different than the identification of the female self as the body. “It’s true that social interpretations of the female body have often suggested that the body is the self” (Foster 1995, p 10). In today’s society, we often see this in eating disorders, plastic surgery and crash diets. “Growing up I thought that enhancing and improving the body was synonymous with elevating the self” (p. 11). While the physical body is also emphasized in male identity, it is often more related to what it can do (rather than what can be done to it). In ways that

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<sup>5</sup> I once saw an advertisement for a female radio jockey that emphasized this point explicitly. The copy on the ad read, “Built like a woman, thinks like a man.” The idea that was pushed in this ad was that she had “the best of both worlds.”

are typically different than males, females internalize an observer's view of their bodies, so that the body as object becomes important and not the body as subject. The key point here is not that the body shouldn't be identified with the self, but that the body should not be seen as an object of the self or others.

The goal here is to see both the mind and body as parts of the self – not as passive objects, but as constituted by the actions and practices that they do. The body is not “natural,” or unaffected by social forces. Quoting Judith Butler's work on the material body, Fausto-Sterling writes that ... “every time we try to return to the body as something that exists prior to socialization, prior to discourse about male and female...we discover that matter is fully sedimented with discourses on sex and sexuality that prefigure and constrain the uses to which that term can be put” (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, p. 22). The inclusion of both mind and body as mutually constitutive components of the self helps to avoid emphasizing one at the expense of the other.

As outlined earlier, all human action and interaction with the world is mediated through cultural tools and artifacts; this is true for both the physical and mental aspects of human actions. Just as the self is comprised of both physical and mental components that interact dialectically, the world of instruments can also be understood as being both material and symbolic. Historically, material tools have existed that have mediated the labor of humans in the world. As these tools have been used in activities, they have become reified in the objects of the world, incorporating the embedded cultural ideologies of the practice. These objects become meaningful again in their continued use in human activity – thus they are both shaped by and shape the actions of individuals and groups. Like the self, they exist as emergent properties of human activity, and thus are

both producers and products of human activity and of persons. Just as human beings cannot be understood outside of the activities that they participate in, tools cannot be understood outside of their practical use within these practices. Although they bring with them embedded histories and ideologies, they are constantly reshaped within social practices, and thus are dynamic components of reality, having both a concrete and abstract form, both of which are always present and co-construct each other.

In much work applying socio-cultural theory to identity formation, the role of language is stressed. “In this connection, identity formation as a moment of rhetorical action, concerned with using language in significant interpersonal contexts to form identities, is offered as a theoretical approach ...” (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995, p. 85). Without underestimating the role of language (and thought) as forces in identity formation, it is important to emphasize the material existence of tools (and also the material existence of language and thought). Just as the self is always both mental and physical (although actions may rely more or less on one sphere), tools and signs are always both material and symbolic, although they may be more or less so at any given time. The proposed research both challenges and reinforces the primacy of language, by using language to discuss and reflect on material realities.

The role of cultural tools and signs is changed from modifier or “add-on” of an individual being to actual producers of the self as tools of identity. Tools are no longer neutral objects that can be interchanged with one another. Within human action and collective activity, tools take on meaning as they are used to achieve some outcome, and this meaning becomes a part of the tool in its continued use. As mediating components of

human action, they shape not only the external world but also the self of the individual and group using them.

Language has been emphasized as one of the most important mediating tools. Ideologies, for example, can easily be understood in terms of systems of words. According to Vygotsky (1986), it is the meeting of fundamental cognitive thought processes with communicative language that creates the possibility for higher mental functions. The result - internal speech, or thought - allows the individual to control their actions in new ways, thus constructing the self.

The same mediating process can be seen with the physical existence of human beings. Denzin (1993) emphasized how ideologies - “beliefs about the way the world is and ought to be” - are not only based in the symbolic world of words, but also in the physical and material reality of day-to-day activity (p. 200). “It is through the training of the body that the most fundamental dispositions are imposed, those which make a person both *inclined and able* to enter into the social game...” (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 56). A physical sense of who we are in the world is also based first on interactions with the external world. The way that we interact physically with others, with ourselves, and with objects in the environment is socially constructed and regulated within activity systems. Through our actions in the world, we appropriate these interactions into a physical sense of who we are – a physical awareness of our bodies. “These activities constitute individuals as concrete gendered subjects in the gender stratification order. It must be understood that an international, dialectical relationship connects these material practices to the worlds of experience where gendered identities are produced” (Denzin, 1993, p. 201).

In her writing on the body, Grosz (1994) referred to the idea of body image to illustrate this. Just as our ideas, words and thoughts mediate our interactions with the world, our body image mediates our physical presence in the world. Emphasizing the importance of both physical and mental mediation reduces the reliance on solely mental or symbolic tools. In order to achieve something physically, I may in fact *think* consciously that I can or cannot do it. But at a corporeal level, I also *feel* that I can or cannot do it. This does not always rely on thought or words, yet it is difficult to communicate because of our reliance on linguistic processes to reflect on and communicate our feelings. I can and I cannot are embodied, mediated experiences, that are important aspects of individual action and the development of the self.

As Browning (1995) writes in *Samba: Resistance in Motion*, there is always some level of translation when one attempts to use language to describe or analyze corporeal acts. “There are things I learned in Brazil with my body, and some of these things it has taken me years to learn to articulate in writing. But this is not to say that they were without meaning when I could only speak them through dance” (p. xi). Despite the risk of distortion in translation, Browning continues on to explain the value in this translation. “My purpose in writing about the dances is to try to heal the body divided from its intellect ... Of course I said the rift was a perceived one, and doesn’t actually apply in a culture which comprehends intelligent bodies” (p. xviii). Considering the prevalence of this rift within the academic culture, I share with Browning the belief that writing about the body, in my case the practice of martial arts, can begin to heal this split.

This research, and any research that attempts to understand how we feel in the world at a corporeal level, must deal with the limitations of language. The way that we

speak about ourselves, for example, often reinforces an idea of the body and mind as distinct: “It is, however, clearly unfortunate grammar to claim that there is a ‘we’ or an ‘I’ that does its body, as if a disembodied agency preceded and directed an embodied exterior” (Butler, 1988, p. 521). Because the body and the mind are intertwined and cannot therefore, be separated, we must acknowledge that each shapes the other. The language that we use, in other words, plays a part in how we experience, construct, and perform our bodies. So while abstractly we can think about language or body image as separate from each other, in reality this is not the case. Part of our work, therefore, is to examine how the words we use influence (and limit) the ways that we exist while at the same time understanding how our material existence shapes our language. In this instance, this must be done within the world of social science research, which often heavily emphasizes language and abstract thought and ignores the body.

Activity systems, including all of the components, are created and recreated through the continued recreation of historical activities. These activities are not reproduced as copies of themselves, but are continuously changing in their recreation. The cause of such change lies in the dialectical relationship of the components with each other, within themselves, and with the system itself. Thus it is tension and contradiction within the activity system that lead to new reconciliations and developments, as well as moments of engagement and reflection. This is the type of relationship that is emphasized by the dialectical nature of Vygotskian and post-Vygotskian activity theory. According to Engeström’s (1987) model, contradictions provide the opportunity and potentially the motivation for change. When they exist within one component of the system (as opposed to among components), these contradictions represent a need for resolution, but not

necessarily for transformation of the activity. When they exist at the level of the activity system, however, they allow for expansive learning (i.e. the transformation of the activity itself).

Denzin (1993) frames moments of contradiction between the subject and ideology as epiphanies. These turning point experiences when reality is redefined are life events that “radically alter and shape the meanings persons give to themselves and their life projects” (p. 206). Within gender studies, we can see how moments when tension exists between the individual as a gendered subject and the existing gender order can lead to new understandings of the gender order. “Dialectically the individual as a sexual subject acts back on the gender order” (p. 212), which can result in a deepening of “the person’s internalized oppression to a gendered sexual identity, lead to an open rebellion, or produce a deeper commitment to it” (p. 211-212).

Just as there are moments of contradiction between the self and activity systems, there are also moments of perfect fit, where a person is completely engaged with an action. Csikszentmihalyi refers to these moments as “flow” experiences. In a discussion on the ego in creative activities, Csikszentmihalyi describes the identification: “You’re so identified with what you’re doing that you cannot let it fail, because it reflects on you. It’s the activity itself – the writing or the painting or the music – that has become so much a part of you that you have to make it succeed, and through it make yourself succeed” (Kuhn, 2000, p 164). Not only does the activity “become” you, but also you “become” the activity.

When framed within the concept of an activity system, the ideas of epiphanies (where one examines contradictions between the self and an activity) and flow (where someone

becomes engulfed by an activity), offer a way to understand the production of selves in our everyday lives. In terms of the martial arts, we can see that as a practice they satisfy all of the qualifications of flow laid out by Csikszentmihalyi (1991):

- A set of skills that can be “worked” at,
- A set of goals and feedback,
- The activity must (potentially) exist for the sake of itself (intrinsic activity),
- High level of concentration (so you can get “lost” in activity),
- Sense of control,
- Concern for self disappears during activity, emerges stronger after,
- Sense of time is altered, and
- Merging of action and awareness.

By utilizing both the historical construction of the male/female dichotomy outlined previously and the dynamic, social, historical, continuous, and embodied development of identity that is proposed within socio-cultural activity theory, we can conceptualize the development of gendered selves within cultural activities. Because they potentially offer spaces where females can participate in practices that have been traditionally assigned to the “male” spectrum, sports and the martial arts can be understood as spaces where gender can be redefined, through the action of individuals and groups.

People come up to me every single day of my life since that match. I have people say, ‘I saw that match. You changed my life. I started to believe in myself. I went to my boss and asked for a raise. I started getting better grades in school. I started thinking of myself differently. (Billie Jean King, quoted in Fein, 2005, p. 79)

While I am certainly not the first to suggest that women's participation in sports (in line with "the personal is political" positioning of many feminists) can be understood as feminist activity, I believe that this argument is worth reinforcing. Before considering how the girls who participated in this research can and do perform their selves within the martial arts, it is necessary to consider the participation of females in sports and the martial arts in a broad sense. The next chapter reviews literature, research, and personal accounts of women athletes and martial artists in order to understand it within the socially constructed male/female dichotomy.

## II. Girls, Sports and the Martial Arts

I recently came across a section of a sports website titled “Barely Sport.”<sup>6</sup> Within this section of the site, sports fans can find lists, articles, and photo galleries of women that, as the name suggests, are in some way (if only barely), related to sport. Two aspects of this site were particularly telling for me, as related to the topic of women and sports for this research. First is the nature of the content. Although it is a sports website, and many of the women on the site are athletes, the focus is not on their athletic abilities or accomplishments but on their physical appearance (more specifically their appearance in relation to dominant male fantasies). The tagline for this particular section reads “hot cheerleaders, athlete wives and girlfriends, sexy ladies, and other fun stuff that’s ... Barely Sports.” So while there are some items that are not related to females specifically, the vast majority of the content features scantily clad women meant to be pleasing for the male heterosexual sports fan. Beyond the placement of female athletes as sexual objects as opposed to as accomplished athletes, however, the second and more troubling aspect is the title of the section. The title reveals a popular attitude towards women and sports – that their position, even when they participate – is not quite “legitimately” sport. On this particular site, for example, pictures of “hot WAG’s” (wives and girlfriends) are positioned alongside female athletes. Their role is the same, irrespective of their accomplishments or abilities. Girls and women are positioned as sexual objects to be enjoyed by heterosexual men – this is how they (barely) fit into sports.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://bleacherreport.com/barely-sports>

Beyond this one website, we find this same positioning of women in the sports world. Not surprisingly, it becomes most pronounced and obvious in the sports that are most celebrated as “masculine,” such as football and, more recently, mixed martial arts (MMA). In both of these sports, (male) athletes are celebrated as “ultra-masculine” and females are positioned as sex objects, fulfilling the roles of cheerleaders and ring girls (also present in boxing, another sport celebrated for its “ultra-masculinity”). In this sense, the differences between males and females are constructed, in an exaggerated way, in terms of the male/female dichotomy. Within such a construction, there is no room or allowance for overlap between male and female. Violations of heterosexual gender norms are “punished” with jokes, taunts and other social messages. In slightly different ways, as discussed below, the culture of these two sports illustrates the process of naturalization outlined by Bourdieu.

In *The Stronger Women Get, the More Men Love Football*, Nelson (1994) argued that football exists as a place where a historically and socially constructed idea of masculinity as extreme physical strength, violence and aggression is produced and enacted – as a place where the male claim to superiority in physical power still matters. Within this construction, women are not only excluded from certain activities (i.e., playing football) but they are also positioned as objects of sexual, verbal and physical desire and often abuse. “In the manly sports world, sexism is a badge of honor, a common ground, a familiar language” (Nelson, 1994, p. 84). Due to low reporting rates, statistics of sexual assault and abuse are difficult to establish. Although not always highly publicized, male professional and student athletes are often involved in crimes of violence against women. In a survey of campus judicial affairs offices, Crosset, Benedict,

and McDonald (1995) found that male student-athletes were overrepresented in incidents of sexual and physical assault against women. The Center for Women Policy Studies found that ‘athletes and fraternity members are the two most likely campus groups to commit gang rape’ (Nelson, 1994, p 129). Additionally, when crimes are reported by women, professional athletes are less likely to be convicted than other men:

USA TODAY research of 168 sexual assault allegations against athletes in the past dozen years suggests sports figures fare better at trial than defendants from the general population. Of those 168 allegations, involving 164 athletes, only 22 saw their cases go to trial, and only six cases resulted in convictions. In another 46 cases, a plea agreement was reached. Combined with the six athletes convicted at trial and one who pleaded guilty as charged, that gives the athletes a 32% total conviction rate in the resolved cases. That means more than two-thirds were never charged, saw the charges dropped or were acquitted. (Weir & Brady, 2003)

While professional athletes, as high-paid celebrities, may more often be targeted with false allegations, we must acknowledge a level of acceptance within our culture for violence against women, especially within the culture of contact sports. These incidents, while not condoned, are often joked about. At one professional hockey game I attended, for example, I recall a fan in the stands taunting a player, who was apparently known for domestic abuse, with the taunt, “Beat him like you beat your wife.” To be fair, this particular outburst was met with a fair share of strange looks, but I have heard many fans mock athletes and fellow crowd members with implications of femininity and homosexuality<sup>7</sup> (and there have been other cases where domestic abuse is used as

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<sup>7</sup> A recent NY times article (Thomas, 2008), for example, highlighted the hostile environment created in Madison Square Garden for gay fans.

entertainment in banners and taunts). Boston Celtics fans, for example, have hung banners in the arena claiming they like to beat rival teams almost as much as ‘we like to beat our wives’ (Nelson 1994, p. 134). More often than not, such “crowd participation” is encouraged and admired by fellow fans. Hockey, like football, is celebrated as a sport that is “too tough” for women. The premise that sports like football are too tough for woman is used to naturalize, and thus justify, supposedly “innate” differences between men and women and social behaviors such as the sexual and physical objectification and abuse of women.

The problem with such a premise is that while football is, in many ways, too “rough” for most women, it is also too rough for most men. Most obviously, we see this in the fact that most men (“the fans”) are neither physically strong nor fit enough to play professional football. What is less obvious (or perhaps better concealed), however, is that professional football is too tough for professional football players, who have an average life span of roughly 55 years old (Glueck & Cihak, 2006). In a recent study, Cantu and Mueller (2003) collected nationwide data regarding football fatalities in all organized football programs in public schools and in college, professional, and youth programs. They found that a total of 497 brain injury-related fatalities occurred among American football players during the period from 1945 through 1999. When professional football players do live past 60, their quality of life is often decreased as a result of their playing. “A recent New York Times analysis ... suggested that N.F.L. retirees ages 60 to 89 are experiencing moderate to severe dementia at several times the national rate” (Schwarz, 2009). The popular idea that contact sports such as football reflect rather than construct a tenet of “masculinity” is harmful not only to women, but to men as well.

Recent publications about the rise of the sport of MMA emphasize aggression and violence as “naturally” masculine traits (Sheridan 2007; Wertheim 2009). In a similar fashion as with sports such as football, MMA is celebrated as a space where “men can be men.” These claims continue to be fueled by theories such as the catharsis theory of aggression which states that releasing or venting anger is necessary, especially for men. Such theories are often used to explain violent and aggressive activities of males. In some cases, there is almost a sacred worshipping of some “basic masculine instinct,” an evolutionarily passed on trait that is being repressed and feminized in our overly civilized and politically correct society. By pairing this worship of primal male aggression with the on-display, bikini-clad, objectified ring girls, popular MMA organizations such as the UFC (which currently does not allow women to compete) create spaces that are unwelcoming and unfriendly for females who wish to challenge such limiting gender roles, even those who may appreciate other aspects of the art and practice of MMA.

Despite scientific research disproving the catharsis theory (Bushman, Baumeister & Stack, 1999), which shows that participating in violent and/or aggressive acts does not reduce but in fact increases aggression, claims continue to be made that MMA and other contact sports satisfy a prehistoric and innate need for fighting. This idea is emphasized not only by those who celebrate MMA, but also those who condemn it as “uncivilized” and “barbaric.” Both positions ignore the cultural and historical construction of sports such as MMA and contribute to the naturalization of dichotomous definitions of masculinity and femininity. Neither historic nor scientific explorations of the evolution of men are necessary to witness the “naturalization” process here. A look at MMA, as it exists in the present, will suffice. Watching professional MMA competitions, one can see

that there is nothing at all that is not carefully constructed. From the clothes and advertisements, to the money being exchanged and earned, to the rules and regulations, the weight classes and the means of reaching them (diet, protein drinks, saunas, etc.). The setting itself of the fights – cages surrounded by screaming fans, announcers and music used to build tension, judges, referees and bells to structure the fights – are carefully constructed to produce an image. The fights themselves are staged – two opponents who fight only because they are told to by the conventions of the social practice. In many cases, it seems as if the dramatized name-calling and taunting that take place leading up to MMA fights are required in order to produce the “primal” desire to fight. If, as is claimed, the act of fighting is an innate, “natural” trait of men, the excessive amount of money, time and effort necessary to produce such fights seems highly unnecessary.

Organizations such as the *Ultimate Fighting Championship* (UFC) walk a fine line (and I would argue, from a marketing perspective, walk it quite well) between celebrating violence as both primal and civilized. They do so by distancing themselves from the less civilized (and less profitable) “common bar fight” and strictly adhering to rules (there are 31 listed “fouls” prohibited during a fight), while at the same time selling the sport and athletes as “ultimate fighters,” as instinctual warriors. This negotiation is done quite purposefully, in order to gain (and retain) as many fans as possible and hold legitimacy as a sport. It is ironic that so much work must be done to produce and protect the concept of masculinity as naturally violent, of fighting as male instinct.

Perhaps most ironic and telling are the rules, present not only in organized fighting but in society in general, against attacks to the groin. “Having balls” has become a euphemism for being strong and tough in our society; in order to protect the hierarchy

of men as tougher and stronger, the male genitals have become arguably the most protected body part of any sex. It is rarely acknowledged that having “genitals [that] dangle precariously outside the pelvis” (Nelson, 1994, p. 56) is a clear disadvantage in the so-called battle of the sexes; it does not need to be acknowledged when we have done so much culturally to protect them.

Where does this construction of sex and gender leave women who participate in sports such as MMA? When women challenge the strict roles by excelling at traditionally male sports – or by playing sports in a traditionally male fashion – they do so at the risk of being ostracized and ridiculed by both men and women. They are accepted as athletes (or as “barely athletes”) only if they can justify their participation by playing into traditional gender stereotypes. This can involve anything from posing in men’s magazines such as *Playboy* and *Maxim* to dressing in “feminine” clothing and highlighting their roles in traditional, heterosexual relationships. In Fein’s (2005) collection of quotes from tennis players and commentators, a chapter on “The Feminine Mystique” reveals some of the ways that female tennis players have negotiated being a female athlete:

- Why should I have to look ugly just because I’m an athlete? (Anna Kournikova, quoted in Fein, 2005, p. 76)
- That’s the one thing women’s tennis has, is femininity. If women looked like men or played like men, it would be boring. I know some women who lift weights ... But even if it would make me stronger, I’d never do it. It’s *important* to look feminine for your self-confidence. I want to be known as a woman, not just a tennis player (Chris Evert, quoted in Fein, 2005, p. 77).

- I prefer to be appreciated for my beauty and other qualities rather than only being seen as a tennis champion (Gabriela Sanatini, quoted in Fein, 2005, p. 78).
- Everyone always looked upon me as the bad guy – as the woman with big muscles. That hurt. (Martina Navratilova, quoted in Fein, 2005, p. 82)
- I never felt like an athlete ... I still thought of women athletes as freaks, and I used to hate myself, thinking I must not be a whole woman. (Chris Evert, quoted in Fein, 2005, p. 81)

The emphasis on femininity that many female athletes share often limits their athletic achievements – they choose not to hit too hard, not to compete too much, not to get too muscular, not to sweat too much. Often, homophobic and stereotypical images of “dykes” and “lesbians” are used (including by fellow female athletes) to keep women in their place by isolating openly gay athletes as freaks or unnatural. “She travels with her girlfriend, she is half a man” (Martina Hingis on openly gay Amelie Mauresmo, quoted in Fein, 2005, p.150). “Female athletes are stereotyped by the general public – and usually as homosexuals. And that is our bond. No, not that we are homosexuals, but that we are stereotyped... All female athletes feel that we are treated unfairly in this regard by the public” (Billie Jean King, cited in Fein, 2005, p. 151). So while what is in some ways breaking down traditional, dichotomous definitions of sex often reinforce such definitions as well. The contradictory message that young girls often receive is that they are supposed to be strong and athletic, but not so strong and athletic that they threaten the “natural” dichotomy of male/female.

## ***Adolescent Girls, Identity and the Martial Arts***

In our culture, there is a popular sentiment that adolescent (and perhaps younger “tween” and “pre-teen”) girls are facing a period of “crisis.” The prevalence of eating disorders, depression, and low self-esteem among teenage girls are often cited as symptoms of the problem, which is attributed either to individual disorders or to cultural influences, in particular the images contained in the mass media. A common observation is that the onset of many of these problems occurs in adolescence, when there is a conflict between the person the girl has been or wants to be and who they are “supposed to become” as adults.

Compared with boys of the same age, adolescent girls are more anxious and stressed, experience diminished academic achievement, suffer from increased depression and lower self-esteem, experience more body dissatisfaction and distress over their looks, suffer from greater numbers of eating disorders, and attempt suicide more frequently (Johnson, Roberts, & Worell, 1999). While acknowledging the reality of these problems in the lives of adolescent girls, this research aimed to look not specifically at the problems girls face, but at how girls successfully navigate their relationships and sense of self in adolescence within social contexts. “It is all too tempting to categorize adolescents in general, and adolescent girls in particular, by listing the multiple problems facing them and assuming that these form accurate images or themes.... We see girls today creating a new and different definition of strength... We see this new generation of adolescent girls as strong and as looking for new ways to be women” (Johnson & Roberts, 1999, pp 4-5).

This current research looks more closely at how young girls, at a time in their lives when they are supposed to be “becoming women,” understand what it means to be

female in our society. While acknowledging the ways that girls “look for new ways to be women”, I believe this work also shows how this process of identity development is both enabled and limited by social factors. Identity here is looked at as the practice of these girls – what they do – as well as their reflection on these practices (when in fact they do stop to think about it). This is seen as a dialectical process, where individual agency is recognized within the social, historical, and cultural setting of which it is a part. Thus, identity is never complete.

Adolescence is believed to be an important time in this process of becoming. This is not to say that identity only develops during adolescence; it is of course a life long process. It seems, however, that in our society much pressure is placed on our teenagers to determine “who they are” and who they will become. During this time, young boys and girls must consider who they are and what their role is in society. El'konin (1971) developed a stage theory of development that consisted of “dominant activities” at each stage. According to his theory,

... a special activity emerges and develops in adolescence, an activity that consists in the establishment of intimate personal relations between adolescents. This activity has been termed the activity of social contact... [The] formation of the adolescent personality is greatly influenced by the formation of relations within the peer group ... Thus we begin the formation of self-reflective awareness on the part of the child, his self consciousness as ‘social consciousness diverted inward’ (Vygotsky)... This, in turn, permits the emergence of new motives and objectives that direct the child's own activity toward the future and along the channels of education and career. (El'konin 1971)

According to El'konin, then, adolescents, through their interactions with their peers, begin to reflect upon their own selves in a new way. This reflection on their own selves allows for activity that is focused on the future of the individual, specifically their education and career. The emergence of an understanding of the self must come from interaction with others – not from within the individual. This is a different approach than one that states that one's internal characteristics, personality, or essence determine one's identity. As in Vygotsky's theory, the psychology of the individual (intrapersonal) emerges from activity that is first interpersonal.

In the APA's review of research on adolescent girls, several authors report common shortcomings of psychological research on adolescent girls. Like much psychological research, research on adolescent girls has looked at girls without considering the greater contexts within which they live. This research leads to assumptions about individual girls (using concepts such as resilience) that fail to see the relational aspect of identity. Finally, much of this research is done on White, middle class girls and then generalizes findings to all girls, ignoring differences between and within various racial, ethnic, cultural and socioeconomic groups (Johnson, Roberts, & Worell, 1999).

It is important to keep in mind that within the cultural framework described so far, which stresses certain characteristics as masculine and others feminine, gender is performed and negotiated differently by individual women. The picture we have drawn so far about women is further complicated when we consider differences in race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality. Due to an under-representation of women of color in psychological research, for example, it is unclear how stereotypical images of males and

females are negotiated among different populations. When studies do address the lives of these women, they are often treated as one group (e.g. minorities, women of color) or broken down into smaller groups (Black, Latina, Asian, Native American) that ignore the significant differences among the cultures lumped together (Consider, for example, the differences between Chinese and Filipino immigrants, both of which are often lumped together under the category “Asian”), and the heterogeneous nature of groups in general. A lack of research can also lead to an acceptance of popular perceptions (such as of African American women as strong and independent) that mask other issues (such as the prevalence of certain mental health issues among African American women). Research done with diverse populations must be sensitive to the social and cultural contexts, including relationships within and among groups and cultures.

In the work on adolescent girls and identity, there is a strong need for more work that addresses girls of color. This must be done in a way that honors the differences among these girls (both as individuals and as members of groups that share certain characteristics). Too often, research done with White, middle class girls is generalized to all adolescent girls. Research has shown that this can lead to misleading and erroneous assumptions about girls. (Johnson & Roberts, 1999; Ohye & Henderson Daniel, 1999; Vasquez & de las Fuentes 1999).

It is within the framework of activity theory that we can look at the world or martial arts as a context for adolescent girls of diverse background to develop their understanding of what it is to be female in our society. Much has been written about the difficulties of being an adolescent girl. Some researchers point to this time as a period where girls have to negotiate between their “true selves” or the person they have been,

and a “false self” or the person they must now be. The need for negotiation comes largely from external messages – messages about what it means to be a female adult in our society (Pipher, 1994). The challenge is to avoid “essentialist” conceptualizations of the self or gender, that assume some underlying “natural” or “true” self that is free from performance and negotiations. Instead, we can acknowledge the difficulty girls face in negotiating the messages they receive about what women are “supposed to be” and who they want or believe to be.

Psychologists point to the media, to cultural norms and values, to family and to friends as the various sources of these messages. These messages tell girls that to be female is to be nice, to think of others before they think of themselves, to take care of others emotionally, while at the same time being cared for and protected physically. Girls who challenge this too much are often faced with having their femininity questioned (Dowling, 2000). Others display alternate forms of aggression (sometimes called indirect or relational aggression), such as bullying and verbally taunting other girls, while still remaining “nice” and “friendly” from the perspective of adults (Brown, Way, & Duff, 1999; Simmons, 2002).

It is important to stress the relational aspect of identity development. “Physical and cognitive development during adolescence brings girls into a radically different relationship with themselves, their families, their peers, and the world around them... [T]he rules of relationships that they once understood are transformed by their entrance into a social world dominated by heterosexual dating” (Debold, Brown, Weseen, & Brookins, 1999, pp. 186-187). From a bodily perspective, Grosz (1994) discusses how the gap between the ideal body image presented from society and the individual’s body

image developed from the experiences and activity of the individual within social activities becomes strikingly obvious in adolescence. Young girls internalize an observer's perspective of self, which creates viewing the body as an object to be looked at (another way that identity is always relational). This reflects not only the physical ideals of how the body should look, but also the primacy of form over function revealed in the two quotes below of women reflecting on their changing awareness of their bodies:

The body that was once an ally in exploring and engaging the world becomes in adolescence an adversary that must be forced into submission to an artificial appearance standard (Scott & Derry, 2005, p. 191).

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As a child, the physical activity I was involved in was always to help me improve my agility, strength and skills. But now in college, my exercise is always an attempt to change something on my body. I have been working against my body, trying to change its natural appearance, instead of working with it as an ally (Ibid., 192-3).

While adolescence has been stressed as a phase of problems and crises for adolescent girls, it is important to note the resilience and strength of girls in dealing with the contradictions they face. We have already seen that girls suffer more academically, psychologically and socially than boys. And yet, across cultural groups, adolescent girls hold more flexible and liberal attitudes than boys about the rights and roles of women (Johnson, Roberts & Worell, 1999). Researchers have begun to stress that despite many of these difficulties, adolescent girls demonstrate a great deal of resilience and achievement during this period (see Johnson, Roberts & Worell, 1999 for examples).

The challenge remains to look at resilience as a social and relational concept, and not as a characteristic of an individual. In other words, what situations, social structures and experiences allow for behavior that can be considered resilient? In addition, it is necessary to study the lives of girls in context, to understand how expectations from the dominant culture relate to family and cultural values and realities, to understand how girls of different racial, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds experience adolescence, and to empower girls with more say in the development of the environments and institutions of which they are apart (Debold et al. 1999; Vasquez & de las Fuentes, 1999).

### ***Girls and Sport***

There has been much research touting the benefits of sports in the lives of young men and women. For girls especially, sports can be a space for young people to explore aspects of their identity that are otherwise discouraged. “Activities that involve challenge, effort, and concentration, such as sports, appear to be very beneficial for girls self-image and for developing non traditional gender role traits” (Basow & Rubin, 1999, p 43).

Research has shown that participation in sports by girls can help to reach short-term goals such as improving appearance as well as long-term goals such as an increase in energy, psychological well being and self-efficacy (Women’s Sports Foundation, 2008).

Participation in some sports can serve as a buffer against negative feelings about ones body type (Basow & Rubin, 1999). There are some 2.8 million high school girls that participate in organized sports of some kind; these girls have been shown to have less incidences of alcohol and drug use and teenage pregnancy while enjoying higher school grades and self confidence (Adams, Schmitke, & Franklin, 2005).

Research also shows, however, that despite efforts such as Title IX, women continue to lag behind men in participation rates, and more girls than boys drop out in adolescence (Scott & Derry, 2005). This has led to research focused specifically on studying what motivates girls to participate in physical activity (for example, see Higgins and Oldenburg 2003). Once again, many efforts to increase girls' participation are limited in their focus on individualized factors (efficacy, motivation) rather than broader social circumstances. Historically, we have seen how different ideas about women, as well as different material circumstances have led to different levels and types of participation by women in activities labeled as "masculine."

The lack of participation by women shows that the world of sport is not immune from the stereotypes and ideologies that keep women from seeing themselves as strong, powerful figures in the world, that places women as objects of gaze rather than active agents in the world:

A ... fundamental obstacle is the way women are alienated from their bodies by a gender system in which femininity is displayed through rigorous appearance maintenance and modification, self-conscious posture and gesture, and clothing that invites the gaze but limits freedom of movement. (Scott & Derry, 2005, p. 188)

In fact, sports can in some ways magnify the stereotypical differences between men and women, as a space where the ideology of male power has been enacted and in some cases worshiped, especially when sports are segregated by gender (McDonagh & Pappano, 2007). "With the exception of the military, sports is the most masculine, male-identified institution in the United States, and from its inception, it has been a closely

cultivated arena for males to demonstrate their privilege and power” (Adams, Schmitke, & Franklin, 2005, p 17).

Some research has shown that participation in certain sports (such as boxing, wrestling, weightlifting and oriental martial arts) can lead to increased levels of antisocial behavior and aggression, especially in adolescent boys (Rowe, 1998, Endresen & Olweus, 2005). The researchers in one study attribute these increases to practice in “power” and “strength” sports (where there is a high level of physical contact and/or a value in physical strength) as well as from repeated contact with macho attitudes, norms and ideals (Endresen & Olweus, 2005). Journalistic accounts of male athletes also point to a high level of value placed on aggressiveness and toughness (Messner, 1990).

Considering the role of sports as a “temple” of masculine values, it is not surprising that female athletes face obstacles when they attempt to participate. Although strides have been made with legislation such as Title IX, it is clear that we have a long way to go to allow for equal participation in the arena of sports. From my own experience, both as an athlete/martial artist and as a researcher, I believe that several key barriers remain, including the symbolic role of sport as masculine, stereotypes of women as lacking athletic skills, lack of support (financially, physically, and emotionally), beliefs that they are the physically weaker sex, equipment and settings being male dominated, messages about gender “appropriate” sports and the lower status of “feminine” sports, pressure to be “feminine,” less coverage of female athletes and programs in media, gender-stereotyped coverage, the emphasis on heterosexuality in sport, emphasis on sexual attractiveness and the stereotypes of female athletes as “unattractive,” “masculine,” and “dykes” (the appearance of being strong is often seen as

undesirable for women), the importance of “masculine” emotions that are associated with sport, negative responses and of and sexual harassment by male athletes and trainers/coaches, and the different ways boys and girls are taught to approach things (ex. bravado vs. modesty).

When we look beyond the obstacles to cases of girls’ participation in sports within the broader framework of our culture, we can see the limitations of participation in sports. Brown’s discussion of Bourdieu’s writing on gender and power (2006) points out that participation in strength related activities (such as sports and the martial arts) that have traditionally been associated with masculinity can both challenge and strengthen patterns of male domination. Research that has looked at how girls negotiate their participation in sports with their identity as females reveals that as they gain access to sports, girls often adopt values and ideas that keep them from looking critically at the restrictions they faced. Consider, for example, research that shows how girls adopt a belief in meritocracy – so that females’ lack of participation is not due to social inequalities but a lack of effort on an individual’s part (Cole & Hribar, 1995; Cooky & McDonald, 2005; Helstein, 2003). Also important to consider is how girls often deal with balancing being feminine and being an athlete – as if the two were somehow mutually exclusive (Adams, Schmitke & Franklin, 2005; Heywood & Dworkin, 2003; Royce, Gebelt, & Duff, 2001). In addition, female athletes face the same dangers as their male counterparts – viewing (and abusing) the body as “machine,” the stress and social impact of competition, over-exhaustion, violence, and the devaluing of traditionally “feminine” traits (such as collaboration, humility, concern for others or oneself). Despite these

limitations, however, we see strides made as new role models emerge and more girls question the balancing act they are forced to perform.

Adams, Schmitke, and Franklin (2005) found that some girls adopt labels such as tomboys to negotiate their participation in sport. The term tomboy does not have the same derogatory connotation (for these girls) as being called a dyke or a lesbian, but at the same time allows them to display stereotypically male characteristics associated with athletics (such as competitiveness, strength, anger, and aggression). Such negotiations strengthen homophobic attitudes and the “normalcy” of heterosexuality. Others negotiate their participation in sports with their feminine identity by playing up their feminine appearance with beauty products such as makeup and hair accessories. Research that has looked at how female athletes develop gender identity often reflect and reinforce this negotiation process by framing the issue in terms of being “both feminine and athletic.”

Lawler (2002) looks specifically at combat sports as a space where girls and women can redefine what it means to be female by transforming who they are. Relying on her own experience as a martial artist as well as interviews with women from sports ranging from ice hockey to rugby to boxing, Lawler points out that the story of women participating in “aggressive” sports is not one story, but many stories, some of which emphasize underlying feminist ideals, but many others which others do not. What is key for Lawler’s work is an underlying spirit of defiance in their participation – a lack of regard for what it typically means to be female – and a positive transformation of the self, attributed to liberation and empowerment. For some of these women, female athletes that use tools such as make-up and hair accessories to negotiate femininity and athleticism undermine the “seriousness” of female athletes (Heywood 1999).

In their exploration of female athletes as cultural icons, Heywood and Dworkin (2003) explore the tensions between feminist ideas and female athletes, as the participation by women in stereotypically male arenas is negotiated. In their discussion, the authors (and athletes) reveal how sports can become spaces where gendered identities are contested, and traditional, oppressive systems of racism, sexism and homophobia are both challenged and reinforced in different ways. What is important to keep in mind is that the value of sport, as a social practice that is enacted and reenacted, must be questioned for both male and female participants. Arguments over how athletes perform and how they should perform do not have easy resolutions. Should women participate in sports in the same way as men, or is this merely adopting the same harmful and aggressive practices that (some) feminist fight against? Is it beneficial for women to explore “feminine” modes of participation, or another way to merely limit one’s participation? Can participation in sports such as bodybuilding and weightlifting (and martial arts) serve as a form of political activism? “Sport, like any social practice, can be rethought and reconstructed” (p 49). “[W]e need to move beyond the ‘sport is great for girls’ model and confront some of the darker realities . . . that are part of the sports world” (p 53). It is only through the reflective, collaborative work of those who participate in the world of sport that the potentials of female participation can be realized.

In “Heroines of Sport: The Politics of Difference and Identity,” Hargreaves (2000) explored how participation in sport by *groups* of women served to challenge systems of oppression and create new national identities. The creation of organizations and women’s leagues in sports ranging from soccer to basketball to rugby allow women to collectively challenge gender roles. The recognition that participation in sports by

women has some power<sup>8</sup> in challenging traditional gender roles can be seen in the women's international sport movement discussed by Hargreaves. Again, we must keep in mind the shortcomings of the movement so far (e.g. the lack of participation by all women and the systematic inequality in resources and freedoms by race, class, and ethnicity).

Research in the field of social learning theory has shown that self-efficacy, or one's beliefs about one's capabilities at a given task, can have real effects on the performance of that perceived task. Several studies have explored how self-efficacy and physical self-concept are correlated with positive health benefits for girls (Dishman et al., 2006, Kitsantas & Zimmerman 2000). It is not surprising, then, that if girls do not believe that they are capable of the same level of performance as boys, they will limit their own performance. If we can address these issues within sports practices, then we can increase the potential for higher performance of female participants. The challenge, again, is to do so without seeing self-efficacy (or resilience) as an individual trait rather than a relational characteristic.

### ***Beyond Sport: Martial Arts***

The popular conception of the martial arts is that they are preeminently concerned with techniques of self-defense; I believe they are even more concerned with questions of self-definition. (Donahue, 1994, p. 12)

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<sup>8</sup> The phrase "some power" is used here to highlight not only the potential of sports to challenge gender roles, but also the limitations. While female athletes have challenged certain stereotypes (i.e. women as passive) they have not challenged all (i.e. men as active) nor have they eliminated assumptions about differences (i.e. men are more active/powerful/athletic/strong than women).

The martial arts are a collection of practices that fall at the same time within and outside of the realm of sport. Like sports, participation in the martial arts has been credited with various benefits for youth, including increased cognitive self-regulation, affective self-regulation, prosocial behavior, improved classroom conduct, and better performance on a mental math test (Lakes & Hoyt, 2004). Some research has found that continued participation in martial arts has led to lower reported aggressive behaviors (Nosanchuk 1981; Skelton et al., 1991), a reduction in hostility levels (Daniels & Thornton, 1992) and more negative attitudes towards violent conflict resolution as compared to participation in wrestling and boxing (Bjorkqvist & Varhama, 2001). As a result, the martial arts have also been suggested as a means for violence prevention in schools (Mastrostefano-Curran, 2004). In addition to decreased aggression and hostility, researchers have reported stronger self-image (Duthie, Hope, & Barker 1978), higher self-reliance and independence scores, and lower levels of anxiety (Kurian et al., 1994), and higher levels of responsibility and tolerance (Madden, 1995) in more advanced students of the martial arts.

In his exploration of Tae Kwon Do as a psychologically beneficial activity for children, Law (2004) made a point to differentiate between traditional and modern programs. It is interesting to note that many of the benefits found in studies of the martial arts are present only when training is more traditional (containing a philosophical component). In studies comparing traditional training with more modern training (with little or no philosophical emphasis), researchers found that students involved in modern training demonstrated a significant increase in aggressive fantasies and delinquent tendencies (Zivin et al, 2000). This differentiation falls in line with our distinction here

between martial arts as more than sport (although there has been, arguably, a move towards more sports oriented and less traditional practices in many schools).

Also interesting to note is that in some cases where male students develop lower opinions of aggressive behavior, female participants demonstrated a more positive attitude towards violent conflict resolution than the comparison group (Bjorkqvist & Varhama, 2001). Although it is not completely clear why this is the case, it is likely that the exploration of aggression and violence within the martial arts takes different paths for men, who have learned to value aggression and violence as a demonstration of toughness and women, who have learned that aggression and violence are to be avoided if one wants to be seen as a “lady.”

Although many specific martial arts practices (especially those labeled by some researchers as ‘modern’) are leaning in the direction of sport and competition- with participation in the Olympics, emphasis on point sparring, and popular competitions such as *The Ultimate Fighter* - the tradition, history and emphasis on philosophical components of training (derived from traditions such as Confucianism and Buddhism) separate the martial arts from sport.

Perhaps the most important aspect of martial arts for our purposes is the status of the martial arts as a self-defining activity. For anthropologist and martial artist Donahue (1994), it is this aspect that overshadows the role of both physical technique and methods of self – defense:

The martial arts can, on one level, supply people with at least the illusion of control over violence through a system which has formally codified combat techniques. At the same time, the modern martial arts contain within them a

sophisticated ideological system which offers practitioners a sense of place and purpose, a rationale for living and a moral code to guide action. The popular conception of the martial arts is that they are preeminently concerned with techniques of self-defense; I believe they are even more concerned with questions of self-definition. (Donahue,1994, p. 12)

Rosenberg & Sapochnik (2003) make a similar claim in their comparison of the martial arts to psychoanalysis: “When practitioners are asked why they have taken up martial arts, a typical answer is that they originally wished to develop self-confidence, but they eventually found that confidence did not come from the acquisition of technique, but from insights into their own nature - their fear, selfishness, as well as courage and determination” (p. 452). It is the status of martial arts as a self-defining activity that offers an interesting position in the lives of girls, and it is the strong emphasis on both mind and body (philosophy and technique) that accounts for this status.

As a tradition, the martial arts are bursting with contradictions. Students learn how to fight in order not to fight, emphasis is placed on “standing still while moving,” ancient philosophies interact with modern realities, and tensions exist between humility and confidence. I believe that it is the presence of these contradictions, in part, that allows for such promise for female practitioners. Keeping in mind the framework of activity theory, we can see how it is exactly these contradictions that allow for both learning and development, as they challenge us to develop new ways of performing ourselves in everyday life.

According to the philosophical roots of the martial arts, “enlightenment” (or self knowledge) must acknowledge the fundamental, very real physicality of our existence.

Just as Western society has so often left the body behind in its search for “humanity” (“I think, therefore I am”), it is believed, according to the mythology of the martial arts, that the ancient Chinese monks had stressed the spiritual at the expense of the physical. And so we get to the essence of the martial arts, which were (according to some accounts) developed in China to counteract the neglect of the body.

While it is difficult to define or determine exactly what constitutes a martial art, there is an agreement among many scholars and practitioners that any activity that claims to be a martial art must unite the philosophical and the martial or corporeal. The stress that martial artists place on the “martial” relies less on the ability to defeat an enemy in battle (if this were so, the effectiveness of martial arts would have been determined minuscule long ago) than on the connection between knowing one’s mind and knowing one’s body in order to gain control over one’s self. If we move too far away from the “art” in martial arts, we are left with merely fighting; if we move too far away from the “martial,” we are left with merely philosophy. At the root of all martial arts is the fundamental contradiction of learning to fight in order to not fight – of learning to destroy in order to create. This requires a learning that is both physical and mental simultaneously (although there are times when one is stressed, voluntarily or involuntarily, more so than the other). In order to understand how the ancient social practices of the Eastern martial arts have come to be acted and re-enacted (created and re-created) in contemporary Western culture in such a way that it is meaningful for the young girls of this research, we must look more closely at what the martial arts are.

Despite the differences between and among the various disciplines, there are certain underlying philosophical principles that underlie the martial arts as a whole.

Acknowledging the various amounts of emphasis schools and disciplines place on the martial arts, the present research focuses on those which can be considered more traditional, which place a good deal of emphasis on the philosophical foundations. Research has shown the importance of traditional aspects such as kata (predetermined steps in a specific sequence) or meditation in training sessions for the improvement of personality traits such as self-control acquisition for young boys (Reynes & Lorant, 2004).

Considering the role of the martial arts as a self-defining activity, these principles are essential to the process of identity development for the practitioners. It is especially interesting to note that these philosophies correlate with many of the ideas we have explored already in our discussion of identity.

Perhaps the most important principle of the martial arts in terms of identity formation is the emphasis placed on character development. A review of literature on the martial arts, or even a review of popular martial arts films reveals an almost mystical perception of the discipline and self-control of martial artists. Suino outlines three major types of strength important in modern bushido<sup>9</sup> - physical strength, strength of technique, and character strength (as cited in Donahue, 2004, p. 238). This emphasis of character development in the martial arts is related to the underlying warrior mythology that permeates much of the history of martial arts. This mythology emphasizes the development of personality traits through physical and technique training. Consider, for

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<sup>9</sup> According to Clark (1996), bushido, literally translated "Way of the Warrior," developed in Japan between the Heian and Tokugawa Ages (9th-12th century). It was a code and way of life for Samurai, and has been incorporated into the disciplines of the martial arts, especially those originating in Japan.

example, the 5 tenets of the Tae Kwon Do, which were adapted from ancient warrior codes: Courtesy, Integrity, Perseverance, Self Control, and Indomitable Spirit.

The fact that the development of character within the martial arts is dependent upon the physical training of the participants also speaks to the relationship between the mind and body that is so prevalent in the martial arts. In line with the activity theory framework discussed earlier, the philosophies of the martial arts see the relationship between the mind and body as dialectical. This dialectical relationship is not only emphasized in the interactions between mind and body, but also in the nature of the world. Concepts such as ying/yang (om/yang in Korean) emphasize balance and dynamics in the world – between nature and man, man and woman, hard and soft. Understanding these components as interrelated and dependent on each other rather than as dichotomous opposites shows dynamic balance emphasized by the martial arts (although it should be noted that the symbol and concept of the yin/yang also reinforces the “naturalization” of the male/female dichotomy).

It is believed by many martial artists that dedicated physical training over the course of one’s lifetime can lead to a state of being that transcends conscious thought. Keeping in mind the connection between the martial arts and Buddhism, this concept can be likened to a state of enlightenment. In Japanese arts this state is called “mushin” or “no-mind.” The idea behind this term is that with training and developed technique, an advanced practitioner of the martial arts can transcend mental thought during training or combat. The lack of conscious thought necessary to perform during these times can be related very well to the concept of flow discussed earlier. Altered states of time, losing oneself in the activity, and the reliance on previously learned techniques are all

characteristics of both the state of “no-mind” and of flow. These states are the goal of training in the martial arts, and they are only achieved through disciplined training and practice.

That these states of “no mind” are both difficult to achieve and fleeting shows how the practice of training in the martial arts is meant to be a constant state of becoming. There is no “endpoint” in the martial arts. Although for many observers the point when one earns a black belt is seen as achieving a level of mastery in one’s discipline, for martial artists this point merely marks the beginning of the “real” training. At any moment in ones training, there is an immeasurable path ahead. The adage that “the more you learn, the more you realize how little you know” is perfectly applicable to the world of martial arts. Referring back once again to the role of conflict in development, improvement in the martial arts comes from conflicts between different aspects of the practice (conflicts within the body, between the self and others, between philosophical ideas and practice), as well as from periods of engagement and immersion.

For many, training in the martial arts is so important because it explicitly emphasizes this fundamental process of becoming. As Donahue points out in his exploration of martial arts training in Western society, perceptions about “masculinity” and “femininity” are often central, and often influence beliefs and public perceptions of the martial arts:

Dojo are filled with young men, for instance, who perceive the martial arts as a gateway to enhanced fighting potential. This is a perspective fueled by gender stereotypes in Western society, as well as mass media representations of the martial arts. Certainly the physical aspect of these arts as it relates to self-defense

is an element of attraction for either sex--for both men seeking power and young women seeking empowerment. While the practical utility of such arts in any but the most skilled hands is debatable, the public perception persists that they are a viable means of combating violence. (Donahue, 1994, p. 119)

This research emphasizes the specificity and uniqueness of individual lives. As mentioned earlier, however, the overlapping commonalities shared by individuals in our world provide similar circumstances, potentials and resources that are important to explore, especially if we want to understand how individuals navigate their lives. Although the following discussion attempts to outline some common themes of experience shared by female martial artists in today's society, it is not meant to undermine the heterogeneity of female martial artists as a group. In fact, even the discussion of female martial artists as one group is acknowledged as an analytical tool rather than the reflection of a unified group that exists and acts as a whole.

That being said, there are certain commonalities shared by many female martial artists that warrants using the term as an analytical frame. These commonalities are demonstrated by the existence of formal organizations and institutions such as the *National Women's Martial Arts Federation*, which "exists to promote the involvement of women and girls in the martial arts," *The Association of Women Martial Arts Instructors*, and schools of various disciplines dedicated to teaching females.

Several works have been published in recent years examining, from the point of view of female martial artists, on the role of training in their lives. These works vary from individual autobiographies, to collections of interviews, to structured explorations into training oneself and other women in the martial arts. Hoppe (1998), Wiley (1992), Siegel

(1993) and Atkinson (1983) all tell the stories of various female martial artists, including themselves, using interviews and biographical texts. In *Without Apology: Girls, Women and the Desire to Fight*, Cohen (2005) writes about her exploration of the role of boxing in the lives of teen girls through her own participation in the sport. Lawler has written several books on training women in the martial arts (Lawler 1998, 2001; Lawler & Kamienski, 2007) as well as *PUNCH! Why Women Participate in Violent Sports* (2002), which attempts to explain some of the reasons why women have become attracted to violent sports in recent times. These are just a few of the titles available to women interested in training in the martial arts. These works reveal that while each woman is unique in their reasons for training and persevering in the martial arts, there are some commonalities that can be used as informative points for this research. The following discussion reveals some common themes found in the works, which display the variety of experiences, beliefs and attitudes of female martial artists.

There are various reasons why women begin training in the martial arts (and other contact sports), but many become replaced by an intrinsic interest in the practice itself. Women who start training with a friend or partner often remain training even after the other leaves. An addiction and strong loyalty to one's training and discipline in the martial arts is evident in female practitioners, just as with their male counterparts. Once they have begun training, many women report a deep connection to the community and camaraderie offered by the martial arts. Often, there is a referring to the gym (dojo, dojang) as "home." Developing a sense of self is an important aspect of the martial arts for many women.

Reading accounts of female martial arts reveals the importance not only of learning how to physically defend oneself, but also the essential belief and sense that the self is something worth defending. While many men study the martial arts in order to learn how to fight, most women learn in order to not fight. Many female practitioners value the spiritual connection between the mind and body. This includes a sense of worth of one's body as part of self, as well as the emphasis on the mind in practices such as meditation. As one woman expressed on a website dedicated to female martial artists - "I want my body to be useful." (Terilyn). The martial arts have become a medium for women to deal with violence against women, through self-defense and physical training. Within the martial arts, the awareness and importance of issues regarding violence against women may or may not be connected with other political movements. Consider the following statement, taken from the NWMAF website, which reveals how political ideals and values are explicated in the statement of the organization:

All women are welcome regardless of lifestyle, sexual preference, race, color, creed, religion, class, age, or physical condition. We cherish martial arts as a path of self-discovery and transformation and as a means of transforming ourselves and the world in which we live. We find strength in each other's challenges and promote an awareness and appreciation of our differences. (NWMAF)

While some women find very strong connections to feminists' movements, others resent the mention of such connections. Especially important to note is the many different meanings feminism can have for different women (For a more complex dealing with feminism and sports, see Heywood & Dworkin, 2001, and Hargreaves, 2000). Problems and difficulty with traditional gender roles and values associated with women lead many

women to redefine the ways we define women and womanhood, through participation in practices usually not associated with women. Many women reflect on the inequality of training and/or competitions between men and women. For these women, setting equal standards for oneself (as compared to standards set for men) is important.

The encouragement of a master/instructor often plays an important role in women's participation in the martial arts (For some, the emphasis is not competition with others, but development of self, while for others, competition is valued as a useful tool in training). This has led, for many women, to the choice to train with a female instructor rather than a male. In their stories, many women share experiences of relationships with strong female role models growing up and later within the martial arts. The hierarchical and patriarchal aspect of martial arts difficult for many women. This has led to the formation of several organizations and schools dedicated to female participants in the martial arts.

As would be expected, there is a huge variability in the perceived difficulty of the techniques and practices as women train in the martial arts. Many women experience difficulty (for themselves or others) in getting beyond the talented women "as exception" mentality. Many discuss the practice of belittling females' training and/or ability within the discipline – both by males and more experienced/accomplished females. (When such discrimination comes from other women, it can possibly be understood in terms of Freire's (1970) concept of "horizontal discrimination.")

Mariette Pan, a 12-year veteran and a second degree black belt in Tang Soo Do (Korean karate), shares that whenever she visits a new school, men tend to

underestimate her abilities. They would be somewhat condescending, holding back their techniques and ‘taking it easy. (Chang, n.d.)

The martial arts, as a social practice, 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 (especially 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. By looking at how girls construct and perform their identity within the Tae Kwon Do school, we can see how the martial arts can serve as a potential space for challenging and redefining the “naturalized” male/female dichotomy that has placed men as dominant over women.

### **III. Methods: Exploring the relationship between martial arts and identity**

It was both the potential and limitations of Tae Kwon Do as an empowering force in the lives of girls that drew me to this research. Watching female students, young and old alike, negotiate the activities of Tae Kwon Do and the definitions of femininity in our society, I began to wonder what types of practices could be implemented by martial arts schools to allow for a broader range of possibilities for girls. It was this desire that informed much of my decisions and methods. This is seen most clearly my decision to implement new activities and tools with the girls, not just to (try to) assess what has already been going on. My research, therefore, looks at moments during the research process as well as moments prior to the research as sites of identity building.

In deciding what activities and tools to introduce and implement with the girls, a major challenge was negotiating the relationship between mind and body. The theoretical foundations discussed in previous chapters place a strong emphasis on the physical and material aspects of identity. Approaching the topic from an academic perspective, which stresses language and ideology (at times even at the expense of the body), at first seemed to me a contradiction.

Two issues relating to identity and the mind/body relationship helped me to resolve, at least in my mind, this difficulty. First is the often-overlooked fact that mind and body are never completely separate. Language, as abstract and fleeting as it sometimes seems, has a material existence in the world. In the martial arts world this is

perhaps most clear with the “ki-hap” or scream, which at some moments demands a recognition of its physical presence (such as in sparring or breaking) in both the person doing the screaming and those listening. Keeping this in mind, using language as a means of reflecting on and developing identity did not seem contradictory.

The second issue that helped to resolve the difficulty I initially faced when using language to reflect on and communicate corporeal realities is the importance of language in constructing identity in our society. Although it is “the possession of a body image that anchors and sustains our sense of identity” (Eakin, 1999, p. 11), it is the introduction of narration about the self that works to develop memory and an extended sense of self over time: “narrative is not merely a literary form but a mode of phenomenological and cognitive self-experience, while self – the self of autobiographical discourse – does not necessarily precede its constitution in narrative” (p. 100). Considering the necessity of language use when producing and performing identity through narratives, it no longer seems problematic to approach the body and self using language.

It was in this spirit that I decided to introduce the use of life stories (writing, reading, analyzing, and sharing) to the girls as a means of reflecting on their identity and continuing to develop and construct themselves as strong, powerful individuals. Since one’s personal narrative and identity come into existence through interactions with others, identity begins and remains relational. Therefore, it made sense to work not only as individuals, but to include a group component as well.

## ***Research Questions and Objectives***

Unlike some of the studies mentioned earlier (Enderson & Olweus 2005; Law 2004; Zivin et al 2001), which either praise martial arts as beneficial for young people or denounce participation in these activities as increasing unfavorable characteristics such as aggression or violence, the proposed research aims to look at both the potentials and limitations of the martial arts to afford young females possibilities for developing strength, power and agency. Like researchers such as Cooky and McDonald (2005) and Adams, Schmitke, and Franklin (2005), the proposed work will look more closely at the specific lives of young girls to see how they make meaning out of their participation. It is not meant to explore cause-effect relationships, nor does it separate the practices of the martial arts from the lives of the participants. Instead, it is meant to explore how girls actively perform who they are within the framework of training in the martial arts – how they use the tools available to them to create a shared activity while at the same time being shaped by (and shaping themselves within) the very activity they are creating.

In Stebbins' (2001) work on “serious leisure,” such activities (and I would argue that martial arts is one) provide participants with a venue for self-definition and transformation. In addition to exploring this ongoing performance of the self, my research aimed to direct and transform the participation of young girls in order to better facilitate the development of reflective and analytical strategies among and within the girls themselves. The goal is not to merely observe or identify variables within the participants, but to participate in the ongoing transformation of a historical activity in order to best recognize the potentials for developing strength, power, and physical agency in young girls.

My research also aimed to look at the relationship between all of the factors previously discussed - the social, political and cultural relationships between gendered persons in our society, the growing practice of martial arts within our society, and the importance of identity formation in adolescent girls – as they are navigated in the everyday actions of young girls who are currently training in the martial arts. Unlike the growing accounts of women in the martial arts, this research looks specifically at how *adolescent* girls negotiate their developing sense of self with their participation in the martial arts. Also unlike previous accounts, the present research places this exploration within a framework of ongoing activity, looking at the role of contradiction (as revealed in epiphonic moments) and engagement (as revealed within movements of flow) within these activity systems, and implement strategies to help the girls individually and in a group reflect on and critically evaluate their participation.

Borrowing from Brown's discussion of Bourdieu's writing on gender and power (2006), this work recognizes that participation in strength related activities (such as sports and the martial arts) that have traditionally been associated with masculinity can both challenge and strengthen patterns of male domination. Several researchers have begun to look at how participation in sports provides such paradoxical opportunities. Cooky and McDonald (2005), Helstein (2003), and Cole and Hribar (1995), for example, each explore how young girls' participation in sports has been constructed partially by corporations such as Nike, which proposes normalized images of female athletes, emphasizing individual efforts and desire rather than social conditions and ideologies as the keys to females' success. Perspectives such as these can increase the pressure to adapt

to normalized images of female athletes, which reinforce White, middle class, (hetero)sexualized norms (Schultz, 2004), which is especially difficult to do in traditionally male dominated sports such as boxing and weightlifting (Brace-Govan, 2004, Lafferty & McKay, 2004). Lack of success in sport is seen as a lack in individual ability or desire rather than resulting from social and political structures (or interactions between individuals and social structures). This is especially true when concepts of athleticism and femininity are seen as separate (albeit potentially compatible) characteristics, as they are in work that suggests women can be “both athletic and feminine” (Royce, Gebelt, & Duff, 2001). My research did not aim to see how women negotiate being feminine and athletic, but instead looks at how gendered, embodied selves are constructed (individually and collaboratively) through participation in the social practice of the martial arts.

Keeping in mind the numerous possibilities, both empowering and constraining, resulting from training in the martial arts, there are several key factors worth re-emphasizing here in order to define the question and goals of this work:

- The historical position within dominant ideologies of women and girls as weak, frail, passive, and non-violent/aggressive in relation to men and boys, and the “biological” bias that have led to the acceptance of such relationships as “natural”,
- The embedded historical, social, physical and cultural power relations of men and women that place men as dominant over women,
- The limitations placed on girls both physically and ideologically to develop characteristics associated with strength, power, and aggression,

- The importance of adolescence in the development of identity and gender role identity, especially in terms of the difficulties adolescent girls face in developing identities as strong, independent actors, the higher levels of stress, anxiety, depression and academic underachievement in girls and the role (and limitations) of concepts such as self-efficacy and self esteem in developing strong physical, social, and psychological identities,
- The importance of understanding adolescent girls in terms of their relational activity, and in looking at girls within the contexts of their lives, including looking at girls from diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds,
- The understanding of identity as embodied, constructed, cultural, historical, relational and situational (identity as a constant state of becoming),
- The relationship between individual and group development (i.e. between activities and actions),
- The Martial Arts as an historical practice that has emphasized the development of both the mind and body as one,
- The association between the Martial Arts and masculinity within our culture,
- The potential of sports and martial arts to serve both as a challenge to and an enforcer of traditional dichotomies of masculinity and femininity.

This work looks at how girls, through their participation in the martial arts, construct a sense of self that includes what it means to be a female in our society. This was done while keeping the following facets of the martial arts in mind:

- Emphasis of the mind/body relationship in the understanding of the self,
- Emphasis of challenge/potential in the martial arts training (becoming),

- Traditionally hierarchical distribution of power in the martial arts,
- The stereotypically male aspects of violence, power and aggression associated with the martial arts,
- How the rituals, hierarchies, and discourse of the martial arts school affect the material and ideological experiences of the participants,
- The dynamic relationship of apparently contradictory forces in the martial arts (the importance of balance between opposing forces, i.e. yin yang).

Although these characteristics are an integral part of the activity of martial arts training (and have been for centuries), it is essential to recognize that they are acted and re-enacted by individuals and groups in different ways at different times in different situations. Keeping this in mind, my research looked at the specific tales of girls currently involved in martial arts training, in order to explore:

1. How do girls in the martial arts (as individuals and in groups) construct their identity using the ideological and physical tools that are available to them,
  - a. at different moments, including those of conflict and engagement;
  - b. through specific actions (including physical conditioning, sparring, demonstrations, forms/poomse, meditation, practicing techniques alone and with others, working at the front desk, and training others);
  - c. using specific rituals, rules, philosophies, materials and ideas (including bowing, using the words sir and ma'am, wearing the uniform, and the use of words such as respect, honor, dedication, the work included in this research);  
and

- d. through the social relationships girls are involved with during these actions (with instructors, other students, outside observers, parents) and outside of the school (with parents, peers, siblings, teachers).
2. Categories/themes that emerge from the stories of female practitioners, including:
    - a. the obstacles girls face during their training and what types of strategies they use to address them; and
    - b. the aspects of the girl's experiences, both inside and outside of the school, that influence the possibility to see and feel themselves as capable (strong, powerful, effective), including ethnic and family identities.
  3. How institutional, group, and individual actions constitute the activity of Tae Kwon Do, including:
    - a. how girls can work individually and collaboratively to construct stories that will inform institutional practices;
    - b. how, if at all, the process of writing, watching/reading, and reflecting on self-narratives can facilitate this process; and
    - c. how martial arts schools, as communities and institutions, can foster and encourage dialogues that will encourage and facilitate reflective participation and communication within and among the girls who are a part of them.

## ***Participants***

The participants of this study were 5 adolescent girls (14-16 years old at the time of the research) who were all training, at the start of the research, at the same martial arts school. The girls all attended the same Tae Kwon Do school where I trained, located in Queens, New York. Annie was 15 years old at the start of our work, a junior in high

school. She had been training at the Tae Kwon Do school on and off since June, 2002. Although she was a serious student and a staff member for some time, she was not one of the most senior staff members; her schedule was not as consistent as some of the other girls. Amy<sup>10</sup>, 15 years old at start of our work, had been training since October 2004, right around her 12<sup>th</sup> birthday. Of all the girls, she had spent the most hours at the school as a staff member; she took her schedule and commitment very seriously. At the time of our work, Amy was preparing to move with her family to Connecticut (she has since done so). This was a pivotal time for her, as it meant the end of her training at the school. Yvette, 16 years old, joined Tae Kwon Do in August of 2005. She, next to Amy, spent the most time “working” at the school as a staff member. Because she was fluent in Spanish, Yvette spent a lot of her time doing “front desk stuff,” interacting with the Spanish-speaking parents and students. Although she did not appear to take her own training and commitment as seriously as Amy, Yvette was very dedicated to the students and families at the school. Sisters Madison and Brianna were the last to join the school and were somewhat new to being staff members. Madison, 16 years old at the start of our work, had encouraged her younger sister to join with her during the previous year. She was perhaps most reflective of her training at the school. Convinced by her sister to join, Brianna, 14 years old, was the youngest and perhaps the least “serious” staff member. Despite her having to be convinced to join, Brianna always appeared to be having fun training and spending time with other staff, and took quickly to the training inside the class.

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<sup>10</sup> All names other than my own have been changed

At the time of our work together, the school where we trained was one of 5 schools in Queens owned and run by one “grandmaster.” Each of the 5 schools is run by one “head instructor,” each of whom works closely with the grandmaster, who ultimately is in charge of the curriculum, scheduling, pricing and regulations of the schools. Although there are differences between the schools, there is an underlying shared philosophy and process that guides all of them. This relationship is important to note as the discussion often fluctuated between focusing on the individual school and the overall franchise.

The term junior instructor, within these schools, has two meanings that are important to distinguish here. Junior instructors on one hand are advanced students (training at least 1½ years) who have been identified, and subsequently agreed, to continue their training in the school beyond their 1<sup>st</sup> degree black belt to 2<sup>nd</sup> degree black belt. Because this agreement requires financial as well as time commitments to the school, parents as well as students are involved in situations in which students are not supporting themselves (as was the case with all of the girls). Junior instructor students are allowed to take restricted, more advanced classes and are distinguished from other students by a special red, white and blue uniform.

In addition to junior instructor students, staff members under the age of 16 or 17 are often referred to as “junior instructors,” regardless of their status as a student in the school. Although most (but not all) staff members are also junior instructors, not all junior instructors are staff members. Staff members agree to follow a schedule of assisting at the school (which can mean anything from cleaning, assisting and teaching the classes, handing out flyers, to participating in special events). Although there are

some staff members who are paid for their time, most are not (all staff members do receive discounts on membership fees and equipment at the school). The commitment is seen in some ways part of their training (a key component of martial arts is “giving back” to your school and other, less advanced students). Staff members can also participate in more advanced classes (open only to staff) and are distinguished by a red uniform.

All of the participants in this study are junior instructors in both senses of the word. Not only are they more advanced students at the school, but they also dedicate time to helping out (often coming 3 or more days a week right after school). In this way, we can define all of the participants as “serious” martial artists, each of whom has been training for anywhere from 1-5 years and, at the start of our work, kept a regular schedule of attendance and commitment to the school. A major goal of the research was to use the wealth of experiences of these girls to analyze the practice of martial arts as a resource for young girls in our culture.

Reflecting the diversity of the neighborhood where the school is located, the junior instructors at the school represent a variety of ethnicities. The ethnicities of the girls that participated in this research include Korean (Amy), Filipino/Japanese (Annie), Chinese (2 sisters), and Mexican (Yvette). All of the girls are bilingual, and were either born in the United States or moved here at a young age (before 5 yrs old), so they have attended school in the United States from Kindergarten up. At the time of the research, four of the girls were in high school and one was in middle school.

In order to recruit the girls for the research, I approached them first on an individual basis and asked if they would like to participate. Each of the girls was informed that participation was completely voluntary, and that they were free to end their

participation at any time if they so choose. I also made it clear that their participation in this project has no connection to any way to their standing within the school. Although I have a relationship with all of the girls as an adult student and staff member that presupposes a certain level of respect and authority, I also have a friendly and close enough relationship with each of the girls that assured that their participation was completely voluntary (i.e. they would have felt comfortable saying “no”). I did refrain from approaching several girls initially on my list– one who no longer attended the school and who I was therefore not in contact with and another at the request of the head instructor, who had at the time an unstable relationship with her and her parents. All of the five girls that I did approach were interested and agreed to participate. Only after the girls showed an interest in participating did I ask them and their parents to sign informed consent forms. All of the girls that I approached, along with their parents, agreed to participate and signed consent/assent forms.

Due to the nature of the research, the contributions of the girls within the school could not be fully confidential or anonymous. Other staff members at the school, for example, were aware of the identity of the girls who participated. Within the school, I acted as the spokesperson for the group, so that any suggestions and feedback given to the school (via the head instructor) was seen as coming from the group and not any one individual. Some of the texts produced during these sessions were presented to the school as collaborative work and all of the collaborative suggestions and texts were approved by all of the participants and the researcher (individual work was not shared with the school). In this way, the work was collaborative and participatory. Pseudonyms are used in all written documentations of the work, including this text, to provide some

confidentiality. While this will protect the identity of the girls from audiences outside of the school, the participants and parents were informed that members of the school and family members will likely be able to identify them (especially considering the small # of participants) should they read any written accounts. The participants were given the chance to review my written analysis of the work before it was finalized to assure not only their approval but also the accuracy of the work.

### ***Process***

In developing a research design, I relied on several theoretical perspectives in order to define and justify the methodologies of exploring the issue. First, I relied heavily on activity theory in recognizing that identity is defined as one's ongoing actions and understanding of those actions in a culturally figured world. Fundamental to this understanding is "the idea that human development is based on active transformations of existing environments and creation of new ones achieved through collaborative processes of producing and deploying tools" (Stetsenko, 2005, p. 72). Therefore, the importance of moving between the individual and social plane is continually emphasized, as well as the development and use of tools in the process. In this research, culture is not presented as a static, unified set of beliefs, practices or ideas. "If postmodernism has taught anthropologists [or psychologists] anything definitive, it is that we can no longer conceive of social groups of people with a culture that is clearly bounded and determined, internally coherent, and uniformly meaningful" (Eisenhart, 2001, p. 17).

The participants of this research can be seen as members of numerous cultures, some overlapping, that provide a foundation for individual and group construction of meaning and identity. In this research, we move between the culture of the Tae Kwon Do

school (acknowledging that this culture is not the same for each girl), the collaborative activity of the girls (including the construction and analysis of meaning and experiences within the school), and the individual stories that each girl tells. At the same time, the other cultures that each girl is a part of are acknowledged (school, family, society, neighborhood) as they intertwine with the practices within the school. The purpose of the work is not only to see how these three planes are already interacting to produce identities but also to examine how the introduction of new tools of analysis effect the process, in order to identify and challenge the potentials of the martial arts in the lives of the participants. The role of tools as mediational factors in development, and the importance of dialectical relationships within and among components and systems of activity remain fundamental in the movement between individual and social planes (Vygotsky, 1978; John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996).

A life studies method also aided in the understanding of how individual lives reveal individual processes of identity formation and social ideologies. The goal of utilizing personal and group narratives is to acknowledge the voice(s) of the participants, with which they can reveal how they understand their experiences and construct individual and collective identities. Building on work done by Hargreaves (2000) and others who have studied the meaning of sports in women's lives, this work will "build the analysis around the experiences of the [young] women themselves" (p. 9). In Hargreaves work, "personal biographies are placed within a framework of specific social structures and historical circumstances in an effort to understand the ways in which gender relations in sport cohere with cultural, economic, ideological, political and religious patterns specific to the totality of social relations" (p. 10). In a similar fashion, the narratives of

the participants in this study are placed within the broader framework of Tae Kwon Do as a cultural phenomenon within American society (again keeping in mind the historical ways in which gendered bodies have been afforded and denied power in Western society). I have attempted, as much as possible, to include the words of the girls in the text.

For this research, data was constructed within various contexts— materials published by the school, my own notes and observations, individual girl’s writings and interviews, and collaborative texts and discussions resulting from group sessions. Rather than being determined beforehand, the themes and categories of experience and meaning were identified throughout the process of analyzing the data (and informed by the previous literature on female martial artists), and were then subsequently applied to the analysis, fostering a non-linear, exploratory approach.

Finally, the research shares with participatory action research an assumption that “knowledge is rooted in social relations and [is] most powerful when produced collaboratively through action” (Fine et al, 2003, p. 173). The goal was not to observe the situation of the girls, but to actively participate with them in the process of analyzing and changing their experiences. This approach is taken in order to not only acknowledge the role of myself as a researcher in the process I am studying, but also to embrace and elucidate this role according to my own ideas, beliefs and hopes for the transformation process.

Keeping these perspectives in mind, this research used a two-phase approach. Initially, group work was done with the participants to see how we can understand the participation of girls in the martial arts in order to identify possible sites of change. Group

meetings with the girls were organized with the common goal of exploring their participation in the martial arts in order to identify changes that can be made to help female martial arts students better succeed in their training. I met with the girls a total of 5 times (2 of the girls missed the last meeting) in January and February of 2008. Three of the meetings took place at the school, on Sundays, when no classes were taking place. The other two meetings took place at my apartment so that we could watch a DVD together. The meetings were structured, with clear goals and objectives, but also informal, with food and some time spent just “hanging out.” The planned agenda for these meetings is included in Appendix B. The meetings ranged in duration from 1 to 2 ½ hours. At each meeting, I acted as the facilitator; the activities included:

- Writing about, sharing, and discussing our experiences in the martial arts, with a focus on female practitioners in the martial arts;
- Watching and discussing Karyn Kusama's film *Girlfight* (2000), which is about a teenage girl who takes up boxing;
- Reading and discussing excerpts from B.K. Loren's *The Way of the River: Adventures and Meditations of a Woman Martial Artist*;
- Analyzing our experiences and the experiences from the film and text together
- Developing a list of proposals/points of change to share with the head instructor of the school, based on the discussions and analysis;
- Developing and implementing a plan for sharing the list with the head instructor.

Before meeting with the girls, I met with the head instructor of the school to share the nature and goals of the research, and to assure that the suggestions made by the girls and others were given serious consideration. Prior to the research, the head instructor

expressed support for the research and agreed to consider any suggestions that emerged from the work. Unfortunately, this instructor left the school shortly after the work was complete. So although he received the suggestions made by the group and met to discuss the outcomes with me (the girls decided to have me act as the spokesperson for the group), none of the suggestions were concretely put into place and evaluated. This will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

A major goal of the research was to move “beyond words” by developing a list of potential material changes within the institution of the martial arts school. According to Dworkin and Messner (2002), this move beyond the symbolic is necessary for the embedded male domination to be challenged at a material level. By working with the girls on exploring the material realities of their experiences, this research explores the material changes that involve both male and female participants in a process of reframing aspects of the male and female body (and relationships between bodies) that have become accepted as natural. In addition, the work done with the girls moves beyond individual changes to look at institutional changes. Brown (2006), acknowledging Bourdieu’s warning not to look at the habitus of the individual outside of the cultural context, explains how, although changes in both directions are possible (i.e. from the institution to the individual and vice versa), changes that begin at the individual level can suffer from a time lag.

Understanding identity formation as a self-defining (and transformational) process that takes place within a socially shared activity (in this case the leisure activity of the martial arts), the group phase looked at how collaborative discussions and goal oriented work can transform the individual and shared stories of the individual girls. In the

analysis of the work, I looked at 1) the girls' initial written narratives about their experiences in the martial arts, 2) the shared work of analyzing the stories and developing a "group story," 3) the development of new strategies and resources for understanding their past experiences (including watching the movie and reading excerpts from the texts), 4) the development of a list of proposed changes, and 5) the various ways that the girls talked about their experiences at different moments. Because identity is not understood here as a static, underlying characteristic but rather as a dynamic and socially performed self, it was expected that the process itself would transform the girls' understanding of and performance of who they are. I wanted to analyze the process of change from both my own perspective and the group's. Therefore, there was a certain level of uncertainty as to what the outcome of the group-work would be, since it was negotiated throughout the process with the girls. The analysis included in subsequent chapters outlines how the girls' participation and reflection varied depending on the tools and strategies being provided for them. In addition, I have tried at various moments to highlight what I feel are limitations of the research and propose suggestions for future work in this area.

As part of the group work that was conducted (discussions, analysis), I also analyzed the texts and narratives produced by the individuals and the group in order to focus and structure the meetings. In Stebbins' (2001, 2006) work on serious leisure, he proposed that the meanings that an individual affords to activities that can be defined as leisure<sup>11</sup> offer an insight into their subjectivity and identity. In her research on female

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<sup>11</sup> In his work, Stebbins used the following working definition of leisure: "uncoerced activity engaged in during free time, which people want to do and, in either a satisfying or a fulfilling way (or both), use their abilities and resources to succeed at this" (2006, p. 7)

weightlifters, Brace-Govan (2004) used the concept of epiphonic moments to explore the “social control of ... resistant, subversive femininity” (p. 507) of which participation in strength building activities by women can be seen a part. By identifying such moments in the narratives of the participants, Brace-Govan connected key incidents in the lives of the women she studied to see how the meaning they attached to their activity was created through social interactions (with both ideologies and bodies). In such a way can disjunctures between individual’s actions, feelings, and beliefs and larger social ideas and structures (i.e. other aspects of activity systems) be identified.

This research also used this concept of epiphonic moments as an analytical tool to identify, within the individual and group texts and narratives, important moments of conflict for the girls. At certain times, I brought these moments to the attention of the group to attempt to move further in our reflection. These instances are identified in subsequent chapters as I analyze the group work. In addition to these moments of conflict, I also analyzed the texts and transcripts to identify moments of flow, or incidents of strong identification with and becoming of the practice of the martial arts. Looking back on the process, these moments were much harder to identify, perhaps because they are more difficult to attain. I did, however, note how the girls used the practices of the martial arts to develop their own identities and stories; this is also elaborated in the analysis. The purpose of this analysis is to see how the participants have constructed meaning as individuals and as a group, through life experiences that can be identified as epiphonic moments and moments of flow, and to see how tools such as discourse and rituals are made available to and used by the girls.

The second phase of the research consisted of one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with each of the girls who participated in the group work. These interviews were conducted at the school during the spring and summer of 2008 and lasted between 95 and 135 minutes. All of the interviews, except for Amy's took place during one meeting (Amy's interview was conducted over two meetings). The objective of the in-depth interviews was to see the process of identity formation as understood by the life stories constructed by individual participants, and to see the potentials and limitations of participation in the martial arts for gender identity formation on an individual plane. The interviews gave myself, as a researcher, more room to explore issues that were relevant for each of the girls, and to see how the group process has influenced the individual girl's understanding and meaning of their experiences. Because I already had experience with each of the girls within the group, and also had access to their written narratives from the work, I had an opportunity to identify possible aspects of the martial arts that offer potentials and possibilities for each girl, and to take a more in-depth look at how individuals negotiate the social and individual. The guideline for these interviews is included in Appendix C; a detailed analysis of two of these interviews is included in chapter 7.

As a member of the school community and a practitioner of Tae Kwon Do, I consider myself, beyond the role of "researcher," to be a participant and collaborator in this work. Throughout the process, I collected "official" and "unofficial" texts that are produced at the school and institutional level. These include student guides, school rules and regulations, staff member responsibilities, official material published by the WTF (World Tae Kwon Do Federation) and USTF (United States Tae Kwon Do Federation),

promotional material published on the school's website, posters and other materials displayed in the school, and my own "staff notes". I reflected on these materials not only as a researcher, but also as a member of the school. In addition to these materials, I also reflected on my own experiences at the school, using both written notes and observations to inform the picture that I have tried to produce here. All of these materials, both my own and of the school community, were used alongside ongoing observations of the classes and school practices to represent the structural and cultural make-up of the Tae Kwon Do school, which is included here in chapter 4.

### ***Follow-up/Leaving the School***

One of my major goals in developing and designing this research was to initiate a process of change at the school where I was training. In line with both activity theory and action research, I did not see this work as merely observing, from the outside, a process that was already developed. Acknowledging my own role from the beginning, not only as a researcher but also as a martial artist, I saw this work as an opportunity to facilitate transformations at my school that I felt were necessary and/or desirable. So even beyond my role and experience at the Tae Kwon Do school, my desire for change assured that I could not claim to be a neutral "outsider." I was clear, and made it clear to others, that my work was meant as a means of change. On some level, I still believe that this was a realistic objective. I had, after all, discussed my work with the head instructor and the girls, and was prepared to discuss it further with other staff members and students.

Once we completed the group work component of the research, the girls decided that I should act as the spokesperson of the group and share their suggestions with the head instructor. I did share the list with him, and even met to discuss further my thoughts

on how the work had gone. These meetings were not necessarily easy, considering the hierarchy that exists within Tae Kwon Do school and the somewhat (in my opinion) reluctant to change attitude of the head instructor. (At some point during our discussion, he asked if I was going to meet with the boys at the school to work with them; I interpreted this, in the way that is was asked, as a suggestion that my work with the girls was somehow the equivalent of favoritism.)

In her discussion and application of Wenger's concept of communities of practice and communities of learners, DePalma (2009) refers to issues surrounding transformativity and replicability. This distinction is a useful one here. While the school itself, for the most part, was established as a highly replicable community – students trained to become like their instructors. Even when students are expected and/or encouraged to exceed the instructor, the directionality of the path of students is established. The practitioners are not meant to transform the activity of Tae Kwon Do, only themselves. For this reason, it is not surprising that my desire to implement a transformative component into the system was not easily satisfied. My desire, shared with DePalma's, was for “success [to] be measured by the extent to which members question authority and initiate change, and inner contradictions in practice [to be] embraced and developed rather than minimized” (p. 369). As anyone who has trained in traditional martial arts knows, questioning authority and initiating change are not generally valued or encouraged.

Despite these difficulties, I believe that there was some progress made in our discussions, and that further efforts would have been met with more room for change. Shortly after these meetings, however, I found out that the head instructor was planning to

leave the school. For political and personal reasons, this was a decision that he did not want known at the school, except for a few of the adult staff members. Because of this decision, I was not able to disclose this information with the girls or any other students. Considering the top down structure of the school and the importance of the head instructor, this anticipated change in leadership resulted in a pause, and ultimately an end, to my work with the girls and eventually at the school.

Within the martial arts, relationships between students and instructors are extremely important. In many ways, the instructor comes to represent the entirety of the art, so that when my instructor decided to leave the school, many of the staff and students followed. What resulted from this were several “temporary” head instructors, none of whom were invested in making changes to a school that they were getting ready to leave. In the end, one of our students ended up in the role of head instructor. For those of us who had been staff members when this student began, this change, in essence, meant that there was no instructor for us to continue our training. This situation, combined with other frustrations and dissatisfactions, led me and several fellow staff members to leave the school. Within a year of completing the groupwork with the girls, I was no longer a staff or student at our school. (During the time that we were working, Amy moved out of state and also left the school. Subsequently, Annie moved out of the country. The three remaining girls are still training at the school now, approximately 2 years after we concluded our group work.)

Leaving the Tae Kwon Do school was a difficult decision. In fact, it took several months once I decided to leave before I actually stopped helping out at the school. This difficulty was due to the investment I had put not only as a student and staff member at

the school, but also my investment in this research, which I saw as an opportunity to improve on the school's practices. Tae Kwon Do had come to be an important part of who I was, a means of defining myself. In this research, I saw an extension of that, a means of not only transforming myself but also transforming Tae Kwon Do so that others could define themselves in new ways. In addition, the concept of a "Tae Kwon Do family," which proved important for the girls, was also important for me. Although I still keep in touch with some of the staff members, including the girls who participated in this research, leaving the school essentially meant ending many of the relationships – as a student, a classmate, an instructors – that I had established.

In light of my decision to leave the school, much of the suggested changes that the girls and I made were not implemented, or even discussed, at the school. Despite this, I do feel that the work introduced some new tools for the girls to use in their own identity development. What I have attempted to do is to generalize what I learned with the girls in order to make suggestions for martial arts schools (and to some extent athletic programs) to better realize potentials for girls' development.

## ***Analysis***

Table 1 outlines the data that was collected, how it was analyzed and the objective of the analysis. While each of these levels was analyzed separately, it should be understood that they are all intertwined, and therefore distinction between and among them are done for analytical purposes only. Also important to remember is that the emphasis of the research is not only on the product of how the participants understand themselves through their experiences in the martial arts, but also on the process of how new tools and resources change the way the construction of meaning takes place.

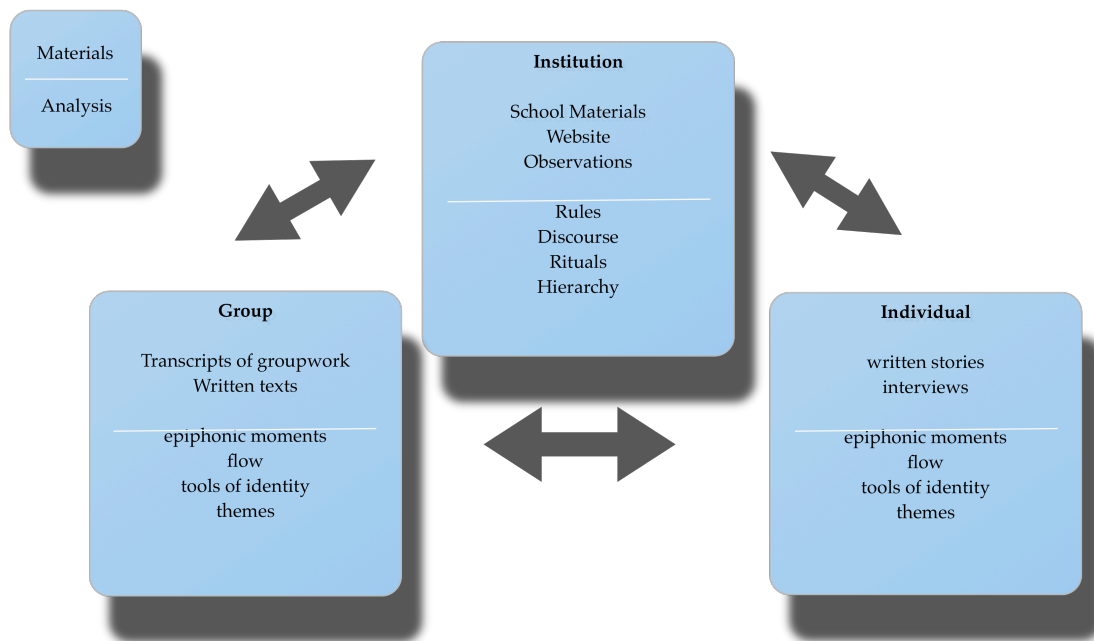
Table 1: Data Collection and Analysis

<b>Moment in Process</b>	<b>Type of Analysis</b>	<b>Objective</b>
1. Institutional Material	Identify fundamental ideas, beliefs, and practices of the Tae Kwon Do school	To identify the shared values and discourse of the Tae Kwon Do school as an institution, in order to see how it relates to the group and individual constructions of meaning and identities
2. Observations of School	Participant observations of classes, meetings, and other school activities	To identify the shared values and discourse of the Tae Kwon Do school as an institution, in order to see how it relates to the group and individual constructions of meaning and identities
3. Individual writings	Narrative analysis – Identify epiphonic and flow moments, tools of identity, categories and themes of identity	To identify, at various moments in the process, the ways in which the participants construct their identities through participation in the martial arts; to explore how participation in the group works changes these constructions
4. Collective texts and transcripts of discussions	Narrative analysis – Identify epiphonic and flow moments, tools of identity, categories and themes of identity, suggestions for change	To identify, at various moments in the process, the ways in which the group collaboratively construct its identity through participation in the martial arts; to explore how participation in the group works changes these constructions, and to see what types of changes the girls suggest
5. Interviews	“Listening Guide”	To explore each girl’s story in depth in order to see how the themes and categories identified from #'s 1-4 play a part

There are several levels at which moments of contradiction and resolution can be identified. At one level, individual writings were analyzed at various moments in the process to see how individual girls experience and deal with contradictions. In addition, analyses of the group sessions (which were recorded) reveal moments during the sessions when the process of collaboratively reflecting (using different tools introduced during the process) led to moments of contradictions and attempted resolutions. Finally, collective texts such as the suggestions made by the girls (the product of the sessions) were contrasted with the institutional documents to see what contradictions exist between the group and the institution of the school. The goal of this process is to use moments of contradiction and resolution identified at various levels to understand categories and themes that emerge and that can be used to understand the various levels as intertwined components of the activity of Tae Kwon Do.

The objective of the analysis outlined above is to identify components of individual, group, and institutional practices and constructions in order to identify how girls negotiate their identities. All of these levels are analyzed with the understanding that they are integral parts of the activity of Tae Kwon Do, and thus cannot be understood as distinct or as existing separate from the collective activity of the school. I have attempted, in my analysis, to focus on the process of change within and among all three levels. Figure 1 outlines the materials and tools of analysis for each of these levels.

**Figure 2: Materials and Analysis Used at the Individual, Group, and Institutional Level**



At the institutional level, I analyzed school materials, my own notes and observations, and the school website to define the practices of the school, including rules, discourse, rituals, and hierarchy. Chapter 4 of this text outlines the results of my analysis of the institution. Keeping in mind the discourse and ideology of the school, an analysis of transcripts and written texts produced from the groupwork was done to identify themes and tools of identity used by the girls. A second reading of these materials was then done in order to identify various contradictions and resolutions within and among systems, defined here as moments of epiphanies and flow. Chapter 5 outlines the story that was produced by the girls and myself during our groupwork, identifying key themes and moments of our experiences. Chapter 6 looks more closely at the process of producing this story, analyzing moments of contradiction and attempted resolution that emerged during our work together. Chapter 7 looks more closely at two of the girls' stories (Amy and Annie) using the transcripts from the interviews.

In order to keep a spirit of collaboration, the collective written documentations (lists, charts, diagrams) that emerged from the discussions, as well as from individual writings and contributions, were reviewed and agreed upon by all of the girls. The written analysis of these documents as well as of the transcripts of our meetings was shared with all of the girls, who were given a chance to give feedback and make suggestions for change.

The individual interviews with the girls were analyzed using an adaptation of Gilligan et al's *Listening Guide* (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, & Bertsch, 2003). This method is intended to provide "a pathway into relationship rather than a fixed framework for interpretation" (Brown & Gilligan, 1992, p 22). This framework requires multiple "listenings" to an interview; "each designed to bring the researcher into relationship with a person's distinct and multilayered voice by tuning in or listening to distinct aspects of a person's expression of her or his experience within a particular relational context" (Gilligan et al, 2003, p. 159). Each listening of the interview provided a specific perspective to each individual girl's story. Like others (ex. Surratt, 2005) who have used the Listening Guide as a tool for identifying various aspects of group and personal identity within institutions, my "listenings" emphasized plot, discussions of self, and institutional references. The four "listenings" were as follows:

1. Listening for events and plot, (identify epiphonic and flow moments);
2. Listening for discussions of self: what themes are used when talking about the self;
3. Listening for institutional discourse: what are the institutional terminologies used when discussing one's story (how do aspects of the institution become part of one's self);

4. Listening for themes that have been identified from the group work (this may or may not include discussions of the social and physical environment and of the school rules and regulations).

Using these four listenings together with the written and oral contributions of the girls to the groupwork, I constructed (more accurately we constructed, since it was the discussions with the girls that makes up the content of the stories) a set of individual life stories, one for each of the girls. In constructing these stories, I tried to depict how each of these girls used the various cultural tools available within the school's culture to define and perform their own identity. This included a consideration of how gender was constructed by the girls and how both material and ideological aspects of the school developed meaning for each girl.

Through the collection and analysis of the various group and individual texts and narratives from the process described, I attempted to develop, together with the participants, a picture of how girls' participation in the martial arts is a part of their identity development. The following 4 chapters elaborate on this picture, from an institutional (chapter 4), group (chapters 5 and 6) and individual level (chapter 7). I have attempted to make it clear in each of these chapters that, although each level is separated for analytical purposes, they can only be understood as intertwined components of the activity of Tae Kwon Do.

## IV. Life in the Dojang

Tae Kwon Do has become, according to some accounts, the world's most popular martial art (Park, Park, & Gerrard, 1989). Certainly within the United States, this discipline is especially widespread. Although it is difficult to calculate an exact number of schools teaching Tae Kwon Do, based on Internet directories I would estimate that there are at least 60 Tae Kwon Do schools in New York City alone (see, for example, <http://www.martialartsny.com>). This is not including instructors who teach Tae Kwon Do at community centers and other, non-school affiliated sites, schools that teach Tae Kwon Do but identify themselves simply as "martial arts schools," and schools that may not be listed. It also doesn't count schools that teach arts that share some features with Tae Kwon Do, such as Hapkido or Karate. From my own experience, I would argue that Tae Kwon Do is an art (much like Karate) that is accessible to women and girls; there are even several books written specifically for "training women" in Tae Kwon Do (Lawler 1998, 2001, 2007; Leibowitz 1993).

In this chapter, I attempt to outline the practices of the school where I trained and where this research was conducted, including the official philosophy and ideology as well as the everyday happenings, as they were enacted by both students, staff, visitors and parents. A key objective in this description and analysis is to include the mental and the physical without creating a dichotomy between the two, but recognizing that both together constitute practice (thus avoiding both dualistic and reductionist approaches to the self). The mental (or ideological) is of course on some level material, and the material, within human culture, is ideological. At different moments in the process, however, one can be emphasized more than the other, and I try to make this clear during

the description of the school. This description and analysis is based on my own experiences and reflections in the school as well as an analysis of the materials produced and shared by the school (e.g. websites, student guides, rules and regulations).

### ***Discourse and Ideology in the Dojang***

Like many martial arts, Tae Kwon Do has retained some of the language and vocabulary from its native country of Korea. Inside the gym – or dojang – it is not uncommon to hear Korean words and phrases spoken by instructors and students, usually interwoven with English or Spanish. Korean symbols and the Korean flag are also present throughout the school. In addition to vocabulary and Korean words, Tae Kwon Do has imported a philosophy and set of practices from Korea. “Tae Kwon Do is ... not only kicking and punching but is also a way of thinking and living. The main goal of Tae Kwon Do is to achieve total mind and body control through training” (from the S.Y. Kim Tae Kwon Do school website).

In the Tae Kwon Do school, there are several spaces where this philosophy is formalized and taught. Each new student, for example, is given a “student guide,” which explicitly lists the school rules, curriculum, some Korean terminology and important aspects of the philosophy. In addition, there are posters displayed throughout the school that highlight important characteristics (i.e. respect, discipline, teamwork) that are occasionally read out loud during the class. Finally, there is a school website that also has information on rules, regulations, and philosophy.

There is a set of “5 tenets” of Tae Kwon Do (courtesy, integrity, perseverance, self-control, indomitable spirit) that has, according to some accounts, been passed down from the ancient warrior hwarang in Korea. In our school, these tenets were not explicitly

taught but were interwoven into the practices and instruction. Related to the tenets is “The Spirit of the Tae Kwon Do Practitioner,” which was provided to the students in the student guide and occasionally taught in the classes:

1. Loyalty to country.
2. Obedience to Parents.
3. Respect your Elders.
4. Be Faithful to your Friends.
5. Be Courteous in all Situations.
6. Consider all alternatives before killing any living thing.
7. Never give up: persevere to finish what you start.

Donohue (1994) talks about the importance of rituals in the world of martial arts, especially as the disciplines have been introduced and re-enacted in the West. It is in these reproduced actions that we can best explore the philosophy and ideals of the Tae Kwon Do school. While it is difficult to communicate in words the physical reality that these rituals help to produce, a close look at the practices of the school help to reveal the process that is being/becoming a martial artist.

A first walk into a Tae Kwon Do school reveals a world that is noticeably different from “outside.” There are numerous rituals and practices within the dojang that stick out – the uniforms, the ubiquitous use of the words “sir” and “ma’am,” the screaming, the stances, and the different colored belts. Fundamentally, these rituals are meant to signify a sense of respect and order. While a look at the rules and principles of the school in writing can provide an idea of what being a student is like, it is ultimately the

performances of the members of the school that reveal the structure and hierarchical organization of the school.

There are several possibilities that I have come across to explain this strict hierarchical organization. Some emphasize the need for a strict order when teaching something that is potentially dangerous, others emphasize the Confucian influence on the Asian martial arts. For me, I made sense of this structure and discipline in a decidedly Vygotskian, “inter-becoming-intra” way. My reasoning was simple – in order to develop self control, one needs, in a sense, to be “controlled” by others. The origin of discipline and respect, in other words, was not centered in a specific person or role (i.e. master, instructor, black belt), but in the *process* of becoming self disciplined. Perhaps this was a way for me to rationalize what was at times for me a disturbing emphasis on obedience at the school. In my own black belt essay (which was a requirement when testing for Black Belt), I wrote:

From the very beginning, TAE KWON DO has been a process of negotiation for me, a give and take process where on both sides, some things are accepted, others not – some things changed, others reinforced... [B]eyond my time and money, I’ve had to negotiate my ideas, beliefs and principles with a tradition that was foreign to me. A tradition that was hierarchical where I was collaborative, that was rigid where I advocated flexibility, and that called for obedience where I would suggest questioning authority. I must admit that it has taken me some time to see the worth in a system that seemed to preach blind faith. Quite frankly, I was not buying the whole “your instructor knows best” thing. ...Despite my uneasiness with the obedience thing, there was something to be said for the level

of respect and discipline showed by the students. It is not often that you see people command the level of respect that the instructors would receive when teaching class ... I began to realize that it was through the process of respecting others, by following the instructors' orders, that I could develop respect for myself and self-discipline.

Whatever the explanation of these practices may be, in our dojang the fact that they have been part of the traditional Tae Kwon Do experience was enough of a reason to reinforce and reproduce them. Formalized in a set of school rules that every new student learns within their first 10 classes in order to earn a white belt (the period before one gets a white belt they are "no-belts"), it is through the reproduction of such rituals that one's reality as a martial artist is shaped.

#### School Rules

1. Students must bow to the flags, sabumnim (head instructor), and all black belt instructors when entering and leaving the school
2. Students must use the words sir or ma'am when talking to instructors
3. Students must obey and respect instructors
4. Conversation is not permitted during class
5. Swearing, smoking, and drinking alcohol are prohibited
6. Students must attend classes regularly for their own good
7. Students must help keep the dojang clean.

While the school rules are passed down formally to each new student, in general they remain an abstract set of rules, quickly memorized and almost as quickly forgotten. (Staff members often have to "relearn" the school rules in order to teach and test new students.)

A closer look at the interactions in the dojang reveal that it is not through explicit studying or repetition of the school rules that the rituals are taught and reinforced, but through the continuous modeling and reminders of staff and more advanced students. In the 5 years that I had been at the school, I cannot recall one instance when someone referred to the school rules when teaching or correcting a student's behavior. So rather than review the practices and rituals through the school rules, I have chosen to examine these rituals as actions that are performed repeatedly in the school. In accordance with my emphasis on embodied identity, I will attempt to examine the ways in which bodies and language are both integral, inseparable components of these rituals that shape the existence of the practitioners.

### ***Greetings of Respect***

An obvious place to begin the description of these rituals is at the entrance to the Tae Kwon Do school. It is customary when entering the school to bow and greet instructors with a loud "Good morning (afternoon/evening) sir (or ma'am)!" A student will stand at attention (feet together, body straight, hands at your side, looking straight ahead) and bow (from the waist, keeping eyes down and upper body straight) for three seconds. This is repeated by every student each time they enter or leave the school. While this is actually a school rule, it is very rare that anyone references the rules when learning or teaching this behavior. Instead, this is taught to children and adults alike as they enter and leave the school. Generally, an instructor will stand next to the new student, demonstrating how to bow and loudly greet the instructors. Once this is learned, instructors generally remind and encourage students to be loud, and to stay still and bow for three seconds. When, during the first few classes, the rules are taught and/or referred

to, instructors will reference this practice (i.e. after reading the rule an instructor might say “like instructor so and so showed you before.”)

In addition to “performing” this greeting at the entrance to the school, it is customary to bow and greet all instructors (especially the head instructor), in this manner the first time you see them after entering. Here it is important to emphasize the material aspect of this greeting. It is easy to think of the words “sir” or “ma’am” as verbal greetings that show respect (or in terms of their more abstract meaning), as we may use them outside of the dojang when speaking to an elder or someone who holds a powerful position. And in some instances, this is what it is. (It actually becomes quite common to use these words instead of names when students and instructors are even casually talking. In some of my first visits to the women’s locker room, I was quite surprised to find that, rather than referring to each other by name, many of the women called each other ma’am.) Students and staff members will almost always use sir or ma’am when speaking to anyone who is higher ranking or older than them, which actually creates a quite unique communication style. (On more than one occasion I have heard visitors to the school ask staff members to please stop saying sir or ma’am.)

There is a clear difference, however, between the use of the words in conversation and the loud, guttural greetings used when approaching an instructor. This is clearly visible when comparing English speaking and non-English speaking students. Since the school was located in a predominately Latino neighborhood in Queens, many of the students at our school were Spanish speaking. In most cases, these students would use the Spanish word “señor” when speaking casually to a male instructor, yet they repeated the same loud, “Good evening sir!” when entering the school and “Yes, sir!” when answering

in class. What is clear is that it is not only the abstract meaning of the words that give them significance in these situations, but the form and manner in which they are delivered (and thus their meaning was tied to the manner in which they were spoken as much as to the word itself). In this way the “words,” as a part of the greeting action that include attention stance and bowing, have a significant material existence, in these instances more emphasized than the material existence of words in general.

From my own experiences and observations, this positioning of bodies in relation to each other can be quite uncomfortable. As a clear sign of being subordinate, adults especially have difficulty getting used to this ritual, and often take a while before adult students feel comfortable bowing and “being loud” when greeting instructors. As a staff member, it is also a unique experience to have someone bow to you when they see you. In the dojang, it becomes a way to see who demands the most respect. The uniform (red uniforms are worn by staff), belt level (black belts, whether worn by a staff member or not, should garner a bow), age, and role in the school all inform whom one needs to bow to. In some cases, the greeting is reciprocal (instructors may bow back to adult students, and should bow to anyone who is older than them), but in others it is not (adult instructors often do not bow back to children). In this way, a clear-cut hierarchy is created and sustained.

### ***Uniforms and Belts***

Moving from the greeting to getting ready for class, the next action would be getting into the uniform. In general, there are three pieces to the uniform – the pants, top and belt. Shoes are not allowed in the “dojang” (where the training takes place), so the uniform is worn without anything on your feet. Obviously, the uniforms are worn loose

so that it is easy to move around in them. It is a student's responsibility to make sure the uniforms are clean and neat. So, during class for example, the instructor will often allow students to "turn around and fix their uniform and belts." (It is considered disrespectful to fix one's uniform or belt while facing anyone who is higher ranking than you, or while facing the flags in the front of the class). Generally, students are encouraged to behave, talk, and even stand in a specific way when wearing the uniform. This includes standing and sitting up straight (not leaning on anything or standing too informally), not swearing or using bad language, and in general acting as "martial artists." So children are encouraged to sit up straight when waiting for class, adults are asked to wait quietly for their class, and so on. From my own experience, I can say that wearing the uniform feels different from wearing other clothes, even other "workout" clothes. Especially when wearing your belt, there is a sense of expectation with the uniform on, one that seems to encourage standing up straight, and being aware of (and to a certain extent in control of) your body in a more complete way.

At the school where I trained, there are several different uniforms (or *dobuks*), each of which represent a specific level in training and determines which classes are open for a student to participate in. New students begin with a white uniform, then "earn" a black uniform when they join the "Black Belt Club" or BBC. (The BBC is often referred to as an "honor student" club – students that have "set up their goal" to one day earn a black belt. In actuality, the uniform represents the length of your contract or membership agreement. New students often "sign up" for 90 classes, or up until purple belt, then add an additional 270 classes, or until black belt, when they join the BBC). More advanced students can sign up for an additional 450 classes and/or up to their 2nd Dan (or second

degree black belt). These junior or assistant instructor uniforms are red, white and blue. Staff members wear red uniforms, which are given by the head instructor and are the only uniforms that do not reflect any membership or contract status. Once selected to “train” to become a staff member, it can take a student anywhere from a few months to over a year before they earn their red uniform. At this point, they are presented with this uniform either at a staff class or other event (i.e. promotion test, black belt test, tournament). Finally, the blue uniform is worn by the “person in charge” or head instructor at a school.

Arguably more important than the color of your dobuk is the color of your belt. All students enter the school as “no-belts,” and earn their white belt (usually) within their first ten classes. From there, students must test for each of their belts. There is a general guideline for how many classes one needs to progress from one belt to the next (see school curriculum table in Appendix A), but students need a recommendation from the instructor and to register (there is a fee) in order to take the test, so it is possible for variation from the guidelines.

In general, there is one test every 2 months, and students can qualify for a single, double, or triple test (or not to test at all) at each one. So, there is a lot of variation in how long it might take to earn one’s black belt (In my experience, I have seen students take anywhere from 1 ½ years to over 6 years). Promotion tests are formal events at the school. The “grandmaster” (at the time of this research, he was in charge of 5 schools) comes, and in general all of the instructors attend. The head instructor will lead all of the students through a “class” that lasts for about an hour. For each test, students must memorize a form (pumsae or poomse), which is a choreographed set of blocks, punches

and kicks, and break a board (a piece of wood) with a specified kick. Although there is often a lot of pressure placed on students at the promotion tests, in general these tests appear to be a formality – it is very rare that, once recommended, a student does not pass his/her test. In a sense, it is a time for students to formally demonstrate and display what they know.

### ***The Black Belt***

In popular culture, the black belt has taken on, at times, an almost mythical status of martial expertise. In reality, there is quite a bit of variation in skill level among black belts. While some schools can be quite strict and prudent in their giving of black belts, others seemingly provide a black belt to any student with a big enough checkbook. These schools have at times received the disreputable title of *belt factory* or *mcdojo*. Our school, I would imagine like most, was somewhere in the middle. Earning your black belt (or becoming a black belt) was taken fairly seriously, but it was not a sign of mastery or utmost skill level. Instead, becoming a black belt meant that you were truly dedicated, that you were ready to “begin” your serious training. Some reflections from my black belt essay:

The best places to learn are those where there is constant development, not only on the part of the people learning but also for what it is that is being learned. Any tradition, no matter how strong, must not become static. It must be recreated, again and again, by the people who are a part of it. For me, I guess becoming a black belt means that on some level I have earned a right to become a part of this process.

While recommendations for “colored belts” (yellow – red 4) are generally issued quite leniently, there is a higher level of criteria when earning a recommendation for the black belt test. So it is not unusual for students to remain at red 4, the level before black belt, for some time. The recommendation for the black belt reinforces the hierarchy; only the head instructor, with the approval of the grandmaster, is allowed to do so. In order to be recommended to the black belt test (which occurred first twice, now three times a year, rather than every two months), a student is supposed to (these criteria are sometimes overlooked) have taken at least 300 classes, participated in 5 tournaments, dedicated a certain number of hours helping out the school, and know all of the forms up to black belt level. Once they are recommended, they have to register (there is a relatively hefty fee) and write their black belt essay.

All black belts continue to take the black belt test as they move towards 2<sup>nd</sup> and in some cases 3<sup>rd</sup> Dan and beyond. Unlike the promotion test, which takes place at and is limited to students from our location, the black belt test involves all of the schools. So, for our school, this involves traveling to another location to test in front of instructors and masters. The test, which may last several hours, includes demonstrating blocks, kicks and punches, forms, 2 on 1 sparring, and breaking. All of these activities are done in groups of various sizes, with the masters and instructors watching. Like the other promotion tests, black belt tests are somewhat of a formality. By the time one is recommended, it is highly unlikely that he/she will fail, assuming they don't give up. Although the test is considerably harder than other promotion tests, it is practically unheard of for someone to give up. In the end, students earn a black belt, which unlike the other belts is embroidered with the student's name and school. In addition, students receive an official

certificate and I.D. card from the headquarters of the World Tae Kwon Do Federation, the Kukkiwon in Korea (See Appendix A for images).

### ***Inside the class***

Once belts are earned at promotion tests, they determine the level of the student in the class. Students are organized according to belt levels, with higher belts first (in the front of the class) followed by lower ranking students. Students at the same belt level are arranged by age (older first) and uniform (red, junior/assistant instructor, black, then white).

At the beginning of each class there is a structured set of practices that includes repeating the “membership oath,” bowing to the flags (American, Korean and school flag) and bowing to the instructor.

#### Membership Oath:

1. We, as members, train our spirits and bodies according to the strict code.
2. We, as members, are united in mutual friendship
3. We, as members, will comply with regulations and obey instructor.

All of this is done in attention stance (body straight, feet together, hands tight at your sides, looking forward). If the class is taught correctly, it should remain strictly structured. Students are expected to stay in line (in belt ranking order), should always be aware of the instructor, and should stand in attention stance whenever the instructor is talking. Countless times throughout the class, the instructor may ask (in English or Korean) for the students to stand in attention stance and/or bow to the instructor or other staff/student members.

Although each class varies, several aspects are fairly consistent. Classes generally start with a warm-up, include blocking, punching and kicking techniques, and may include forms, breaking or sparring. At the end of the class, individual students may receive recognition with “honor student cards” or recommendations, and students again bow to the instructor and to the “highest ranking student” in the class.

### **The warm-up**

There are several purposes of the warm-up. First, and most obviously, is to warm-up the body. Exercises such as jogging, jumping jacks, push ups and sit ups are meant to increase the body temperature and heart rate so that students can perform techniques such as kicking and punching without getting injured. Second, the warm-up serves to stretch the body – both as a warm up and to increase flexibility. In many martial arts, flexibility is extremely important, as demonstrated by the desire for a full split. Although there is some evidence that stretching for flexibility is better done after exercise (at the end of the class), it appears that in martial arts tradition split practice is done at the beginning of the class more often than at the end. Also against much scientific and fitness expert advise, the martial arts often practice partner or assisted stretching, which involves one person pushing the back or the legs of the other person while they are stretching. In many cases, this is almost a sign of one’s desire to succeed, so that one is admired for ignoring the pain when someone is forcefully “pushing” you into the split. This persistence in the face of contrary advise highlights the importance of tradition in the martial arts – what was good for those in the past must be good for me as well.

This is similar to the role of strength exercises in the warm-up, such as push-ups and sit-ups, which are used during the warm-up to “push” the students. In some cases,

this exemplifies some of the contradictions resonating through the martial arts – Tae Kwon Do is hailed as a martial art that works “with” the body, not against it, yet at the same time practitioners who push themselves passed their limits are often admired.

Finally, the warm-up serves to set the tone of the rest of the class. It was often the case that one instructor would conduct the warm-up and another would take over the class once the warm-up was over. In line with the order and structure of the dojang, the instructor who takes over is usually “higher,” more experienced, or more respected than the one who does the warm-up. So, in a sense, the warm-up instructor is “preparing” the class for the next instructor – in terms of attitude, discipline, and physical preparedness.

### **Hand Techniques**

While the emphasis in Tae Kwon Do is certainly on kicking, there are numerous hand techniques that are a part of the discipline and thus a part of typical classes. Blocking, punching, elbow strikes, and various open hand techniques are reviewed. The repetition of these techniques is done in unison, following the count of the instructor (in Korean), while students remain in one of several stances (i.e. horse stance, deep stance, fighting stance). The emphasis during these exercises is to develop strength, speed and concentration. Students scream each time a technique is executed, in unison with tightening the muscles at the exact moment of impact (whether real or imagined). When practicing these techniques, there is an emphasis on the balance between moving quickly and standing still, both requiring strength in a different way. While standing in horse stance (feet twice as wide as your shoulders, feet facing forward, knees bent so that your upper leg is almost perpendicular to the floor), for example, the longer you remain the more your leg hurts. And so the time in between blocks or punches is as important as the

actual technique - which is meant to be done quickly and accurately, immediately after the instructor yells the count - the muscles in your arm, hand and fingers contracting only at the last second.

To my knowledge, there is no physical counterpart to the Japanese term *mushin* (no mind), although I believe this is just as much a goal in martial arts. In the same way that *mushin* requires a mind that is so open that it does not think, martial artists strive to be aware of the body one hundred percent while at the same time transcending (for lack of a better word) it. In some cases, this might mean remaining in one stance for extended periods of time, until the pain “goes away.” While it is tempting to use the word control here, this word implies a certain separation between the self and body that betrays the meaning I wish to convey. In mind and body, martial artists strive to be in the moment, to transcend thinking or controlling the body, to transcend both strategy and technique. Of course, in order to reach this state, one needs to train for many years in exactly the thoughts, strategies and physical technique and control that he/she wishes to get rid of. It is exactly what is meant by flow – complete engagement.

### **Kicking**

This same objective of being in the moment is applicable when kicking, and I would argue even more difficult to achieve. The greater reach and power of the legs as opposed to the arms makes kicking both more difficult and, at times, more advantageous. Because the legs support us when we are standing, it is more difficult to achieve the balance between moving quickly and standing still when kicking as opposed to punching or blocking.

There are several teaching/learning situations within the class where kicking technique is the main focus, and each is a bit different. Depending on these situations, one may be kicking an imaginary target, a variety of hand held or free standing targets, or a person. Theoretically, each is supposed to prepare students for a “real life” situation, although no act within our Tae Kwon Do school comes close to a “real” fighting situation (including sparring, which is discussed in more detail below).

Air kicking is usually done from fighting stance and can include one or more kicks. Unlike horse stance, which places tension on the leg muscles, fighting stance is meant to be loose and comfortable. Similar to a boxing stance, fighting stance requires standing with both hands up (in fists, ready to block or punch) and the body turned slightly to protect the sensitive areas on the front of the body. Between kicks, students are taught to return as quickly as possible to fighting stance and prepare for the next attack or defense.

Besides kicking the air (or an imaginary target), kicking practice often involves kicking a variety of handheld and standing targets. In addition to speed, accuracy and power are emphasized. While “air kicking” is judged by an instructor (or oneself) based on form (ex. does the leg return to the “chamber” position after the kick, does the knee bend before kicking, etc.), target kicking adds the target itself as judge. The way the target feels, sounds and moves all inform the student (and instructor) about the quality of the kick. Through practice, students learn to read these signs.

Unlike air kicking and target kicking, partner kicking uses the body of another person as a target when practicing. In this sense, it is closer to the “real life” situation mentioned before. In another sense, however, it is less like “real life,” since the object of

partner kicking is what is called “light contact.” So while form is still emphasized, the main objective is quick, but not hard, kicks that are theoretically supposed to be accurate but often involve lightly (or not at all) kicking your partner in a general area (i.e. the side of the body, along the rib cage). Often during the class, partners will barely, if at all, touch each other and will instead focus more on the form of the kick (almost as if air kicking). In these cases, feedback comes not only from the instructor (or the target) and the self, but also from the other person. Usually, this feedback is not verbal but includes physical aspects such as how fast the other person is kicking, how high the other person is kicking, how they respond when you make contact, and what level of contact they are making with you. In my own experience, for example, it was important that I had partners (whether male or female) that did not show any reserve or caution in making contact with me. Such caution, sometimes referred as “going lightly,” to me would signal a sort of inequality that I often interpreted in terms of gender.

This inequality could be highlighted even in the pairings themselves, since instructors and staff often switched people around to make appropriate matches. Criteria for these decisions always included height and belt level, and often included gender, insofar as some instructors might try to pair women only with women. Within these situations, women who were paired with men were sometimes judged to be tougher or more advanced, so that women who were intentionally not paired with men became somehow “less.” In cases where women were paired with men, the instructors could also highlight the level of the woman by either instructing her partner to “go easy” or not (i.e., “Don’t go easy on her.”) This is especially true during sparring.

During my time at the school, the emphasis on gender in the class varied. There were times when it truly didn't seem to matter if pairings in the class were based on gender. When I first started, for example, I was often paired with one of the three males that I joined with, since we were on the same level. And for some time after, it seemed as if gender was not a factor in arranging the class (or at least if it was I didn't notice). At some point, however, and I am not sure why, the emphasis on pairing female students with females became evident and widespread. As an instructor teaching the class, I would make a point of not arranging pairs based on gender. It did eventually become difficult to do so, because the students and assistant instructors would automatically rearrange the pairings. I recall one class where I had to stop other staff members from doing so and defend my position (i.e., that there was no reason to rearrange the pairings in this way).

In actuality, this type of pairing can be detrimental to female students, not only because of the messages (material and symbolic) it sends in terms of the inequalities between men and women, but also because it doesn't allow for circumstances that simulate the "real life" situations that martial arts is supposed to prepare students for (such as attacks by males on females). Although all of the techniques taught in Tae Kwon Do are supposed to teach students to defend themselves, there are training drills in the class that are specifically geared towards teaching self-defense. These drills involve scripted movements between pairs of students, usually with one acting as an attacker and the other as the victim. These drills involve strikes and targets on the body that would normally be "illegal" within sparring or technique practice. In controlled situations, students are trained to use blocks, kicks, hand and elbow strikes, and joint locks and take downs to defend themselves against attacks. Beyond learning techniques, these situations

are meant to develop a sense of preparedness and confidence in students.<sup>12</sup> Simulated situations allow for students to imagine themselves defending against an attack. If women and girls are not allowed to practice in self-defense situations where the aggressor is a male, it is more difficult to imagine successfully fighting off a male attacker. Since women are more likely to be attacked by a male than a female, the lack of preparation for this situation seems unproductive. (This criticism also applies to matching partners of the same height, since it is likely that an attacker may be significantly larger than a victim, whether male or female.)

A common explanation of same gender pairings when conducting self-defense drills is that it eliminates the chance that a male partner will “inappropriately” touch women. Because certain techniques involve strikes to the chest and/or grabs and throws, students often felt uncomfortable paired with someone of the opposite sex. By framing it as ensuring the comfort of the women, however, these decisions in actuality highlight the female body as different and in need of protection. (It was never, for example, considered that male students need to be safeguarded from the inadvertent, inappropriate touch of a female partner).

In any instance of technique practice in martial arts, whether it involves hand techniques, kicking, and/or self-defense, repetition is the key. Masters and instructors will often say that it takes thousands of repetitions (exactly how many thousands varies) in order to truly know a kick. As with any physical training, this repetition is mediated by the verbal and material tools provided by the instructors. Phrases such as “bend the

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<sup>12</sup> Bertram (2005), in her discussion of sparring among women, raises the question about the role of violent fantasies in martial arts training. A part of any self-defense training involves the imaginary attack, the question of what would I do if I was really in this situation.

knee,” “keep your hands up,” and “return your hand to your belt” are repeated out loud by staff and then privately by the students themselves. In this way students develop a checklist or set of criteria by which they can judge their own progress.

In addition to this verbal feedback, instructors physically communicate “good technique” to their students. It is fair to say that without this physical communication, the verbal directions and corrections do not have any meaning. Learning Tae Kwon Do involves a developing sense of body image. Much as our language mediates our interactions in the world, body image mediates our physical existence (and these two processes are not distinct nor separate). Besides modeling correct techniques to students to demonstrate the correct technique, instructors will often physically move the leg, arm, or body of a student to give them a “feel” of what the technique should be. While, in some cases, easier and more acceptable with children, these strategies are often used with adult students as well. Instructors may place the hands in a certain position to correct “bad habits,” move the leg of a student in slow motion to emphasize the correct motion of a kick, or even spin a student around to help him/her demonstrate a technique that they are not yet capable of. In some cases, this involves adjusting the body image of the student (what do I feel like I am doing) closer in line with reality (what do I look like I am doing, or what am I actually doing). Watching oneself do a kick in the mirror or on video, for example, can lead to a shocking (and often disappointing) revelation. The role of the instructor, through physical and verbal tools, is to develop students’ technique and body image so that they know what it *feels like* to do a certain technique correctly. Through this process, students learn to develop a control and awareness of their body that is in line with what the instructor expects or sees.

As one moves from basic kicks to more advanced kicks, from single kicks to combination kicks, and from predetermined to improvised kicks, this becomes more difficult. The *Kicking Curriculum*, taken from my own notes as a staff member (see Appendix A), is an example of the “curriculum” of our school.

As one advances through the belt levels, techniques become more challenging. Standing, straight kicks (snap kick, axe kick) lead to turning kicks (back kick) and jump kicks (jumping snap kick, jumping roundhouse kick). Eventually, a single kick may involve turning and jumping (360 roundhouse kick, 360 back kick) or running (flying side kick, aero back kick). The more one is expected to move, the harder it becomes to be aware of (or in control of) one’s self. In addition to more difficult techniques, combinations become more challenging as one progresses. Moving from just one kick to two kicks to three or more consecutive kicks, students must learn to recover from one kick and prepare for the next one quickly. Balance, form and control are all necessary for this to work smoothly. This highlights the importance of the most basic skill involved in Tae Kwon Do – the awareness of one’s body when standing still (i.e., in attention stance).

In an essay on acting, the martial arts and the “bodymind,” Zarrilli (1997) discusses the importance of “standing still while not standing still,” of “awareness accomplished through attentiveness to the breath, and to focus/concentration in and through the breath” (p 104). Of course, if one cannot stand still when standing still there is little chance of standing still when moving. Attention stance is the first thing taught to new students, and is without a doubt the most repeated stance or technique. Used by instructors to control the class (students, no matter what they are doing, are trained to

stop immediately as soon as the instructor yells, “Attention!”), the attention stance is, in many ways, the measure of discipline a martial artist has.

All of the situations discussed so far involve a predetermined technique (or techniques). In addition to these “scripted” situations, students learn to react on the spot to moving targets and to improvise kicks on their own or with a partner. These training drills (i.e., one step sparring, shadow sparring, free kicking) move beyond simple form, strength and accuracy towards situations that begin to resemble sparring, but are still done without the gear. Ideally, students will have developed (through repetition) enough of an intuition to be able to kick immediately when an “opening” arises, without focusing on form, technique, or strategy. In these situations, reaction becomes the focus, and the concept of “standing still while not standing still” becomes even more important.

### ***Tournaments: Sparring, Form, and Breaking***

In addition to classes and testing, students are able to demonstrate and be rewarded for their progress at school tournaments. Held twice a year, tournaments allow students from all of the locations to compete in three areas against students who are roughly the same level. These areas – sparring, form, and breaking- are often taught in the class and are used, in addition to technique drills, as part of promotion tests (sparring being a part of the black belt test only). Tournaments reveal another contradiction within the martial arts – that between competition and pride with modesty and self-improvement. While the “official” philosophy of the school was that tournaments offered a space to measure your own success and progress (regardless of others), the attitudes towards the tournament were very much in line with other competitions (i.e. keeping track of medals, who wins and who loses, bragging, and school pride.)

## Sparring

There is much disagreement among martial artists about the role of sparring and fighting. While many traditional arts downplay the role of fighting and sparring, recent, more sports oriented disciplines (ex. MMA) emphasize competitive fighting as an endpoint in and of itself. Even within Tae Kwon Do, much variety exists between schools and organizations on the opinions regarding the existence of Tae Kwon Do sparring as an Olympic event. While some Tae Kwon Do schools revolve all of their training around sparring, others include sparring as only one aspect of training. Our school was one of the latter. While the competition aspect of sparring was important, it was only one part of training, and like many others it was not as important as the discipline and respect training that was at the core of the school.

All fighting sports involve some rules. While there are many arguments about what type of style or school prepares its students the best for a “real fight,” in actuality no staged or organized event can replicate a fight. That being said, Tae Kwon Do sparring, unlike mixed martial arts, boxing and kickboxing competitions, is not meant to simulate a real fight as much as a sports competition. Competitors wear protective gear that includes headgear, a chest guard, shin and instep guards, fist and forearm guards, and a protective cup. Kicking and punching are only allowed to the chest guard (not to the back or below or above the chest guard). In our school, headshots (strikes to the head) were almost always not allowed (they were never allowed at organized competitions such as tournaments), although in the Olympics they are. Even when allowing headshots, however, serious injury as a result from Tae Kwon Do sparring is rare. While bruises, sprains, sore muscles and body aches occurred fairly often, the objective is never to cause

harm to your opponent, but instead to demonstrate one's own technique and ability by scoring points (i.e., making contact with your opponent's chest guard). For this reason, many think of sparring as facing yourself rather than your opponent.

In many ways, sparring represents the culmination of technique training. Although kicking, punching and blocking are all an important part of sparring, there is little attention to the form of these movements at this point. The repetitions of kicks, blocks, and punches are all done so that in the end, we can forget it. While sparring, students are trained to react instantaneously, to move quickly and effectively and to be "ready" for what is coming next. The less one can think while sparring (either mentally or physically), the better. So students spend much time preparing, practicing, analyzing and thinking about their technique and moves in order to reach a state where this becomes not only unnecessary, but a hindrance.

As discussed earlier, the matching of students in training and competition are important. This is perhaps most true when sparring. While competition is always a part of training, sparring is the only practice where one student is pitted directly against another, face-to-face. The instructor's choice in deciding who spars whom takes into consideration various components. Sometimes opponents are chosen because they match up well – either in belt level, size or skill level. Other times, mismatches are chosen specifically to challenge one of the students. Even among students, there is a dialogue about who wants to spar whom, and whom one is scared of or nervous to spar. While this may overlap with the official hierarchy of the school, it is not always the case. There are black belts that are not seen as particularly good at or dangerous when sparring, and there can be lower belts that, for various reasons, are seen as particularly adept. When considering gender in these

matchups, it was usually assumed that male students were better than females, at least for teenagers and adults.

These matchups, like those discussed earlier, send clear messages to students about how skilled they are and how tough they are. When women are only paired with other women, or when men are instructed to “take it easy” when sparring a female opponent (or when they choose to do so on their own), messages are sent verbally and physically that women are not at the same level as men. This becomes clear when exceptions to this rule are evident, as when there are females that “fight like guys” and thus are paired with male opponents. It was not unusual in class to hear comments about women who were “surprisingly” good, and to witness the “friendly teasing” of men who lost to females.

### **Forms**

At perhaps the opposite end of the spectrum from sparring, poomse or form includes no “real opponent” (although you are compared to others) and no improvisation. For each belt level, there is a form that students are expected to learn. (With the exception of a few levels, which are meant at times to review all of the previous forms). These forms include various stances, turns and techniques (e.g. punching, blocking, and kicking) in a set order. Memorization of the sequence being the first task, doing well in form also involves perfecting the form of each technique, again moving without “thinking.” Students are instructed to conduct each step as if it were for real (i.e., blocking as if someone was attacking and screaming loud at each motion). Rather than quick reflexes and beating an opponent, form is meant to develop concentration, form and discipline. Traditionally seen as a form of “moving meditation,” practicing form is

meant to develop the ability to block everyone else out, to stay on one's path despite what others are doing. At tournaments, students are judged for this concentration, as well as good form, no mistakes, and a loud scream demonstrating discipline and energy.

### **Breaking**

The final event one can compete in at tournaments is breaking. Meant as a display of good technique, breaking involves striking a piece (or pieces) of wood of various thickness in order to break the board in half. In order to do so, a student has to be accurate, quick, and strong enough in their technique. As students progress through their belts, breaking techniques become more difficult and thicker boards (or more boards combined) are used.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the Tae Kwon Do class to an observer, more so than the uniforms, structure and bowing, is the screaming of the students. The Tae Kwon Do scream is meant to be a deep scream – not from the throat but from the “danjun.” “Dan-Jun (in Korean) means ‘Red Field,’ ‘Hot Point,’ or ‘Center of Energy.’ It refers to the place located two inches below the navel. This place is the center of gravity of the human body and at the same time the seat of KI (internal power of vital energy)” (S.Y. Kim Tae Kwon Do School website). When breaking, students are supposed to scream three times – before starting the technique (to concentrate their energy), at point of contact (to release their energy) and upon completing the technique (again to concentrate their energy, or to regain focus). Although the scream is most pronounced when kicking or punching (in breaking, sparring or demonstrations), it is also evident when answering an instructor's orders (“Yes sir!” or “Yes ma'am!”) and in certain exercises.

There are several reasons for the scream that I have heard – to release energy, to intimidate opponents, to develop confidence. Within the classes, there are a large variety of screams (students are encouraged to develop their “own scream”), and students with louder, more identifiable screams tended to have a bigger presence. In my experience, developing a loud scream was something that was often more difficult for women to do, as being loud and aggressive is not generally seen as a particularly “feminine” trait.

### ***Staff Members***

For those students who show special promise or dedication there is an opportunity to become a staff member. Because all of the girls in this research were staff members, it is important to take a brief look at what this involves. When a student is identified as a “potential” staff member, they are recognized with a red stripe on their belt. At this moment, they start their staff training, dedicating a few hours at least three times a week to come in and help out. “Keeping the schedule” was considered very important, so staff members and training staff members were supposed to keep a regular schedule, giving three days notice if they needed to miss a day and making it up. For more advanced staff members, finding a replacement is also required. Although there is some variation among staff members (e.g. some adults who were not “key” staff were allowed more flexibility in their schedules), the schedule is seen as a measure of one’s dedication to the school, and as such was fairly regulated.

When one comes in for their schedule, there are a variety of tasks to be done. Depending on the level and age of the staff member, these tasks include giving trial lessons to potential students, doing school cleaning, assisting in the class, leading the

class warm-up, teaching the class, and front desk stuff, which involved more of the “business” side of the school.

All of these tasks are strictly supervised and structured – in many cases there are written scripts to be followed when talking to students, parents, and visitors. Feedback is given by higher-ranking staff members; staff members may be given new responsibilities based on their performance and abilities. Generally, the “highest” staff members will be allowed to teach a whole class, sign up new students, and supervise other staff members, while the “lowest” staff members will do school cleaning, assist the class, and do “miss you” calls (i.e., call students who have been absent for a certain amount of time).

In this way, with a strict hierarchy, the school is run, with one head instructor supervising all staff members. Often, the head instructor would hold staff meetings during which he would update the staff on the status of the school, provide feedback to the staff, and “train” the staff in various tasks. During these meetings, the ethics of the staff were revealed, both implicitly and explicitly. The “Staff Member Responsibilities,” for example, were sometimes repeated out loud and include a set of principles that the staff must follow – including motivating all students, being loyal to the school and to the instructor, and not disrespecting the school. Staff members are expected, for the most part, to obey and respect the feedback and orders of the head instructor, who could be quite hard on them. “Feedback” could often involve pushups and punishments, and staff members were expected to follow without questioning the instructor. This could cause many problems for staff, who may have disagreed with aspects of the business and/or teaching practices of the school, in addition to feeling overly pressured and stressed out. There was a general sentiment that not everybody could “take” being a staff member – it

was not supposed to be an easy task. It took a specifically high level of dedication, discipline, and perseverance. (At least at this particular school; there is, of course variation from one instructor to another and thus from one school to another). There is often a conflict for many between the pride and honor of being a staff member and the feeling of being taken advantage of or mistreated, so that quitting staff could either be seen as an act of weakness or of strength.

### ***Some additional lessons of the dojang***

So far, we have already seen how principles such as respect, self-control, and discipline permeate the Tae Kwon Do school. I would like to also point out a few common phrases in the school that highlight these and additional morals that reveal how life is structured within the Tae Kwon Do school.

#### **“Tae Kwon Do is honest”**

This was a phrase I heard often while training. If you try hard, it will show. And if you don't try hard, it will also show. It is an approach familiar to anyone exposed to the traditional meritocracy of the sports world. There is no room for complaining, for pointing fingers. This can be extremely motivating for practitioners, but it also can be stifling. If you are not as good as someone else, it is no one's fault but your own. As we will see, this can lead to beliefs that girls are not as good as boys – not because of any social or historical performances of gender, but because of either a lack of effort or a lack of ability.

A favorite quote of the school, “Winners never quit,” reinforces this idea that feelings of frustration or desires to quit are often driven by undesirable characteristics of

the person (“loser”) rather than attributes of situations that include the school practices, instructors, philosophies, histories, and relationships to others, among other things.

Together with this emphasis on honesty is the idea that Tae Kwon Do, as a martial art, allows students to work “with the body,” not against it. Often used as a way to compare Tae Kwon Do favorably to other disciplines, this is meant to suggest that the exercises and drills done in class are not potentially dangerous. As mentioned earlier, this idea is often contradicted by the pushing of instructors when stretching or exercising. Another contradiction to this sentiment is the admiration (sometimes explicit, sometimes not) of practitioners who train despite injuries, and of staff members who dedicate their time at the expense of sleep and/or eating healthy.

### **“Dedicate, dedicate, dedicate”**

The dojang does not give unconditionally. Putting aside for a moment the obvious fees and time given in exchange for instruction, practitioners are expected to increasingly give back to the school and the art as they progress. The extent and form of contributions vary. My boyfriend and I, for example, were asked to help with cleaning and minor tasks within a few months of beginning our training. Within a year, we were “staff” at the school, assisting in the classes, working behind the front desk with administrative stuff, and keeping a regular schedule.

At times, the principles of dedication, respect and obedience at the school seemed to get mixed with the business aspect of creating a successful (i.e., profitable) business. For many students and staff, this was troublesome. Since the membership fees of the school were not cheap, students felt, at times, frustrated when they were asked to pay additional fees for tests and tournaments. Rather than address these issues in terms of

money, however, staff members were trained to address them as issues of respect and dedication (i.e., in order to be a “good” student that is dedicated to his/her training, one must pay fees for tests and tournaments without questioning the instructors). Similarly, students were encouraged to “extend” their contracts by joining more advanced programs because it was better for them as students (e.g., more advanced training or more discipline). The economic aspect of this (agreeing to pay more money to the school) was not highlighted, and students who did not join were seen as not as serious and/or dedicated, rather than not able and/or willing to pay the additional money.

In addition, students were often encouraged to bring friends and family members to try out and hopefully join the school. Again, this can be seen as an economic or business aspect, and was in fact a way for the school to generate more students, and therefore more money. Students were given a rebate as a reward for relatives and friends who joined. Within the discourse of the school, however, this aspect was not highlighted. Instead students and staff were trained to view this as a “leadership” issue. Rather than emphasize the monetary rebate, students who recommended new members were recognized for their good leadership within the school.

I recall in one interview of a female martial artist that I read a reference to Tae Kwon Do as “imperialistic.” In these cases, it would seem to be an accurate description. It was often the case that our role as staff members was defined in terms of “spreading” Tae Kwon Do. Many schools seem to grow and spread exponentially, emphasizing quantity of students, staff and schools over quality. Unlike the mythic stories of ancient kung fu schools where students waited outside for days or weeks to be recognized as worthy of entering, the modern Tae Kwon Do school seems to reach out and grab as

many people as possible (yet another contradiction – martial artists are “special” with aggressive marketing to “everyone”). Whether or not this is a necessary adaptation to our capitalist society is a question I have not yet resolved. There are some “traditional” schools and instructors who do not promote or advertise their services, but instead focus on the students that they have. There are many more, however, that exist in strip malls and main streets, advertising and promoting their schools as ways to lose weight, get in shape, increase focus and concentration, improve school grades, even deal with difficulties such as ADHD. Within the school, these methods were understood in terms of their success in improving people’s lives through Tae Kwon Do – get them into the school however possible, and they will reap the benefits.

The idea that Tae Kwon Do is in and of itself something that is good – and good for everyone – erases, to some extent, the possibility for practitioners to leave in good standing. When students or staff left voluntarily, it was often assumed that they, or their parents, were somehow not strong enough or dedicated enough, or didn’t care enough, to continue. Although some circumstances would allow for a more respectful opinion (e.g. adult students who had to take care of a family, or children whose families moved), these were the exception. Worse were the cases when students or staff members were asked to leave. Although rare, this possibility was always present as an understood threat, that if you dishonored the school or instructor you would be “banished” from the school. A favorite metaphor of my instructor (passed down from his master) was that of “bad” students or staff as a cancer – he would often state that if the arm has cancer, one must cut it off. To fail to do so would be to sacrifice the body for one “bad” part. Following this logic, an instructor or student was deemed bad for the school should be asked to

leave. In cases where this occurred, it was very rare to speak of or discuss the student who left in a positive light.

The metaphor of the body with one bad part highlights the two extreme possibilities – as a “part of the body” one is intimately close to the instructor and school (as more than even part of the family), as a cancer one is potentially lethal and must be completely cutoff. Using this metaphor it is hard to imagine a space in between.

In this chapter I hope to have provided an overview of life in the Tae Kwon Do school, including how it is structured and organized using practices that are comprised of both material and verbal components. As we turn to the groupwork and the individual lives of the girls, we will return to these concepts to see how the girls used some of the tools available to them to define both themselves and Tae Kwon Do.

## **V. Group Work – Stories about ourselves**

While it is important to highlight the holistic, dynamic, and living nature of human activity, the analysis of practices is always possible at different levels. This analysis ideally includes the meaning making process of groups and individuals without compromising the quality of the activity as a whole. In the following sections I attempt to accomplish (at least) two things from the group level without compromising either the historical and social reality of the institution or the agency of the individual girls.

Through my analysis of the groupwork I aim to discuss the relevant aspects of Tae Kwon Do practices from the group's perspective. The practices at the school level, discussed earlier, include the group of girls who participated in this research. It is important to understand their own participation in these practices, how they both contribute to and are shaped by material and symbolic realities in the dojang and out of it. The discussion of the practices below is a result of working with the girls to produce, share and analyze their stories as female martial artists. It is meant to be understood as work we have done together, a process of production that involves myself as well as the girls.

The discussion below is not meant to reflect a static or absolute reality, neither of the stories nor of the girls' perceptions and meanings. Consequently, the second main objective (addressed in Chapter 6) is to analyze the research process itself. Placing myself as an integral part of the process, I introduced (for these girls) new practices into the Tae Kwon Do school. These included writing, talking about, sharing and analyzing the girls' stories, as well as those of other females, in light of understanding and improving on martial arts practices for female practitioners. As I presented it to the girls, I wanted to

learn about girls training in the martial arts and how schools can do a better job helping them train. On another level, I want to understand how this process of collaborative reflection and analysis can play a part in martial arts training, by introducing it to the practices of the group.

It was my hope that through this research I would facilitate some change in the practices I was studying. I imagined three points where this might happen. First, at the individual level as the girls constructed and reflected on their stories; second, at the group level as new practices become introduced; finally at the school level as changes suggested by the girls could be implemented. In retrospect, I am not satisfied that this work has led to substantial change at any of these levels, at least not of the sustained character I was hoping for. This is partially due to circumstantial events (including the facts that I am no longer training at the school and many of the staff members who were at the school at the time of this research left rather suddenly). I believe, however, that this work is an important starting point for further development to occur. I would very much like to continue working in this direction, and will discuss ideas and suggestions in more detail at a later point.

Through all of this the main focus is to understand how identity is lived for these girls training in the martial arts; especially relevant are the moments of conflict (epiphonic moments) and engagement (flow) during the process of our work. The conception of identity as a process that is both material and symbolic is stressed throughout; sometimes the physical is discussed explicitly by the girls, other times I use my own experiences as a martial artist and as a researcher to interpret what is said.

Similarly, gender is at times an explicit content of discussion, and other times is embedded within discussions of other topics.

### ***Our collective story***

At the beginning of my work with the girls, I asked them to write down their stories of how they came to be martial artists. We used these initial texts, which were relatively short and “to the point,” as a starting place to discuss their experiences in Tae Kwon Do. In this way we were able to move from the individual to the group as we constructed a shared analysis and meaning of the stories.

Although only one of the girls felt comfortable sharing her written text with the group, we were able to use her text to create a list of similarities among all of their stories (see Appendix D for our notes) that we used as a starting point to discuss aspects of Tae Kwon Do that were relevant for the girls. I also introduced other stories (namely those of movie character Diana from Karyn Kusama's film *Girlfight* (2000), and B.K. Loren's stories from her book *The Way of the River: Adventures and Meditations of a Woman Martial Artist*) Throughout the process, we moved between the individual level (their own stories), the group level (constructing a shared story), and the institutional level (writing a list of suggestions to improve the school.) By reviewing their written texts, the subsequent discussions, and my own notes, several shared aspects of their stories emerge that, in my opinion, reveal important aspects of how they shape their identities.

In their initial writing, the girls all produced texts that were rather straightforward. Although I did not specify how they should write their story, all of the girls seemed to focus primarily on the same important events and markers in their progress, reflecting the important ways in which the practices of the Tae Kwon Do school include certain

milestones as a way of measuring progress. Events such as coming in for “information,” trial lessons, the first class, getting belts and new uniforms, and tournaments are reenacted by each student as they become part of the school. This is evident when one considers practices like collecting and displaying belts and certificates and the requirements for earning one’s black belt (which include progression through the previous belts, participation in a specific number of tournaments), specifically the writing of a “black belt essay” which is meant to describe one’s progress as a martial artist. Because creating one’s story by listing milestones and linear progression is already a practice at the Tae Kwon Do school, it is useful to draw on such stories to understand how girls progress in their training and to evaluate this process. The challenge is to move beyond the listing of events and accomplishments to a more reflective, critical look at our stories. This is what I attempted to develop with the girls through our work. As I describe our work, I will highlight ways that we and I reflected and critiqued our experiences.

### **Becoming a Tae Kwon Do student**

Of the 5 girls involved, only one, Madison, came to the school specifically because she was interested in training. She writes, “[as] a child, I have always thought that becoming a martial arts student was cool because of the kicks and how people would defend themselves.” Of the rest, Yvette was “tricked” by her father who wanted her and her brother to train, Brianna was convinced by her sister (Madison), and Annie and Amy joined because their friends were students who wanted them to join as well. As Annie recalls, “[m]y reason for joining TAE KWON DO is questionable, because I don’t know exactly why I joined.”

From reading accounts of women training in the martial arts, I believe this is quite common. Especially for adolescent and adult women, the path to training often comes from reasons other than a desire to learn the martial arts, such as a friend or romantic partner, a desire to lose weight, or an interest in learning self defense triggered by fear. While boys growing up may idolize “kung fu” movie stars like Jackie Chan, Bruce Lee, and Jean-Claude Van Damme, there are few female stars to model the traits of the martial arts for young girls. Understanding this discrepancy as fitting into the larger cultural ideas about gender that are produced and reproduced through everyday practices, it is understandable that girls may not view martial arts as “for them.”

At some point, however, all of the girls became engaged in Tae Kwon Do. For the girls I worked with, this happened relatively quickly. Most of the girls reported enjoying their trial lessons, describing the lessons as fun and their instructors as enthusiastic and friendly. They all seemed to enjoy the basic punching and kicking that they learned in those first lessons, as well as following along with their encouraging instructors. This initial “fun” quality of the lesson, coupled with the encouragement of instructors, family and friends, was enough for them to agree to join.

All of the girls identified feelings of shyness and nervousness (some used the word scared) at the beginning of their training. The new, unfamiliar setting that involved strange rituals and unfamiliar words was especially disconcerting for all but one of the girls. (The exception in this case, Amy, is Korean-American, and describes the formal markers of discipline and respect as familiar to her.) In addition, the girls mentioned being uncomfortable with people watching them. Interestingly, as I will discuss later, this discomfort experienced when placed as the object of other peoples’ gaze didn’t seem to

go away for some of the girls. So, while all of the girls eventually became comfortable with the bowing, screaming, uniforms, and other rituals in the school, they still often struggle with being watched or observed. While the girls did not explain why being watched was bothersome (other than to say they got nervous when others watched them), this is in line with their assessment that boys, but not girls, liked to show off and their highly critical stance towards their own technique. In some cases, they expressed feeling less nervous as time went on, but only because, according to them, they realized that no one was actually paying attention.

Within the first few weeks of classes, despite their initial fear and nervousness, they were coming to class at least partially on their own accord, in addition to being encouraged by others. This, in my opinion, is a critical point in the process. From my observations as a student and staff member, it is painfully obvious that there is a high dropout rate among Tae Kwon Do students. Despite formalized practices such as calling students who were “missing” and sending letters and e-mails, many students just stop coming. As with many activities that are non-compulsory and challenging, students of Tae Kwon Do who do not develop a relationship with the practice itself are at a high risk of quitting. For those students whose objective is not the practice of the martial art, there are other ways to lose weight, or get in shape, or fill up extra time. According to Engeström (1994), there are three types of motivation: situational (temporary captivation by external factors such as novelty or entertainment), alienated or instrumental (reward and punishment), and substantial (interest and usefulness). As any student of the martial arts can attest to, there are times when the training is neither fun, easy, nor immediately

rewarding. Without substantial motivation the obstacles and challenges tend to outweigh the benefits.

As students, the girls' friendships with fellow students were an important part of their training, especially meeting new people and sharing their experiences in class. Friends helped each other navigate the at times tough practices at the school, and became a motivating factor as they came to rely on each other to travel to and from the school and take classes together. These friendships were important as the girls progressed in their training – from getting their white belts, to going to promotion tests and tournaments, and moving up to advanced programs and eventually becoming staff members. As time went on and many students quit (or their contracts expired) the bonds between the students who remained seemed to get stronger. In some ways, the girls seemed to use fellow students as benchmarks to measure their own progress (i.e., we were yellow belts together, but now I am a red belt and she is only purple; or, we started together and now she is a black belt and I'm not).

In published accounts of female martial artists' experiences (Atkinson, 1983; Hoppe, 1998; Siegel, 1993), many emphasize the sense of self worth that comes from being able to perform the physically challenging techniques and exercises. As these women point out, it is the feeling that a woman's body is worth defending that is as important as the ability to defend it. But it is not simply the idea that creates the sense of worth; it is the performance and feeling, at a visceral level, of being able to defend ones' self (or participate in some sport) that creates the idea. Research that looks to conceptions and beliefs about ability to understand how cultural ideas influence girls' participation in sports (i.e., Li, Lee, & Solmon, 2006) ignore the physical experiences of girls. While

important as far as focusing attention on how gender stereotypes about sports can influence girls, this work fails to move beyond the ideas and beliefs of the girls. By focusing “inside the heads” of female athletes, we fail to understand not only the importance of the whole body, but also how our body image emerges from the social, cultural and historical activities we are a part of. Madison sums it up succinctly in response to my question below:

Kim: Is there anything that would ... make you stop thinking like that? Like what would help you think, girls can do that just as much as guys?

Madison: If I could do it. (laughs)

Through various means, women are often kept from developing a positive and powerful body image – the sense of self that mediates our physical existence in the world. When women are equated with their bodies, it is in terms of what they look like or what can be done to them, not what they can do. As discussed extensively in the work of Dowling (2000) and Grosz (1994) girls and women are constrained through ideologies and practices in how they can be – they learn that to be female is to be passive, frail, and in need of protection and help. Where progress has been made, and women are challenging these realities, they learn that women can be strong, active, and powerful – just not as strong, active or powerful as men.

In our work together, the girls discussed the importance of being able to do things they couldn't before; “but when you learn it, and like you can do it, it feels good. It's like, yeeaaaah” (Madison). “No but, I mean, like it makes you feel good though, like if you're like improving. Especially push-ups, or sit-ups. You know you're doing at least more than how you started” (Yvette). Not surprisingly, it is the activities within Tae Kwon Do that

the girls are good at that they like the most and vice versa (i.e., “I don't like breaking cause it never breaks.”). In order for girls to be able to accomplish physical tasks that have been traditionally limited to boys, they need the opportunity to perform them. Tae Kwon Do potentially offers girls this opportunity. From their stories, we can see how successful the school is and what improvements need to be made.

Regardless of the event or activity, the girls expressed a desire to earn their accomplishments fairly. Benchmarks such as belts, tournaments and certificates did not hold much meaning for the girls if they felt they were given out too easily. The following discussion addresses the issue of promotion tests and “earning it:”

Yvette: Cause they have to earn it, and I mean like, when you take a regular test not everybody pass. Everybody fails too. So it should be the same thing like that, too. Like a regular test, you know in school. How many, you know, not everybody in your class passes the test. You know, there's at least like five or ten people that fail with like a really low score, so, there should be at least some people that fail.

Brianna: There's on time, when me, my sister, um, Manuel, Juan, and all of us were going double test, or triple test, whatever they were, and then we were doing blue belt, no purple belt form, right in front of GrandMaster ... we all screwed up, on the first thing, but we still passed. And we screwed up on both forms too...

Yvette: You know like a test, you fail, so then the teacher tells you, you know, oh, you need improvement in this part. And then, next test, you know you will, study for that.

Kim: Would it make you feel better when you pass the test, like, like I passed the test, it means more because I know that I could of failed?

Unknown: Yeah.

Yvette: No you just wanna feel good passing the test but knowing that you actually like,...

Unknown: You earned it

Yvette... earned it. You know, not just because you, you showed up and paid and, you're gonna pass....

Annie: It's like getting a hundred for, writing your name down on a test.

Improving and accomplishing physically challenging activities is an important aspect of training for the girls; just “getting by” was not enough. At the same time they emphasized the positive aspect of being able to do things and the desire to be challenged, however, the girls downplayed their own physical abilities.

Madison: (talking about BK Loren) She's really good. She says she can do a hundred pushups, twenty or so pullups... I can't do any of that.

Brianna: I can do half a pull up.

Yvette: (laughing)

KR: But that's not like when she first started, that's after she trained for a little while.

Madison: Half a year in. So she's good.

Brianna: It's almost a year and I can't do 20 pushups.

Yvette: I couldn't even do like 1. Now I can do 10. After 2 years.

So while the girls liked being able to do activities that are generally identified with males (i.e., push-ups, pull-ups), they didn't rate their own abilities as very high, and discussed frustration with being expected to do things that they just couldn't do.

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

Madison: Yeah, like he just, aero back kick, I'm like, I never heard of that term before and then we just had to do it. Just watch other people and then try to copy them but like obviously it's not that good because we never got the actual

Yvette: Yeah that's something

Brianna: I just ran and jumped over the kid and that's about it.

What the girls are asking for here, in my interpretation, is assistance in developing their body image. In educational applications of Vygotsky's theory, the concepts of zone of proximal development and scaffolding are used by many to explain how learning leads development (see, for example, the collections of work published by Moll, 1992; Kozulin, Gindis, Ageyev, & Miller, 2003; Wells & Claxton, 2002). In order to develop one's mind, one needs to participate in the world – with other people and tools, trying to achieve some goal. Many get this when it comes to “mental” practices, but we often seem to forget it when it comes to the more physical ones. (Again, I don't mean to imply here that a practice can ever be fully mental or physical, as the two are not separate, but some rely more heavily on one or the other.) When instructors observe that boys can do more pushups, or are better at sparring, it is easy to ascribe these differences to “natural” capacities of gender, rather than understand them in terms of the differing sense of one's body that result from the experiences and histories of boys and girls.

There are moments in all sports, including Tae Kwon Do, that one feels like it clicks. At these moments it can be easy to forget all of the work that has gone into getting there. What matters, at that moment, is that you get it. There is something terribly frustrating, for example, about “theoretically” understanding how a kick is supposed to be executed but just not knowing what it’s supposed to *feel* like. At these moments, it feels as if no amount of instruction or help will work. From my own experience as well as the girls’ accounts, I would sum it up as “I just can’t do it.” If girls see that their male counterparts pick up things faster than they do, they often assume that “boys are just better at this” than girls. Such beliefs further hinder girls from developing a feeling of ability.

Because of the previous experience of boys, they often physically “understand” things differently. They often grow up without being constrained in the same way girls are, and with more experience in contact sports and “rough and tumble” play (Dowling, 2000). Rather than identifying what assistance and situations are required for girls to develop the sense of their bodies that is necessary in order to perform certain tasks, instructors and students reinforce gender differences by ascribing them to “natural ability” or motivation/desire. Since natural ability or talent cannot be taught, it is not seen as discrimination or inequality if girls are taught in the same way as boys but they just don’t seem to get it. It’s just the way things are.

### **Gender doesn’t matter (except when it does)**

As we discussed gender more explicitly, various issues emerged. What was most interesting for me were the discrepancies between the girls’ talk about gender discrimination (which in their mind was not a problem at the school) and their

discussions about their own experiences. Whenever I asked directly if there were any differences for girls or problems training related to gender, the answer was always no. While they recognized problems faced by movie character Diana in *Girlfight*, for example, they believed that this could be explained by the fact that she was the only girl in a male dominated sport and gym. At our school, because there were many female students and staff members, the girls argued that gender “didn’t matter.”

Madison: I think, um, why there's no difference [for males and females training] is cause like there is a lot of girls in Tae Kwon Do and like in the movie, there was basically all guys. You know what I mean? Cause like, we're just used to it.

As I have discussed above, however, I believe that there are important differences – symbolically and materially – in how males and females participate in activities such as Tae Kwon Do. The minds and body image of girls (and boys) emerge as they live in culturally shared worlds, such as the dojang. Ascribing any difficulties faced solely in terms of individual differences, without any mention of gender discrimination, has been identified by Cole and Hribar (1995), Helstein (2003), and Cooky and McDonald (2005) as part of the dominant discourse about sports that female athletes often adopt as they become participants. This discourse is especially highlighted in popular ad campaigns such as Nike’s *Just Do It* campaign, which celebrate the individual accomplishments of athletes without looking at socially constructed obstacles and discrimination. If one cannot “just do it,” it must be her own fault. In such a context even mentioning gender can be seen as making excuses.

In our work together, the girls addressed issues such as body image and gender stereotypes in different ways. In some cases, the girls pointed to individual differences

not related to gender to explain feelings of weakness, as Yvette does here:

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

This attribution of (in)ability to individual difference is in line with the “just do it” philosophy that permeates sports culture. Other girls, however, do discuss how gender plays a more obvious role. Madison writes:

But I must admit that I partially believe in this way of thinking as well.

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

Even here, however, where there is a direct acknowledgment of gender stereotypes, the responsibility is placed on the girl herself (i.e., she chooses to use it as an excuse) rather than a socially constructed obstacle for girls. Another girl, her sister, uses the stereotypes in a different way: “People look down on me, ‘Oh she can’t do it. She’s a girl.’ But when I prove them wrong, they say nothing.” So when gender does enter the discussion, it is still not done in a way that acknowledges social ideas and stereotypes as an explanation of differences between boys and girls. In the end, it is up to girls to prove stereotypes wrong or use them as a motivator. What is missing is a look at the social systems that create such stereotypes, i.e., any acknowledgement that discrimination exists beyond the beliefs of individuals.

Even though the girls seemed sure that gender discrimination did not hinder them in any way during their training, they were aware of differences between males and females. These differences revealed themselves most when discussing sparring, an activity that several of the girls did not like. On an ideological level, fighting in any form is not seen as an “appropriate” behavior for girls; on a physical level, girls do not develop a sense of what it feels like to fight or defend oneself successfully. When sparring, this revealed itself in the fear of getting hurt (and hurting others).

Yvette: ... I HATE sparring.

Madison: Yeah I hate sparring!

Brianna: The girl kicked me in the head!

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Madison: I get hurt a lot.

Yvette: Yeah.

Madison: All the time.

Annie: You get bruises.

Yvette: I don't like bruises.

Madison: I broke my finger, I broke my toe. Well, I didn't break it but it got bruised for like a good week.

The girls who, at the time of our work together, liked sparring got over their fear of getting hurt and hurting others:

Amy: But then that time when I hit Billy in the groin he got really mad at me and I was like just crying, I just started crying. I was like, "Aaah, I'm sorry!" ... but now I kick him I'm just like, "Okay, whatever."

Even after the girls shared their fears of getting hurt and/or bruises, they didn't frame these fears as problematic in any way related to gender, even though getting passed these fears (to some extent) is a prerequisite to being competent in sparring, and girls associated sparring with males. When it comes to strength and fighting, "natural" differences between males and females are so ingrained in our culture that I believe they are difficult to recognize. In discussing sparring opponents, for example, the girls preferred to spar males who "knew how to control" their kicks and who "cared" that they were girls. At the same time, the girls claimed that there was no difference between males and females when it comes to sparring. So the idea that guys should spar differently when facing a female was just assumed to be obvious, but was never seen as a problem in regards to gender equality.

Yvette: Like a guy, sometimes they don't know how to control themselves like, you know, if you hit them really hard in a bad spot then they take out your anger, their anger so then it's like you got to control that too.

Madison: Like I know, you know Jaime? When he spars guys he's all out but when he spars girls he's like gentler, he controls. He's good.

Brianna: He's like calm.

Yvette: Yeah.

Kim: So he's fine?

Yvette: He's fine.

Brianna: I still don't want to spar him, though.

The girls preferred male opponents to 'control' their kicks and 'care' about gender even though they didn't see this as part of martial arts:

Kim: So then the difference is, when it's a girl sparring a guy, are you saying, some don't care. Are they supposed to care?

Amy: No.

Yvette: Well I mean, we don't really -

Annie: In martial arts you're not supposed to [care about the gender of your opponent].

Yvette: Yeah.

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Yvette: We're not really expecting anybody to care.

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Yvette: I mean when he, when like on Friday, when we were sparring, he didn't go that hard. He actually was like trying to like get me to do the combination kicking.

Madison: Yeah.

Yvette: And to do good.

Madison: Jaime does that too. Jaime's good.

Yvette: Yeah, Jaime does that too.

Madison: He controls and then he kinda lets you kick him.

Yvette: Yeah, he's like, "Come on, come on, do combination, combination."

Madison: To teach you. That's the thing though, it's to teach you.

In the discussion above the girls rephrase the issue from one about gender to one about teaching and learning. While this is one way to deal with the tension between the official discourse (i.e., girls and guys are the same) and the reality (i.e., I don't want to

get kicked by the boys.) I believe this is problematic, however, as the fact still remains that males and females are seen as having different roles when sparring each other. Whether these roles reflect differences (assumed to be natural) between strength/power or competency, the gendered differences remain. The need for males to refrain from kicking too hard is especially true when girls are romantically interested in a male partner. One girl writes:

I was scared most when I had to spar the boys. Then came a time when I had to spar my crush. At the time, (I'm guessing) he liked me too. So when I sparred him, I would describe him as using 'medium' strength. He did hit me at random times but not hard, until his final blow to my stomach which made me cough out some spit (how embarrassing!) All in all, it was a good fight b/c he treated me *both as a girl and a martial artist*. [emphasis added]

The need to be treated as both a girl and a martial artist reveals the popular idea that being athletic or strong is okay as long as one still meets the specified role of heterosexual female – in other words, as long as one doesn't go too far. Because Amy's partner only used "medium" strength, the traditional roles were not challenged. If Amy, on the other hand, were to match her male partner while both were sparring "for real," these roles would be challenged. In popular culture we see many examples of successful female athletes that are deemed acceptable (or not) because they are (or are not) "feminine enough." There seems to be a fine line that powerful female athletes such as tennis star Serena Williams and MMA star Gina Carano walk – on one side, they are sex objects for men, often interested in fashion and looking good (acceptable). If they fail to meet this requirement, they are labeled as "animals," "men," or "dykes" (unacceptable).

MMA star Gina Carano, for example, has been delegated to the position of “spokeswoman” for her sport because she fits the traditional, heterosexual male perception of female attractiveness. In the end, she is known first for what she looks like, rather than what she does. Although her position as “sex object” offers an alternative to the ultra-thin, frail women depicted in magazines and films, it still requires that female athletes are “approved of” by heterosexual males in order to get recognition. In some cases, athletes’ images are digitally altered in order to make sure they fit cultural norms, such as a photo of Serena Williams that appeared on the cover of *Vibe* magazine (Hello Beautiful 2010). While an increasing number of female athletes successfully walk this line (e.g. both excelling in their sports and posing in men’s magazines such as *Maxim* and *Playboy*), the need to meet such gender stereotypes limits the potentials of female athletes.

The specific type of athletic success that is deemed acceptable for women creates conflicts between perceptions that gender discrimination is no longer a problem and the deeply ingrained ideas of what women are (i.e., “the fairer sex”). At times the girls struggled between their belief that gender doesn’t matter and their fear of sparring guys who don’t hold back.

Amy: like they control but, they kick you regularly.

Kim: The same way they spar each other?

Amy: yeah.

Kim: Is that for everyone?

Amy: But a little bit less power.

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Amy: I wouldn't really say that that thing, that kind of thing happens here cause the guys here, they don't care if you're a girl or a guy. They just spar.

Annie: That's not particularly true.

Madison: yeah.

Amy: Well, maybe they do control but-

Yvette: Like, I just don't like sparring with guys.

Here, Annie momentarily brings attention to the tensions in the girls' talk. In this case, this tension is not addressed until I return to it later in the conversation. Of all five girls, only Amy expressed a desire for the male students to treat them the same:

Amy: But I want them to hit me hard.

Kim: You want them to be just the same as if it's anyone else?

Amy: Yeah, exactly. I don't want them to treat me differently, you know.

It is important to note that of the five, Amy is the girl who most enjoyed sparring and was identified by the others as good at it. In her descriptions of sparring, she described a state of relieving anger and stress and not caring. The use of physical contact activities as a means of relieving stress and anger is something that is at times difficult for women, especially when the target is another person. Books such as Cohen's (2005) *Without Apology: Girls, Women and the Desire to Fight* and Lawler's (2002) *PUNCH! Why Women Participate in Violent Sports* describe the need some women feel to be powerful and, at times, aggressive, and the difficulty they often face getting over the guilt associated with their own aggression and anger (i.e., the need to stop apologizing). For some of the girls, this was easier than for others.

Amy: I feel good when I spar. Really good.

Brianna: I got smashed in the head during tournament.

Madison: Sometimes when I'm really hyper and you spar, it's so fun.

Brianna: The girl kicked me in the head ... and then I got mad and then I punched her. (giggles)

Amy: Not only that but one then there's...

Annie: One point right there.

Amy: ... times when like the whole week there's a lot of pressure, and you just like, you have to take it out on something.

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Amy: You're just like, "Aaahh!"

Yvette: That's what she does. I can't do that I can't ever take out my, like, I don't know. It's just not me.

Amy: If I don't take my anger out then I'm not gonna ...

Yvette: Like it depends sometimes, If I'm really, really, like really, really mad then I'll take it out on that person. But then, like I don't know. I can't do that.

Amy: You could, know when sparri-, when sparring was the best? When you're angry. Like you don't care who's watching, you just go aha!

Yvette: That's not in my case.

Girls that perform well at male dominated activities such as advanced kicks were often seen just as exceptions. While the girls generally had positive feelings about girls being able to “prove others wrong,” they also acknowledged problems that girls face when they do not.

Kim: What if ... there were more ... girls that could do ... 540. So if there were more female instructors that could do the advanced kicks then would you be less likely to

Yvette: We would probably try to like follow. 'Cause I mean if there's just one girl your usually just like, oh, okay. Maybe it's just her.

Yvette: And also between like girls, like, I mean, if you can do pushups, and you know that the, another girl in your class can't do pushups, they always look at you different. 'Cause you know, just because you can do pushups, you know, they feel like a freak or something.

Several Girls (laughing)

Yvette: 'Cause I mean -

Madison: Sometimes don't they get like impressed, like -

Yvette: Yeah, sometimes, like it depends on the girl too, like some girls, you know they get, you know, they're impressed that, Wow! She can do pushups and like, maybe I can do pushups too. So they start, you know, to, if they see other girls do something then -

Kim: They start to think they can do it too?

Yvette: They start to think, they can do it too. But I mean like the other girls, that you know, they're so like, girly-girl and everything, you know. They're just like, wow, she's a man or something.

New Speaker (laughing)

Yvette: It's like they start, like something stupid. Like, wow, she's, she's a guy or you know, she's not a girl cause she, she, she does guy stuff.

Whatever.

Kim: Do you guys feel that too? Brianna, yeah?

Madison: About people think you're a guy?

Yvette: No not that they think you're a guy, but I mean like, they see you different just because you could do something, and they can't do it ...

If we expect female martial artists to reach a level of engagement where they become one with an activity (i.e., experience flow), we need to avoid the disconnect many women feel between themselves and their physical power, especially in activities such as sparring. An important part of development within martial arts is reaching the state of mushin, or “no mind” – “... the aim of martial arts practice is to reach a state of no-mind rather than to achieve victory. 'No-mind' could be described as the ability to act and react, in a creative problem-solving way, without being encumbered by thought. I would say that the purpose of Kendo is to overcome the mind's propensity to rigid attachment (Rosenberg & Sapochnik 2005, p. 452). As with Csikszentmihályi's “flow,” this state can only be reached when a person becomes one with the activity, not paying attention to anything else. If obstacles such as guilt, gender stereotypes and confidence stand in the way of this engagement, female martial artists will always risk falling short when it comes to sparring and the martial arts.

In order to be fully engaged, one needs to feel competent, to be able to perform the activity without anxiety or worry. When discussing sparring, the girls identified the level of confidence as a key factor in performance. According to them, in order to excel in sparring, it is necessary to be confident (no matter who one is sparring):

Amy: They first have to learn how to like it. Like sparring, for example, if

you don't like it then you're not gonna get any confidence in winning. But if you start learning, getting, getting to like it then you're gonna, start you know, liking it having really good confidence. That's how I was cause you know how in the beginning, I used to hate sparring. I would cry each time I did sparring.

The problem that emerges here is that, when sparring at least, confidence seems to be a characteristic of males and fear of females. Males (and females that are bigger or stronger) are feared by the girls. Despite their claims that “it makes no difference” whether one is a girl or a guy in sparring, the girls revealed time and time again that it did.

Yvette: Like even when I spar you I'm scared. (laughs) ... But I mean at least you're a girl so I know at least it won't be like that bad.

In our discussion, the girls identified one male in particular as being a good partner. Even though he was older and considerably larger than all of the girls, they felt comfortable sparring him because he placed himself as their teacher, going easy on them and wanting them to do better. When I questioned whether this was because of gender, the girls hesitated and offered other possible explanations (i.e. he was older or bigger, or because he could tell they were nervous). At one point, confidence is identified as the factor that makes a difference in how one relates to their sparring opponent. Although the girls at first do not explicitly identify differences in confidence as a factor of gender, eventually they jokingly suggest that a lack of confidence is identified with being female, when I question whether a male opponent would treat another male opponent in the same way (i.e., with care and control).

Madison: I think another thing really is that like, cause, I'm not confident with sparring and I don't like it, so like, I look scared and then, that's when Jaime, like if I have to spar Jaime, he'd be like, oh it's okay and then he's like trying to

Yvette: Yeah that's true sometimes

Madison: It depends on your confidence with sparring also

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Kim: Yeah. And do you think that they would do the same thing, like, for a teenage boy?

Yvette: No.

Madison: I don't know.

Kim: Like say someone like George. Right, George is about the same belt level as you,

Brianna: Yes

Kim: And he's about the same age.

Madison: Yeah he is.

Yvette: It's different.

Kim: So if Jaime was sparring George, George looked [scared], do you think Jaime would stop and

Madison: No.

Yvette: No. It's different.

Brianna: George is good.

Yvette: Plus George likes sparring. So like, he is actually like going towards you.

And like if it's you, against Jaime, you're not the one going towards him, you're just

like standing there.

Kim: And what if, what if you could imagine George wasn't like that, what if

George was more like

Brianna: a girl? (laughs)

Even after I point out that they (i.e. Brianna) supplied the word “girl” when I was trying to describe someone who was not confident in or good at sparring, the girls hesitate to claim gender differences.

Kim: Do you think, usually, that guys have more confidence than girls in sparring?

Amy: I think it really depends on them though

Brianna: It's like they don't...

Madison: Because

Brianna: ...care. It's like, it's fighting.

Madison: Yeah. (laughs)

Kim: So they like it more?

Brianna: Yeah.

At this point, at Madison's suggestion, the girls attempt to think of boys who are not confident at sparring. When the girls name a few examples, Madison suggests that these boys may not be good, but they are still not scared.

Kim: But I think what Madison, and maybe I'm wrong, but I think what you were gonna say is that they're not good at it but they have, they don't have low confidence.

Madison: Yeah they're, they're not saying, oh, I'm scared, I don't wanna do it. They don't back out from it.

Kim: Even if they're bad they just

more than one of the girls: laughs

Madison: Yeah, even if they're bad

Madison: They actually go up to me and go, like, I wanna spar you.

Amy: They say, they say it to the girls, they don't go up to a guy like Joseph

Chris, or Pedro and be like, I wanna spar you, they go to (?)

Madison: yeah.

Amy: Don't let them do that to you.

Madison: 'Cause they're confident.

Amy: Be like, fine, let's go spar, I'll beat you up, (?) okay?

Kim: What about, how many girls can you think of that don't like to spar?

more than one of the girls: A lot!

Madison: That's the thing.

Amy: (pointing to the girls) One, two, three.

Yvette: Ma'am Maggie!

Kim: So there is a difference it seems, in general.

Madison: In general.

Kim: That guys have more confidence sparring than girls.

Kim: And is it just because like Brianna said, they just like fighting, and

they like to fight?

Brianna: 'Cause that's the reason why they joined probably.

It is easy, when discussing aspects such as confidence and fear, to problematize the girls themselves, and to limit the discussion to beliefs and mental constructs such as

efficacy. This approach fails to acknowledge the ways that gender differences are socially constructed by ascribing them to “natural differences” (girls are just not cut out for fighting) or individual shortcomings (these particular girls have no confidence). In the discussions above, the girls identify differences in the relationship between the two opponents (“So like, he is actually like going towards you. And like if it's you, against Jaime, you're not the one going towards him, you're just like standing there.”) Rather than understanding confidence as an individual trait, activity theory allows it to be understood as a feature of activities that can be revealed by looking at, in this case, how bodies are organized and interact, symbolically and materially. Because women often do not have experiences outside of the dojang that resemble fighting (whether in play or not), and because cultural norms place women as weaker than men (i.e. both fearing men and needing protection from them), it is easy to reinforce difference in the dojang rather than changing them.

The way that students are organized within a Tae Kwon Do class is an important factor in determining confidence. Although it is not always the case, there are some moments when we become aware of how we are placed within these situations. From my own experiences, two distinct experiences highlight this.

About a year or so after I started training, I would regularly attend classes on weekday afternoons. Since many students' work and school schedules would not allow this, these classes used to be relatively small. It was not unusual therefore, that I would be the only female in these classes. During sparring sessions, I would be partnered with male students, despite differences in size and/or weight. I clearly remember sparring one student, for example, who was easily the largest student in the school and, although not

the fastest, certainly was capable of kicking and punching quite hard. Despite this, I was expected to spar him. I am pretty sure I never beat him in a match, but the mere placement of me as his opponent created the possibility for me to improve, to feel like I should and could compete. Later on in my training, I believe that these situations became less frequent. In one, more recent class, I recall being frustrated as a sparring class was organized into two divisions. Although it was never stated, it was clear that there were two levels – on the top level were all of the adult men (and some teenage boys), and the bottom level included all of the females and some of the younger males. Being placed in the bottom level, despite having experience sparring all of the males in the class, immediately affected how I thought and felt about sparring that day. The organization of bodies creates possibilities to think and feel that I can do something (or that I cannot). My confidence in each of these cases does not come from inside of me, but from the organization of the situation. Certainly I am an important part of this situation; my past experiences influence the way that I participate in the situation. But the confidence or motivation I have is not determined solely by me – it is not something that I “bring with me” into the situation. It is something that emerges from the situation itself (including, among other things, myself, my partner, and the rules of the classroom).

The reality of a sparring match is that if I am thinking during the match about whether or not I can win, I probably will not. During the match itself, I must feel, not think. Any moment of thinking or using language in any way is only meant to influence the way that I feel. So while it is true that my thoughts can effect how I feel, the opposite is also true. Both of these processes emerge from the situation, in this case the practice of sparring. The martial arts, in their most traditional form, are not about product but

process (philosophically, the true opponent in sparring is always oneself). Ideally, the end result should not matter. There is no end; you are never done training. The goal of instructors, therefore, should be to create situations where students have the possibility to improve. In order to do so, one cannot feel limited or inhibited.

The expectations that instructors placed on the girls within the school reveal underlying expectations based on gender. Inside the class, for example, the instructor would choose students to “partner” with him for self-defense.

Brianna: Like, you know when he calls somebody to be his partner? He hurts them.

Madison: Oh yeah. Oh my God, it's so funny.

Kim: So you like that he doesn't call on you.

Brianna: Yes

Madison: Well I don't think he would call on you.

The girls interpret not being picked as the instructor “caring” about them. In other words, he would not pick the female students because it is not appropriate to “hurt” girls (i.e., “I don't think he would call on you.”)

On one occasion, while I was still training at the Tae Kwon Do school, several of the staff members from the school took a trial class at a Muay Thai (a Thai martial art similar to kickboxing) school. The class was quite challenging, physically, and it felt good to train in another setting. At several moments, the instructor tried to get me to punch harder by saying that I punch “like a girl.” After the class, I wondered why this particular taunt, laced with gender stereotypes, didn't bother me at this time. In the end, I realized that (in my mind at least), the instructor believed that I could do better. He didn't accept (or at least I didn't think he did) that punching like a girl was natural or inevitable.

It wasn't so much the idea that was expressed (i.e., that girls don't punch as well as boys) verbally, but the expectation that the phrase brought with it in that particular situation.

While I don't agree with or condone the use of such phrases as motivational tools, I think this case highlights the importance of addressing gender differences not as natural or insurmountable, but as socially constructed obstacles that can be overcome.

Despite feeling scared and uncomfortable sparring males (or partnering with them during self-defense), the girls believed that more practice and opportunities sparring males would benefit them. Often, the choices of instructors during class were based on creating same gender pairs. When they weren't, there was often the underlying assumption that either it was "unusual," i.e., look how good this girl is, or even funny, i.e., look at this guy being "beat up" by a girl.

McDonagh and Pappano (2007) argue that the compulsory separation of sports by gender automatically reinforces the idea that women are not, and will never be, able to compete "with the boys." At competitive tournaments, where divisions were created by gender as well as age and belt level, it was clear from the number of competitors, judges and bystanders that the male competitions were always seen as "the main event" while the female divisions were secondary. In our discussions, the girls questioned why the tournament separates competition by gender. Although the girls never say that the genders are separated because males are better or stronger or more dangerous than females (I believe because this would challenge the official discourse of gender equality), it is implied in their talk:

Annie: Like Instructor Jelena, I was so surprised, well not really, that she got to the men's division.

Kim: Why did she get to the men's division?

Annie: She's pretty good.

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Kim: Well on the one hand you're saying there's no difference, girls and guys can spar each other. But then you're saying that the girls who are better, should be able to spar with the boys.

Annie: Well that's only in tournament time. I don't understand. What do they do in tournaments?

Kim: I don't know, that's what I'm trying to figure out. Why is it different in tournament?

Yvette: Well, I mean, in here, there's really no difference, like, if you're taking class, whatever, sparring. But then in tournaments I don't, I don't understand tournaments.

Conflicts such as these could, in my opinion, serve as epiphonic moments for the girls. As Brace-Govan (2004) showed with her work with female bodybuilders, contradictions between female athlete's desire to perform well and outside messages that highlight gender stereotypes often serve as moments for women to question and strengthen their identity as strong and powerful athletes and/or martial artists. Moments when participants are saying, simultaneously, that gender doesn't matter and that it does can serve as moments of exploration and critique. There is a need to realize and recognize that gender stereotypes and differences are socially constructed and not merely a matter of innate individual or group characteristics.

Including sparring, the girls were able to identify gender differences in the both the types of activities preferred and the ways of participation.

Amy: It also depends on you know the different class types. You know how Monday's form, Tuesday's whatever, Wednesday's whatever? Well mostly all the guys show up on Friday for some reason.

More than one of the girls: cause it's sparring.

Amy: Yeah exactly. But then Monday they don't show up for form class or anything. They show up for like Tuesday or something

Kim: So you think guys like sparring better.

Yvette: 'Cause they, they always like to fight for like no reason.

Amy: They wanna show off their friggin friends with sparring ...

Madison: Yeah.

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Yvette: It's the only reason why they come and take class.

Amy: (laughing) Exactly.

When discussing advanced kicks, the girls touched on a difference between the boys, who were willing to keep trying (assuming that they would get it) and girls who would give up (assuming that they wouldn't get it).

Kim: But for, you think, and I'm trying to figure out like, the difference. Do you think like guys don't let that bother them? Like they try one time and they can't do it. It doesn't matter and they just keep trying?

Yvette: They keep trying.

Madison: They keep trying.

Yvette: 'Cause they wanna like

(Madison and Brianna): Show off.

Yvette: Yeah they wanna show that they could do something.

Kim: But if you try to do something and you can't do it then that's just

Yvette: Aw, just give up.

Kim: You just give up and say, okay I can't do that.

Yvette: Unless I could like, unless like he keeps on bringing it up, like in class. So then I'm just like, okay, I have to do it. So I do. I try.

From my observations as well as discussions with the girls, there was a clear difference in the way that they performed in class from boys. While male students often volunteered and looked forward to demonstrating and attempting more difficult techniques (even when they could not perform them well), females often hesitated and feared such opportunities. As Yvette's comment above highlights, it is only when some aspect of the situation (i.e., the instructor "keeps on bringing it up") encourages repeated efforts that girls will keep trying. This emphasizes the importance of instructors' continued belief in, and encouragement of, female students, especially as they attempt more difficult techniques.

As mentioned earlier, the girls did not like to be the object of other students (or instructors) attention. They spoke in a negative tone about the boys desire to "show off," in terms of sparring, learning new techniques, and advancing in belt level and uniform. While the girls described the boys repeatedly as "wanting to show off," they themselves preferred not to be watched, especially by boys who they liked:

Yvette: Like usually if there, you have a crush that's in Tae Kwon Do and you

know they're there, like, for me I would usually, I like, I usually feel like, like nervous, like, you know? I don't wanna do anything in front of them, like nothing. So, I don't know. That's the only thing, like. If I see, if I know they're inside, you know and they're like watching me ...I, I'm like, I'm just like, I don't know what to do. And like, I don't know. I always get that feeling. Especially if it's a guy that you like.

If the girls are not encouraged by instructors to participate in and practice more advanced techniques, it is likely that differences in their experiences will be amplified. Instructors who may, with good intentions, refrain from pressuring or requiring girls to practice these techniques are actually contributing to gender discrimination.

Despite the girls' continuous claims that gender was not a factor in their training, that in today's day and age gender discrimination doesn't exist, there were very real differences revealed in their talk about their training. Explorations of the ways in which socially constructed differences are reinforced within the dojang and interpreted as either "natural" characteristics of groups or shortcomings of individuals are an important starting point. The question should not be "can women ever be as good as men?" – this is irrelevant and leads to questions about nature vs. nurture that simply reinforce the false dichotomy between genes and the environment (Oyama 2000). Instead the question we must ask is how we can change activities such as Tae Kwon Do so that being female is not a limitation. This requires looking both inside and outside of the dojang at how the way in which girls are allowed to participate in practices shape their identities (i.e. both the symbolic and material mediation, both the mind and the body image.)

## **Becoming staff**

It became clear to me throughout my work with the girls that the distinctions between males and females became highlighted in new ways as the girls progressed from student to staff member (i.e., “got their red uniform”).

As they progressed from student to staff member, new relationships developed. Staff and instructors went from being teachers and authority figures to a second family. “But actually after I got the uniform, I felt like I got to know people better.” This was perhaps most evident when they adopted familial relationships with other staff members (i.e., girls would specify one person as their “Tae Kwon Do mommy,” “daddy,” “sister,” etc.) These relationships were pretty stable, and important for the girls. Occasionally, the new role of being a staff member strained their previous friendships, as they were expected to “distance themselves” from the students. But overall, there was much appreciation and fondness of the new friendships that emerged as the girls spent more time working and training with their fellow staff members. “Yeah, it's kinda like, when you're a regular student you really don't get that advantage to like, actually meet your instructors and see, you know.”

Throughout their development both as students and staff, the most complicated relationship was with the head instructor of the school. As mentioned earlier, while there were many female staff members at the various locations, the highest positions tended to be held by males. Since Tae Kwon Do , like most martial arts, was highly reliant on strict hierarchies, the placement of individuals within the organization was very important. For the girls, the head instructor of our school filled various roles – a teacher inside the class, an older brother/father figure, a boss, and an authority figure. The power relationship, as

it existed, reinforced traditional power relations between men and women. Bourdieu's description of gendered positions in the workplace, and what they both promise and permit, is applicable here.

Thus the world of work is full of little isolated occupational milieux (a hospital staff, the office of a ministry, etc.) functioning as quasi-families in which the staff manager, almost always a man, exercises a paternalistic authority, based on emotional envelopment or seduction, and, both overburdened with work and taking charge of everything that happens in the institution, offers a generalized protection to a generally female junior staff (nurses, assistants, secretaries) who are thereby encouraged to make an intense, sometimes pathological, investment in the institution and the person who embodies it. (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 58)

In the everyday activities at the school, the head instructor determined the actions of the staff, including what they would be doing at what time (e.g., teaching, working behind the front desk, practicing techniques or scripts). The lack of freedom that this created for the girls was something that they discussed in our meetings:

Amy: But there are times when I'm getting really stressed like I just wanna take class but then he doesn't let you take class. I hate it when he does that. And then when you don't want to take class he makes you take class. I'm like (makes a frustrated noise)

Comparing their experiences of being a student and being a staff, the girls stressed the freedom they had before becoming staff:

Madison: Your like schedule's much more flexible.

Brianna: You just leave whenever you want.

Amy: You don't have to go every single day.

Madison: You don't have to ask permission to leave.

Beyond the lack of freedom in their actions, the girls also discussed the discomfort that they felt when with the head instructor. This was troubling since it was he that determined the nature of their interactions, which would change based on his mood. The girls joked about feeling uncomfortable when the head instructor was affectionate with them, perhaps because it was such a contrast to his usual “strict” demeanor. Although their tone remains lighthearted, the discussion reveals an underlying sense of discomfort and powerlessness.

Amy: Like Valentine's Day when he liked hugged me, I was like, like backing away, I'm like eehhhhh.

Yvette: Yeah I was like this. And he was hugging me and I'm like this. And then he's like this.

More than one of the girls: (laughing)

Yvette: I'm like, it's okay.

More than one of the girls: (laughing)

Yvette: Yeah like he takes my arm and he puts it around him and I'm like, it's okay.

More than one of the girls (laughing)

Madison: Oh my God. That sounds creepy now.

Yvette: I was trying so hard.

Amy: No it was cause, you know you saw my expression, I was like this I was like

Yvette: Yeah she was like this

Kim: Madison 's like, I'm done

Amy: He's like, don't be shy, don't be shy. I'm like, I'm not being shy, I don't wanna be hugged by you, that's the thing.

Yvette: Yeah it was like this too.

Amy: I'm like I don't wanna be hugged...

Madison: Doesn't he like to like, do that to you. (Demonstrating him massaging her shoulders)

Yvette: Yeah!

Brianna: That hurts.

Yvette: Some massage.

The sense that the instructor was “all powerful”, as well as the related powerlessness of the girls, was enhanced by the girls’ feeling that “he knows everything.”

Yvette: Instructor James always knows everything.

Amy: I know. He's so nosy.

Annie: Oh yeah. That is so true.

Amy: Like about you having a boyfriend and everything, I'm like

Yvette: Okay we don't need to go into details.

More than one of the girls: laughing

Yvette: It's okay.

Amy: He knows everything...

The boundaries of such a relationship become blurry as he tried to guide them not only in their training but also in their personal lives. Staff rules of the school include items such as “staff members must get permission from the instructor if they plan to meet outside of the school” and rules about “representing” the school well and not

disrespecting the instructors or masters. For adolescent girls, the placement of their instructor as someone who would interfere in their lives beyond Tae Kwon Do increased the power he held.

Their experiences as a staff, working to satisfy the demands placed on them by their instructor, were often stressful for the girls. Our discussions returned repeatedly to the girls' wish to have less pressure (and thus less stress.) At the same time, it was through a performance of who they were supposed to be that developed the characteristics that are valued within the martial arts. The training and tasks within the dojang created zones of proximal development for the girls to develop respect and discipline. The tension that existed for the girls was between the amount of expectations that were placed on them and the desire to satisfy these expectations. The girls struggled between resenting the stress and pressure placed upon them by their instructor and the desire to impress and be recognized by him.

Yvette: Like you want to be left alone sometimes, but then at the same time you wanna be like

Amy: recognized.

Yvette: recognized. It makes you feel good when he recognizes you.

Madison: I think what it is, if he expects too much it's like, too much pressure, but if, but then, the good side to be that he expects too much is that he thinks you're capable.

Yvette: That's true.

Madison: And that kind of feels, good.

Kim: So it's good that he thinks that you can do it.

Madison: Yeah.

Kim: So maybe the pressure is good?

Madison: Maybe.

Kim: Or is there still just too much of it?

Yvette: Like it's good but then you feel like, it's too much for yourself.

Amy: Yeah.

While the girls did have ideas and suggestions about how the school could be improved, they did not feel comfortable sharing them with the instructor, both because they did not think he would take them seriously and because they felt uncomfortable approaching him. (One girl's response when I proposed setting up a meeting with them and their instructor to discuss our work was "Oh, hell no. Oh hell no. No, it's okay.") Within their relationship with him, their agency was limited. One theme that emerged when discussing relationships between the girls and other staff members and students was the need for caring relationships. Ultimately, the girls desired a more caring attitude from their instructor.

Amy: There are times when he really cares about you but then there are just some times when you just wanna like kill him.

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Yvette: Like maybe he should just show that side that, like you know, he supposedly cares about you.

Amy: Exactly.

Yvette: I like better showing that side.

All of the frustration and conflict revealed itself in the contradictory feelings the girls expressed about being a staff member. On one hand, the girls were extremely proud of their status as role models in the school. On the other, the girls questioned whether this was really what they signed up for. In questioning whether being a student or staff member was more important (i.e., more valued) by the school, the girls revealed a progression in their training that changed the emphasis from their own training in Tae Kwon Do to the role of support for others.

### **Defining the object**

For the girls I met with, the development of their relationship with Tae Kwon Do was revealed when one suggested that Tae Kwon Do is “life changing.” The girls point out that both physically and mentally they would be different if they had not started training. Perhaps most revealing in its simplicity is the observation by one girl that “...it gives you something to do. Like, if I weren't doing Tae Kwon Do, I'd be just like at home every day on the computer.” While at first glance this seems dismissive or flippant, I believe on a deeper level it reveals the importance of Tae Kwon Do to her life – it is what she does. Throughout my work with the girls, it was obvious that Tae Kwon Do existed as the hobby that the girls chose – what they did in their free time. The way they talked about this reveals the importance, within our culture, that we place on organized hobbies for young people. As one girl writes, “I told my sister over and over, ‘you can have Tae Kwon Do, I already have basketball.’” It was understood that staying home everyday on the computer was not adequate, but playing basketball on a team was. The choice to do Tae Kwon Do (and to continue doing it) as a hobby was an important part of the girls’ self-creation. As one girl says, “[i]t creates personality.”

As mentioned earlier, this self-definition and creation is an explicit part of the activity of Tae Kwon Do, which I believe adds to the importance of exploring its potential for its participants. While basketball is an activity that is used by many people to define their self, there is nothing in the activity itself that necessarily stresses this. In the martial arts, however, the explicit objective is to improve (and create) one's self. For those who accept this, martial arts become a lifestyle as much as a hobby. Sometimes this is stressed in the language that is used, i.e. "one does not receive or get his/her black belt, one becomes a black belt." From my own reflections, I saw this in how difficult it was to leave the school, for myself as well as for fellow staff members. This was true despite feelings of frustration, anger, and disappointment in relationship to what was going on:

My resistance to quitting is not necessarily due to loyalty to any person or activity, but to myself. As a transformational activity, Tae Kwon Do exists as a definition of myself. When I agree to define myself in a certain way, there is a high cost of denying the worth; I want to believe that Tae Kwon Do exists in a certain way because I have invested time, energy and myself into this activity.  
(from personal notes)

The ways in which Tae Kwon Do is enacted and defined by the girls is not always the same. As Engeström (1999) highlights when he makes the distinction between collective activities and individual and group actions, activities are not always understood by all participants in the same way. Throughout the groupwork, I realized that Tae Kwon Do meant something different for the girls than what I perhaps wanted it to mean to them. It was at times disappointing for me that in our discussions, I was the one who

regularly brought up issues surrounding the physical and mental training. It seemed that the girls' actions and responsibilities as staff (i.e. helping to clean, assisting in class, taking care of "front desk" stuff) outweighed their training as students.

Related to this discrepancy between being a student and a staff member is the role others play in their decision to keep doing Tae Kwon Do. This is revealed when I asked the girls what motivates them to continue coming to Tae Kwon Do. (To see a list of motivating factors generated during one of our meetings, see Appendix D)

Annie: My parents.

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Yvette: One reason that motivates me is - that, um, I don't know, I just really like kids a lot so, I mean ...

Madison: Oh yeah.

Yvette: ... that's the only reason I go because you know, you can go and like see the little children try doing their kicks and it's really funny for me. Especially the three four year olds.

Madison: They're so cute

Yvette: They're really cute so, that's the only thing that motivates me.

Brianna: I go because my mom makes me.

Madison: Really?

Brianna: Like she paid for it.

Amy: People around me like the parents.

Annie: There are some people that look up to you even though they don't admit it, but, that's why, like, you have to set a role model for them. That's the job of an

instructor to be a role model, so if you do quit, you know, what happens to those people that look up to you?

Yvette: Yeah, that's true.

Kim: That's what keeps you from quitting?

Annie: Well kind of.

Kim: What else?

Annie: Um, we make friends.

Yvette: (quietly) What else?

Annie: Responsibility

Madison: We don't want to waste the money.(inaudible). Or you just quit.

Yvette: Yeah.

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Kim: What about actually taking class?

Annie: Oh yeah, taking class is fun, too.

It is not until I ask them that they mention taking class as a motivating factor, and their comments once it comes up are less than inspiring:

Amy: I'm getting lazy these days.

Madison: It depends.

Kim: It depends on what?

Amy: It depends on whose teaching and it depends on what -

Madison: And then, like, if I have homework. Oh my god. If I have homework I really don't feel like going but I go anyway.

Annie: Maybe when you're younger you look forward to taking class but now that

we're growing up we don't have time for it.

Amy: You feel lazy, don't you?

Brianna: Yes.

Annie: Yeah.

As the discussions continued, what became clearer to me was the importance of the relationships the girls formed at the school. More so than what they could get out of the training, the girls focused on what others expected of them and not wanting to let important people down. As is revealed in the above text, it is as if doing things for oneself (i.e., taking class) is okay for little girls, but as girls develop into teenagers and young women what is important is not letting others down. This can be understood in light of Gilligan's (1982) well-known work on moral development in girls, or other work that understands women as relational and caring as opposed to rational and objective. The danger lies in seeing this as a necessarily "female" trait, as opposed to a socially constructed means of existing and interacting that shapes and limits girls and women (as well as boys and men.)

In fact the girls themselves came to see this selflessness and dedication as positive traits that demonstrated their maturity in relation to the teenage boys at the school, who were seen as irresponsible and just there for the "physical" training:

Amy: Well, all the guys, what I think is that all the guys just come for physical exercise, and they really don't want the red uniform and help out or whatever.

Brianna: They don't care.

Amy: They really don't care.

Annie: They want it to show off.

Madison: Yeah, They want to learn the kicks and show off.

Yvette: Yeah, that's all.

Kim: And how's that different then the girls?

Yvette: Because the girls take the staff seriously.

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Annie: That's why his whole staff is girls.

Amy: Yeah, exactly. Seriously.

Yvette: They don't take it too serious.

Brianna: They don't give a crap.

An important question in relation to the differences the girls point out between boys and girls on the staff is “where do these differences come from?”

Kim: Do you think it's, like they're treated differently or do you think they're just different?

Amy: They're just ...

Amy: They're just ...

Annie: They're just different.

Amy: ... I mean everybody's different

Yvette: They're just different. Everybody's different in their own way so, but guys are like –

At this moment, Yvette seems to be downplaying gender differences by highlighting individual differences. But at other moments, differences between boys and girls were emphasized. In the next chapter, I will discuss moments of conflict within the process of my work with the girls. As discussed earlier, I believe that these moments,

when there may be contradictions between different elements in the activity system (i.e. epiphonic moments), are potential spaces for development. This moment of questioning whether boys are different because they're boys or because they are treated differently is an important example. The girls obviously struggle with resolving this problem.

Kim: Are they treated differently by Instructor James?

Amy: Yeah.

Kim: What is -

Madison: I don't know.

Amy: I think Instructor James gives the girls more pressure than the guys.

Annie: 'Cause the girls are more disciplined than guys.

Yvette: Yeah.

Brianna: He knows he can't -

Madison: He said that before.

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Annie: Instructor James has his reasons for picking girls.

Amy: Yeah.

Annie: Well, not in a perverted way.

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Kim: What do you think his reasons are?

Madison: Because he finds more

Annie: We're more, responsible

Madison: Yeah. He said it once. That he f-, finds that girls are more mature.

Yvette: More mature than guys. And it's just true.

Annie: And we persevere more to finish our work, more than guys do.

Yvette: Guys are not mature. They're slow learners. (laughs)

Yvette: Well it's not that they're like slower learners, they just don't, they don't have the responsibility. They think everything's like a game, so.

Amy: And not only that but

Yvette: They're not too serious.

Madison: But, when you talk about learning, learning about what?

Yvette: Like, how to handle things.

Madison: Oh.

Annie: No, I think Instructor James prefers girls more because they do more of the business work instead of actually training inside the dojang. Like, like Manuel-, if he were to train more, I think he would be good at the front desk. But I think Manuel- is more focused right now at his physical strength more than (inaudible)

Amy: 'Cause all guys are like that.

Kim: Do you guys agree?

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Madison: Yeah, guys are more focused on their, ...

Yvette: Yeah that's true

Madison: ... on their like, physical

In the end, the girls seem to agree that “guys are just different,” and this is why they are treated differently. An important question for instructors and others interested in female martial artists is how can we push these conversations further (i.e. what tools and processes can we provide for girls) in order to create possibilities for girls to examine

how gender is socially constructed, so that they can re-evaluate and redefine their own potential and identities. Continuing the discussion, the question I posed was what does this mean for girls:

Kim: Doesn't that mean then that girls are less focused on their physical training?

Yvette: It's not that but

Madison: Maybe we know how to balance our priorities.

Kim: So you think it's more balanced?

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Kim: So is that what it is, girls are just balanced more?

Amy: Hmm?

Kim: Madison said maybe girls could balance more.

Annie: I don't think that's true, sometimes.

Amy: Me either (?)

Annie: Cause you can't exactly be balanced. Maybe we're more good in the front desk. There are some, like, like ma'am Maggie, I, I'm not saying anything bad, but, you know, she doesn't like to do, spar, and she spends most of her time in the front desk instead of training at her sparring.

Madison: Like what I mean is that like, we know that both is, sort of important.

Annie: Both is important but we can't balance it.

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Kim: So what are they missing then?

Yvette: The discipline

Amy: They're missing

Yvette: responsibility

Amy: respect

Yvette: respect

In their discussions about their role as staff members, it was clear that the division of labor based on gender was communicated both through the material organization of bodies and jobs and through the verbal reinforcement by instructors. The girls got the message in many ways at the Tae Kwon Do school (and I would imagine outside of the school as well) that to be female is to be, to an extent, selfless (or at least defined by what one does for others). The girls became associated with the front desk, with helping out, supporting others, and the boys were associated with training, showing off, and helping themselves. This is not something that exists solely on an ideological level, but also materially. In my observations, I noticed that often the division of bodies was such that girls often spent more time outside of the dojang (the classroom) than inside, and their time spent inside was more often spent helping and/or teaching childrens' classes rather than adults. At special occasions such as promotion tests, the head instructor and/or grandmaster of the school would choose, time and time again, female staff members to stand outside and greet students and parents (presumably with a smile and a friendly attitude) while placing male staff inside the classroom. While there was no shortage of female instructors at all of the schools (often they outnumbered the males), the highest-ranking instructors were almost always male. Even when female instructors did make it to the highest levels, they were either seen as exceptions, or they're not because of their abilities in Tae Kwon Do, but because of their dedication and support.

This message became very clear to me when discussing my work with the girls with the head instructor of the school. At this meeting, I expressed my concern that the female staff at the school often took on the role of supporting others to the detriment of their own training. While he was obviously concerned and cared very much for the girls at the school, there were several problems, in my opinion, with his response. First, his concern was on how to change the girls. In agreeing that female staff were often less enthusiastic than males in taking class and training, he seemed to see this as their problem. The questions became “how can we make them want to take class?” and “why do some females stay dedicated to their training and others not?” These are both important questions, but only can be answered if we look beyond the girls themselves to understand how certain ideas and behaviors are created for the girls within the activity of the Tae Kwon Do school (as it exists within our society and culture.) Once we do so, the questions about “making” the girls want to train become more about changing the activity of the school and less about problematizing the girls. A second problem was that this role of female staff was not necessarily seen as a problem at all. In describing the work of one especially dedicated female staff member (who was “second in charge” at the time of our talk), he said something along the lines of “she keeps me together, I keep everything else together.” It was as if to say, yes I know that this is what females do, but at least I recognize that it is very important. It allows me to do what I do. The fact that it never allows the girls to do what he does is not seen as a problem.

This is not to say that dedication and selflessness are bad things to have, of course. I also admired the girls’ willingness to sacrifice their time and energy to help run the school and teach the students. But if Tae Kwon Do is to be an activity that promotes their

strength, power, and agency I would argue that they cannot see wanting to train and get better as the “selfish” and “immature” characteristics of boys. At the same time, it would not hurt the boys training to develop some of the selflessness and dedication that the girls had. This is perhaps what the girls were thinking when they suggested that in order to improve the school, the instructors should “make the boys clean more.”

As I progressed in the meetings and work with the girls, it occurred to me that the focus of my research (i.e., what I wanted Tae Kwon Do to be for the girls) was not the same as what Tae Kwon Do was for them. I wanted very much for the Tae Kwon Do school to be a place where gender discriminations could be analyzed and addressed. While I was focused on the role of martial arts in developing power and strength in individuals, the girls saw it as a place to spend time with friends, to develop discipline and respect, and to help others. Although they did see the physical training as important, it was almost as if the importance decreased as they progressed. Initially, this was a bit troubling, as I wondered why I should think that my position was any better than theirs. After all, the martial arts are about more than just the physical. Considering the reality of females and their positioning in our society, however, I do think it is important that we explore the potential of martial arts to allow females to be powerful and strong, and to understand how instructors, schools and students can work to realize this potential. Furthermore, as an instructor (and a more experienced adult), I believe that I cannot ignore the responsibility that comes with my position – a responsibility not to control or dictate to the girls, but to teach, train, and influence them as they develop.

## **VI. Learning within and from the process**

Within a sociocultural tradition, it is important to focus on the level of activity as opposed to solely individual or group characteristics. One of the objectives of my work with the girls was to construct together a group activity that could expand and transform the activity of Tae Kwon Do training. In other words, my research was not aimed at simply understanding the activity (Tae Kwon Do), nor was it limited to understanding the girls' identities as they developed within this activity. Beyond understanding the activity and the developing identities, I wanted to facilitate change through the research process.

In the previous chapter, I outlined the shared story that we, as a group, were able to produce about our training in Tae Kwon Do and, using a sociocultural perspective, analyzed how the girls' identity developed within this activity. In this chapter, I aim to explore further the process itself, to see how the girls used the language and other cultural tools of the institution to construct, describe and understand both themselves and the activity of Tae Kwon Do . Emerging from this process, I explore the various contradictions that are evident in the activity model – both within and among various components of the activity.

What was ultimately missing in my attempt, using Engeström's (1987) work on expansive learning as a guideline, was the development, by the group, of a new model/objective that could redefine and thus expand the activity of the Tae Kwon Do school. Since the objective was not simply to modify the girls, individually or as a group, nor to replace the girls' activity with an already existing one (I did not, for example, simply want the girls to adopt the boys' experience of training), it was not enough to highlight or even reflect upon contradictions in our stories and experiences. What was

necessary, in order to transform the activity itself, was a new model, developed out of the contradictions in the current activity, that could ultimately be used as a tool within a new activity system. While we were able, through our work together, to develop a list of suggestions that would potentially change various components of the Tae Kwon Do school, these changes did not sufficiently develop a new model of the school. They did, however, identify potential starting points for such change. The failure to construct such a model notwithstanding, I believe that much can be learned by looking closely at the groupwork process as it happened.

### ***Using the discourse of the school***

Within the work with the girls as a group (as well as in their individual stories and interviews), the ways in which Tae Kwon Do is talked about reveals key aspects of how the girls' developing identities are part of an activity that has collective tools, including a shared language. In addition, the way the girls (and others) talk within the activity – as they train, take class, teach class, hang out, help out – changes themselves as well as the world. As girls develop within and into Tae Kwon Do they do so with the language and underlying ideology of the art, which are used as tools in the practice of training as well as in the practice of defining oneself. Such discourse reveals key characteristics of the activity as a whole. At the same time, the use of such languages provides opportunities to reproduce and alter the historical practice of Tae Kwon Do. Without reflection and analysis of such tools, however, the conscious and deliberate transformation and expansion of Tae Kwon Do is not possible.

Several key moments in the process reveal the girls using both the official and unofficial discourse of the school, showing how socially shared aspects of the activity system are used in the process of defining oneself. Especially relevant is the way that issues of choice are shaped within the school. When discussing when they would (or could) leave the school, for example, the girls referred to the duration of their contracts:

Annie: I mean the way that I think about it is the only way that I could get out of Tae Kwon Do is if my contract expires. But until then I'll stay.

Amy: When your contract expires he's probably gonna try renewing you again, he'll be like "Annie. You have to join this program. You know you have to make your life successful. You have to look into the future" I'll be like ugh, okay.

Annie: But you have to decide whether you want to continue or not for that program and -

Amy: I didn't want to join the instructor program.

Annie: So, I didn't want to join either.

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Amy: My contract got entered as 2010. Now because I joined instructor program I have to stay until 2015. Oh my goodness, I'm gonna grow old.

Brianna: 8 years.

Annie: Oh my God. 2010 is coming soon and I'll be gone.

Yvette: My contract expires 2011.

Brianna: Mine is 2010

Amy: 15. 15!

At these and other moments, it was clear that the girls did not see remaining in Tae Kwon Do as necessarily their choice (at least at this moment), but as something they were obliged to do. This is clearly built into the structure of the school, which is based around “contracts” and “membership agreements” that are supposed to assure the “commitment” and “dedication” of the students. To stop coming during one’s contract would mean that one “quit” (as opposed to decided to stop coming.) The adoption of the discourse of the school shaped the possibilities for the girls to act. There were limited options, within the current activity, for the girls to leave the school. They could choose not renew their contract at a specific moment (which, as the girls reveal above, is harder than it sounds), they could be forced to leave by external circumstances (i.e., moving away), or they could quit (and thus become a quitter.) They believed, as they had been told, that they were role models for others, that beyond themselves they represented their school, their instructors and Tae Kwon Do , and that quitting would be letting others down. A popular mantra at the school, after all, was the cliché “winners never quit.”

If the girls had not adopted the language in this way, and many students do not, they could break their contract without labeling themselves as a quitter, or feeling as if they had betrayed their instructors or themselves. The ways that the girls used the language, evidence that they had in fact used such discourse to understand themselves and shape their actions, assured that they did not have this option. In order for another possibility to exist, the activity itself would have to be changed. The discourse of the school (i.e., contracts, dedication, commitment) would have to become flexible tools that are interpreted and defined by the girls in the process of developing a new model, rather than as established and inflexible structures and rules that shape the actions of the girls.

The girls repeatedly used the language of the school and instructors when making judgments and comparisons of themselves and other staff members. We have seen earlier how, when addressing the differences between the male and female staff members, the girls used words such as “discipline” and “respect” to define what the boys were lacking. They were especially harsh when describing the attitudes of the teenaged male staff and the “juniors,” who were younger in age and did not yet share the same level of responsibilities that the girls had.

Yvette: Well kinda like, make the juniors do something, cause like, like I don't know

Amy: You know most of the time it's like, for teenagers it's like the girls are teaching

Yvette: Guys don't teach. Well Instructor James. (laughs)

Kim: They don't teach? What are you saying, like jr. instructor guys?

Yvette: Yeah like they don't like helping out.

Annie: Like Joseph.

Kim: What do they do then? You said they don't clean, they don't teach

Annie: They take class.

Amy: They just take class.

Yvette: They just take class.

Amy: They just come and go.

Brianna: And take space.

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Yvette: I always get mad at like, the staff members, the little staff members, cause I

mean like, you are supposed to be like, you know, moving around, trying to see everybody, you know, to help them out, and then like, sometimes they stay in one, like, you know, with one person. I mean, I don't blame them, but sometimes, you know, when I'm in a bad mood or something, I'm just like, "Move around! Move around! Don't just stay in one place." But I mean like, sometimes they're not even helping anybody, they're just standing in there. So, I'm just like, I scream at them, I'm like, "Can't you move around. Can't you see these kids?" You know, like, push them down if they need help, you know, just, stay with them.

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Yvette: So, yeah. And like, especially when it's the first orientation, I always try for like the staff member to like stay with that person for the rest of the class. So that way, you know, make them feel a little bit more comfortable. Like Naveed, I'm always telling him, he's always answering back. I'm like, "Naveed, you're gonna stay with this person." He's like, "Why?" "Cause I told you so! I want you to stay with this person for the rest of the class. That way, help her out, and like, she's gonna be confused or something." He's like, "Okay, whatever."

As they become staff members and increase their responsibilities in the school, the girls use the language of the school in new ways. Initially, issues of not helping enough and answering back are related to their own performances as staff members. As they take on more responsibility and power, they become the ones judging others' performances and responsible for keeping them in line. In the new use of the school's language, they also adopt the expected roles and expectations – juniors are not supposed to "answer back," they are supposed to "help out," and not just stand around taking up space (even

taking class is not adequate). Interestingly, they do so even though they express unhappiness with these same expectations when placed on them, claiming that too much was expected from them at such a young age.

As they deal with this conflict of being the “disciplinarian” when they themselves feel unfairly disciplined by their instructors, the girls start to reflect on the perspectives of others, especially the head instructor. The process of collaboratively reflecting on and discussing shared activity, therefore, can allow for the participants to broaden their perspective of the activity by encouraging them to think about the positions of others, especially when dealing with how these others play a part in their own stories.

Yvette: But like I mean you also have to see his point of view like he wants somebody who's well disciplined, and like responsible and will follow the schedule ... But I mean I understand why sometimes he's like really tough on us 'cause like, you know, he's trying to train us and that's the way...

The shared language and concepts of the activity provide a space for this perspective taking. The discussions revealed that now, as staff members, the girls judged themselves based on the ideology of the school, using the language of the instructors and institution. As they began to interpret their own actions using the discourse of the school, it became possible to become like the head instructor, and thus to understand his perspective. Several of the important concepts for staff members, for example, were patience, a good attitude, responsibility and discipline. The girls, both negatively and positively, examined their own capacities to demonstrate all of these traits.

Yvette: The mom was trying to motivate him, but she was like getting like, she didn't have patience. And I mean, I mean I'm not saying I have like the

best patience in the world, but I had patience with him. I stayed with him for like 45 minutes in the trial lesson. He was really shy.

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Madison (About one of students): I guess maybe I should have enough patience.

Yvette: Attitude? (laughs) It did, like, made mine worse

Annie: It makes you think more positively about things (?)

Annie: Um, critical thinking. When it comes to multi-tasking.

Brianna: Responsibility?

Madison: Oh, good one.

Yvette: Something I don't have (laughs).

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Yvette: Yeah, discipline. My discipline is, hmmm, somewhat there.

### ***Defining the Activity***

This shared language, beyond providing a space for taking others' perspectives, also provided the girls with a means of defining the activity. Much of the judgments about staff members came out of discussions about what Tae Kwon Do meant for the girls. A task such as this, which encourages the practitioners to define and elaborate the meaning of their activity, reveals further how the girls develop into the activity, using the cultural tools provided within the school, and also highlights various conflicts within the activity that the girls struggle with.

A prominent sign displayed in the large window of the school promises great rewards: "Tae Kwon Do is the best thing I ever did for my life." Within the literature of

the martial arts and the promotional and instructional material of the school, self-improvement (beyond physical health or skills) is often emphasized. One of the central ideas emerging from the discussion “what does Tae Kwon Do mean for us” was that, according to them, training did, in fact, change the girls’ lives (the term they used was indeed “life-changing”). In line with the discourse of the school, the aspects that they identified as changing were those that were valued by the school – discipline, respect, positive attitude, responsibility, and patience. The girls believed that the process was good for their future. So they endured tough times and lots of responsibility because they believed, in accordance with the school philosophy, that this would make them better “in the future.”

The process by which these traits were developed in the girls was admittedly tough for them. Evidence of this can be found in the repeated reference to the “pressure” and “stress” of their experiences. So while Tae Kwon Do was a place to relieve stress, when one took a class, for example, it was also the place that increased stress by increasing the amount of pressure they felt. The tension that was revealed here, between viewing the pressure as a good thing (i.e., necessary to develop discipline and respect) or a bad thing (i.e., a hindrance to their performance), pushed the girls towards finding a solution. By creating a situation where the girls had to talk about and describe what Tae Kwon Do was, I believe I was able to bring to their awareness (as well as my own) some of the contradictions embedded within the activity. Based on their contributions to the process, we can develop a model of the various components of the activity of Tae Kwon Do. It is important to note here how the girls used the language provided within the

activity to construct the meaning of the components of the activity system (i.e. subject, object, tools, rules, community, division of labor).

### **Subject**

Whether discussing themselves individually or as a group, as students or as staff members, several key concepts were explicit in the girls' discussions of the subject. The ideal learner within the martial arts is, in a very real sense, a "disciple." Within the Tae Kwon Do school, this meant following the head instructor, the grandmaster, and the philosophy of the school. Translated into English, Tae Kwon Do means the "way" of the hand and foot (or punching and kicking). The girls used the language of the school to explain this concept of a "follower" of the way. The varying degrees to which the girls identified with this "way" of living are closely correlated with how much they saw themselves as martial artists. Additionally, participants within the system are defined by their status within the school. As a student, the role is to follow the instructors. As a staff member, one's role is not only to follow the art oneself, but also to help others join the path as well. The extent to which the girls saw themselves in light of their status (i.e. as a purple belt, as a red uniform, as a SWAT member) also demonstrated how serious of a "follower" one was.

### **Object**

Within the Tae Kwon Do school, the participant's main role is to improve, to make themselves better. By making oneself better (i.e., following the way), students and instructors can be true to the art and "pass it on" (i.e., help others make themselves better.) As a student, therefore, they were expected to improve themselves – their technique, physical conditioning, discipline, and mental states. As they progressed to

more advanced students and eventually staff members, they were also meant to improve their ability to help others improve. As the girls discussed the motivating factors that kept them coming to Tae Kwon Do, despite the difficulties they faced, it became clear that the dedication to the school came from a desire to live up to their roles – to meet the expectations of others, fulfill their roles as disciplined students and caring teachers. The desired outcome was to make the school a successful place – measured by how well it was run, how well they followed orders, and how much they helped others.

### **Tools**

In order to reach the desired outcome (the successful following and teaching of Tae Kwon Do), the girls described several tools that were used within the school. Most notably, the pressure from the instructors (especially the head instructor) is used as a reminder and guideline of how one is supposed to act, instilling discipline, respect, and a positive attitude. The girls used the training they received, which included mental and written notes, rules of thumb, and much repetition and practice, to guide their actions. With structured roles for staff and students in various situations (i.e., during class, at the front desk, in the locker room), the girls learned how they were to perform within the school. The head instructor was always there as a reminder, and on special occasions the grandmaster also provided feedback. This feedback, both positive and negative, served as a tool for the girls to judge their own performances. As they progressed, the girls were often able to provide their own feedback using the same guidelines that were employed by their instructors. To reinforce the guidelines, materials such as posters and student guides are also available.

## **Rules**

The rules for this endeavor are clearly laid out within the school's materials. With explicitly stated "school rules" for students and "staff member responsibilities" for staff members, participants are left with little question regarding what is expected of them. As discussed earlier, the martial arts are historically rich with strict rituals, such as bowing, using words of respect, wearing uniforms, and screaming. Our Tae Kwon Do school was no exception. Within the process of meeting and working together, the girls initially had difficulty speaking to me without using the word "ma'am" (they did get over this, once I made it clear that they did not have to under these circumstances.) While they did at times express uneasiness or difficulty in abiding to the rules (or in some cases even explicit disobeying of the rules), the girls in general did not question or suggest that the rules should be changed or different – only that the realization and enforcement of the rules could be done in a different way. This is in line with the philosophy of the martial arts, which places much importance on the underlying principles and laws of the practice.

## **Community**

The head instructor, during staff meetings, would often point out that relationships formed in Tae Kwon Do are different than others. Referring to the difficult physical and mental training, the "sweating together" and the strict rules of discipline that we are subject to, he would argue that there is a strength to these friendships that is not always there with people you merely "hang out with." The girls revealed this as well in their talking. While they certainly were friends with their fellow students and staff members, they repeatedly chose to use the term "2<sup>nd</sup> family" to refer to the school community. Somehow more permanent, if not necessarily more intimate, than their other

friendships, these relationships adhered to the formality and “professionalism” that was expected at the school. As discussed earlier, these relationships were extremely important for the girls. The relationship with the head instructor was especially relevant – in this case the girls often expressed a desire for this relationship to be more “caring” and less stressful.

### **Division of Labor**

Within the community, the responsibilities were divided based on the rank, age dedication, and, in my opinion, gender, of the various members. A clear hierarchy was established at the school that determined who could and should do what. Within the judgments of each staff member’s performance, the girls relied on the hierarchies that were established in the school. The two girls, Amy and Yvette, who were “SWAT” members (a higher level of staff who take on a heavier schedule and usually get paid a small salary) were seen as deserving more pressure, and able to handle more responsibilities. In the discussions, the girls who were the “most senior” at the school initially contributed more and controlled the direction of the conversations, and the status of each girl informed their arguments and suggestions.

### ***Others’ stories***

Understanding life stories as a culturally and historically shaped social activity, as opposed to a reflection of one’s personal memory, allows us to understand the importance of other people’s stories in the process of telling our own. Not only do other people play parts in the stories we tell, but they also play an important part in the telling of our stories, including the production process. As pointed out earlier, the research process was

not meant to “capture” unaltered the stories of the girls as they existed, but to work with the girls in the production of and reflection on their stories.

Keeping this in mind, an important part of the groupwork process was the use of outside stories as tools with which to reflect upon our own stories. During our meetings, the girls related their own experiences in Tae Kwon Do to those of two other females, Diana, a character studying boxing from the movie *Girlfight*, and BK Loren, an author and martial artist. The process of bringing in outside stories as tools with which we can evaluate our own stories allows for ideas and concepts to be explored that may or may not be present already. In this case, I chose stories that specifically emphasized the power and strength aspect of training for females, as these were the elements I was interested in exploring. The intention was to see how the girls, after watching/reading these stories, would (or would not) use the experiences of others to inform the development and understanding of their own life stories.

Reviewing the written responses of the girls, certain themes did emerge as they compared their own experiences to those of Diana and Loren. What was striking, for me, was both the presence of themes, feelings, and experiences that were not expressed prior to watching/reading the stories and the insightful character of their writing. While not necessarily surprised (I had expected differences between their speaking and their writing, and I had, after all, chosen these stories to share for a reason), I was reminded of the powerful role that reading and writing play in formulating our thoughts. So often, writing is seen as a copy of what’s in our head (i.e. we must think something before we can write it). The writing of the girls, even though it was not extensive, demonstrates clearly that the process of producing a text is as much about inventing our thoughts as it

is sharing them. As we shall see while looking at the themes that emerged, (for Madison especially) it seemed that the process of choosing quotes from the book allowed the girls to communicate aspects of the training that were not expressed when they initially began writing nor during the discussions.

When reviewing the girls' response to the movie (the prompt was compare your experiences with those of Diana's), 4 of the 5 girls explained how Tae Kwon Do was life changing (Yvette wrote very little for this prompt, and did not in general write as much as the others). It's worthwhile to note that in their initial writing (i.e., write about your experiences/story as a martial artist) none of the girls used this type of language to describe their training. Here are their responses after watching the movie:

My experience in Tae Kwon can be said as life changing ...Tae Kwon Do has taught me more than kicking, punches and self-defense. It taught me respect with sweat, hard work, pain and 'sticks' ... It keeps my body fit, and my mind straight. It taught me discipline and taught me to control my anger and emotions.  
(Brianna)

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Tae Kwon Do means a lot to me. It's impossible to name all. The major reasons are a way of relieving stress, caring for students, improving physical and mental strength, and seeing friends/2<sup>nd</sup> family. (Annie)

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...I realized that TAE KWON DO was more than an exercise. It was about discipline, respect, self-confidence and defense. (Amy)

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...Tae Kwon Do gives me a goal or a hobby to look forward to like boxing does for Diana. In a way, both activities are quite life-changing because they involve much dedication... The meaning of Tae Kwon Do for me is more than just a hobby, more than just an activity to do so that I'm exercising; it's like a way of life. I'm not sure how to describe it but it has become a significant part of my life that will be unforgettable... I couldn't imagine what I would be doing right now without attending Tae Kwon Do at least three times a week. (Madison)

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In a later response (to Loren's writing), Madison returns to this concept by copying a phrase that captured her (above the copied text, she wrote "life changing = similar"). "If I learned this, if I could just learn it, my life would change" (Loren, 2001, pp. 26-27).

Another theme that emerges from the responses to both the movie and the story is the hard work that is involved in training. Madison, for example, writes that she "can relate to pain she [Loren] feels after class." Neither Madison nor any of the other girls emphasized this pain and hard work in their initial writing, but they did when relating to Diana's story:

Like 'girl fight', I'm forced to practice the complicated kicks over and over, as I try to catch my breath. Sweating I never did as a child and only rarely it would occur, but with the millions of jumping jacks, push-ups and laps I couldn't help but sweat. (Brianna)

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Diana's training was harsh and needed much improvement before she became the new Diana in the ending. My training was also harsh, which isn't bad at all because it changed who I am into a better person than I would have been if I didn't join. (Annie)

Within these themes, the girls also emphasized the differences between their experiences and those of Diana and BK Loren. They were impressed with the level of dedication that both Loren and Diana, who "risked everything she had just to learn how to box" (Amy), displayed from the very outset of their training, and they were also impressed, even claiming to be in awe of, the physical capabilities of the two women. In some cases, the girls seemed to use these comparisons to downplay their own abilities or dedication (i.e., she's braver than me, I'm not as strong as she is.)

During the work, I also asked the girls explicitly about issues related to gender in the stories of Diana and Loren. In their writings about gender, they often expressed thoughts about gender that they did not express during the conversations, which often tended to get stuck on "there is no difference/problem/issue." Amy, for example, doesn't mention in her initial text or in the discussions any question of the appropriateness of martial arts for females. After watching *Girlfight*, she writes, "I was thinking the opposite of Diana. I just thought to myself that 'TAE KWON DO' was just for men. Later on I realized that it just wasn't for women or men as a Tae Kwon Do student it really didn't matter whether I was a girl or a guy." I have mentioned examples of the girls' writing about gender in other places (e.g. as an excuse in Madison's writing, or as a motivator for Brianna). I believe that the inclusion of the stories and writing tasks during the groupwork provided the space for these ideas to be generated. In the discussion process, I

was then able to bring up the writings of the girls in the group. Most likely, these ideas about Tae Kwon Do and gender would not have been discussed otherwise. As mentioned earlier, the purpose of the work was to generate change in the ways that the girls thought and talked about their training. The use of other stories was a key element of this process of transformation.

### **Girlfight**

The first story that I shared with the girls was Diana's. After we had spent a bit of time talking about their experiences in Tae Kwon Do and touched on some possible changes they might suggest, I played the movie *Girlfight* for them. In this film, the lead character, Diana, lives in the projects of Brooklyn with her alcoholic father and younger brother. Finding herself in trouble for fighting, again, and on the verge of being kicked out of high school, Diana ends up in the gym where her brother, somewhat reluctantly, takes boxing lessons. As she begins lessons with her disinclined trainer, we watch how boxing becomes an increasingly important activity in Diana's life. Although several descriptions of the movie, including the one that the girls offered, suggest that boxing is a place where Diana can control her anger, I would argue that boxing is first and foremost a place where Diana is allowed to be angry (and thus provides a practice in which she can control this anger). Regardless of which position one takes, the movie touches on important issues regarding, among others, race, class, gender, and family, and thus offers the potential for discussions on such topics.

Several online synopsis of the film, for example, identify feminist themes in the movie:

Director Karyn Kusamashould should also be commended for the film's ...  
objectivity in telling this slightly feminist tale.

Rotten Tomatoes

Drenched in sweat, emotion and attitude, "*Girlfight*" is a riveting testament to a new femininity for the next century.

Cinema.com

Breaking new ground in women's boxing may seem like an unlikely way to advance the cause of women's issues. Aren't there more important problems like pay equity and childcare to address? Yes, but boxing reaches out in a visceral way to viewers too worn down by life's own battles to do more than manage to pay the mortgage and get the kids off to school each morning.

The Internet Movie Database

A fair assessment seems to be that the movie does offer a welcome, if flawed, alternative story about a young woman struggling to succeed in a traditionally male activity. "Though the movie can be read as a reassurance to heterosexual viewers, it can also be read as an argument for new heterosexual femininity that includes power of the female athlete as icon, as a challenge to assumptions about innate male superiority based on physical strength, a challenge that helps to establish a kind of flexible power differential that laws and claims for women's innate 'differences' often cannot."

(Heywood & Dworkin , 2003, p. 123).

I chose to share this particular story with the girls because it dealt with an experience that was in some ways similar to the experiences of the girls at the Tae Kwon Do school. With both the film and the excerpts from the book, I initiated the discussion

by asking the girls to think about the similarities and differences between their own experiences at our Tae Kwon Do school and the experiences of the characters.

While the girls did see some commonalities between their own experiences and Diana's (i.e. hard training, nervous at first), another reaction was that the two situations were quite distinct, particularly because Diana went into a gym where there were no other females, while the Tae Kwon Do school had many female students and staff. By presenting the girls with Diana's experiences, which included many instances of clear gender bias, the girls were forced to look at their own experiences to consider why they did not feel the same was true for them. As they discussed why she had a more difficult time than they did, they seemed to agree that because she was the only girl, Diana faced difficulties that were not present for the girls. This is in line with the common idea that the mere presence of women within an activity signifies equality and a lack of discrimination.

We have seen already that, when pushed further in the conversation, the girls did reveal that there were differences between males and females (i.e., in sparring, in confidence, in responsibilities and attitudes). Within the groupwork, the use of outside stories presented the girls with a different set of experiences. Reflection and discussion of these differences allows for the development of new ideas and understanding about not only oneself, but also about the world.

Discussions of Diana's experiences, for example, exposed and built upon some of the beliefs that the girls had about romantic relationships. The story proved to be an especially helpful tool in this regard as the girls were somewhat reluctant in the group to talk about their own experiences in this area. Discussions about Diana's relationship with

a fellow boxer at her gym demonstrate that often, it is in these romantic relationships that social constructions of gender are especially highlighted. This was the case as the girls analyzed why it was so difficult for Adrian (with whom she was developing a romantic relationship with) to face her in the ring. When I asked why it was harder for him to fight her than it was for her to fight him, the girls tried to explain why, as a female, it was different for her than it was for him.

Kim: What was the problem with her and Adrian?

Amy: They weren't, um, Adrian was kind of like, he was kind of like, also, that he didn't, he just took advantage of her. Since she was the only girl who did boxing I guess.

Yvette: Well not really.

Amy: Like he was, I don't know

Yvette: Like at first, I'm guessing, like for him it was kind of like a game

Amy: yeah.

Yvette: You now just playing with whatever. But then he actually ended up, falling for her, so, I don't know.

Amy: Also he didn't want to hurt her.

Kim: So it was a problem with her that he didn't want to hurt her?

Yvette: The problem was that he loved her, so that's why he couldn't fight her.

Amy: Yeah that's why

Yvette: when they had to fight each other.

Kim: Why wasn't it a problem for her?

Yvette: Because

Amy: Cause she was already too used to fighting all the guys, so, she wasn't gonna think that

Yvette: I mean she did love him.

Amy: But then

Yvette: But then you know how her trainer was like, it doesn't matter what he means to you, you gotta sh-, go out there and show them how you, how you fight.

Yvette: And also, she had to show him like, you know, just because she's a girl doesn't mean that she can't

Amy: fight

Yvette: fight or do anything. Something that a guy would normally do.

Annie: Because she doesn't care about the gender of the person, she just said if you're a boxer you should fight.

Yvette: Good point.

In the above interaction, it is clear that the girls are not simply answering the questions based on what they “already know.” The process of the groupwork is one that involves the co-construction of explanations and understanding. So when Yvette challenges Amy’s explanation by saying, simply, “no, not really,” Amy doesn’t try to argue her original point, but continues in the process of trying to collectively understand the problem. This lack of confidence and competence in providing an explanation to the issue at hand is possibly evidence that the girls have not examined these issues enough to have a strong opinion. When they struggle with continuing the process, the three girls who have been talking the most (who happen to be the most senior in the group), push to have the other girls contribute to the process.

Yvette: I think it's their turn to talk.

Amy: I know, seriously.

As the other girls contribute and the discussion continues, it becomes clear that the analysis has gone as far as possible without some additional resources or tools. The last comment below, made by Yvette, ends with her voice trailing off and no definitive resolution. This makes sense to some extent, as the girls are attempting to interpret someone's story that they do not know. At the same time, this interchange also provides a starting point for further development in the ways that the girls understand how gender is constructed and what this means in terms of their own identity.

Madison: She just supposed to put emotion into boxing. So it doesn't matter who she's boxing

Kim: How come then he couldn't do the same thing?

Brianna: 'Cause she was a girl.

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Yvette: It's just like she said avoided your emotions. Maybe he couldn't do that. Maybe for the first time he actually felt like that and he didn't want to ... (trails off)

It is interesting that the girls reached the conclusion that it was more difficult for Adrian, as a male, to separate his emotions and feelings for Diana from his fighting, especially considering common stereotypes and "scientific" findings that place women as more emotional. In their analysis, there is much that is left to be explored. If they both loved each other, why was it a problem for him to fight her but not the other way around? To what extent do emotions play a part in sparring and fighting others? How do issues

surrounding domestic abuse influence our feelings about males and females competing in contact sports? What does this say about our beliefs about the strength and power of both males and females? In many cases such as this, I believe that we did not move beyond the conflicts and lack of coherence within the girls' explanations and meanings. I would argue, however, that the ways in which the girls addressed these issues proves that there is much room and potential for discussions about gender to take place within martial arts schools. I would also argue that because we are so rarely asked to reflect on how gender and sex are socially constructed, that models of such practices need to be developed. The work that was done in this research provides a foundation for such development.

Continuation of the work that was started here would necessarily include additional resources (e.g., writings about gender, additional movies and books, models about gender and sex, and structured guidelines for reflection and analysis) that could help the girls develop together a new model (i.e., activity system) of martial arts training, perhaps one whose objective more explicitly involved transforming gender roles and stereotypes.

A vital aspect of such an attempt would necessarily involve new tools for sharing the physical feelings involved in training. A main objective of this research is to develop an understanding of identity that does not sacrifice the body for the sake of the mind. Without denying that our mind is also a physical reality, it is important to highlight aspects of identity that do not exist in the symbolic realm of words and concepts, but instead reside at a more corporeal level. I was interested in finding out how the girls felt when they trained and when they didn't and how training in Tae Kwon Do affected what it felt like to "be me." Acknowledging our reliance on language for thinking and communicating ideas, as well as for creating our minds and selves, it is difficult to tap

into the visceral experiences to see how they are both shaped by and shape our minds. In Browning's (1995) discussion of the Brazilian arts of Samba and capoeira as resistance, she reminds us that some physical acts – such as dance and martial arts – signify political and social messages that cannot be voiced in words. As we move forward, tools that allow us to reflect on the physical ways of knowing and communicating are necessary.

### **The Way of the River**

It was not much of a surprise, therefore, to find it difficult to get the girls to talk about their experiences on a physical level. Statements like, “I just feel weak” or “I feel like I can't do it” were at times as far as the girls could go in explaining their physical senses. Partially for this reason, I chose BK Loren's *The Way of the River* to share with the girls. In the book, Loren writes about her experiences in and out of the various martial arts she has trained in. Often, she includes descriptions of the physical consequences of her training:

Where did you get that?” a girl called out, as if I had just found the coolest item ever at the shopping mall. I blushed. ‘I don't know’ I said. She called the other girls around me so I could show them. “Oh my god, how cool,” they said. I said, ‘Thanks’ and I blushed again, telling them it was nothing. Truth was, however, I felt like celebrating. There was, indeed, a muscle just beneath the surface of my skin. It was perfectly shaped, like a long, bulbous fish. I could carry this muscle with me everywhere. I was immediately quite fond of it. (Loren, 2001, p. 30)

Reflections such as these of course are not separate from the symbolic world of words and meaning. As Vygotsky points out, the marriage of thought and language in human development marks a break away from the immediate world of other animals. I do

not mean to imply here that it is desirable nor possible to “strip away” language and other symbolic structures in order to get to an underlying corporeal self. I do intend to argue, however, that discussions about our experiences, especially within academic settings, often ignore the body altogether, even to the extent of constructing a mind as separate from material reality. Reflections such as the one above provide insight into the author’s physical experiences, showing how our bodies and body image are socially constructed and mediated just as our minds are. For BK Loren remembering the above locker room interaction, there is a sense of how she felt both about and within (or *as*) her body.

The girls also found ways to understand and define actions such as fighting and sparring in relation to what BK Loren wrote. I believe that without the language of Loren, in both of the following instances, the girls would not have been able to produce these reflections (i.e. to think these thoughts):

I think that she has a good perspective to fighting. She’s saying that when a person is ‘fighting back’ he/she isn’t fighting back, but returning what the first person struck. I think that her way of thinking is smart! (Brianna)

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I like this quote: “In any sparring match, there is always only one person fighting ...” (p. 9)~interesting (smiley face) ~ connection of the people who spar against each other? ~ therefore, no victories or losses. (Madison)

Discussions about our senses as such are not always readily available. It is difficult to describe in words what it feels like to spar, or to do pushups, or even to stand at attention stance. Despite the intimate familiarity with these experiences, it requires the

development within specific literacy practices to be able to write about and communicate such feelings. Consider the following description of Shaolin teachings:

He [Sifu] had frequently said the goal of Shao-Lin boxing was to teach a student “This is my arm, this is my leg.” If you challenged him and told him you already knew that your arms and legs were your own, he would do a section of a form and ask you to follow him. When you failed, he would say, “If you know ‘This is my arm, this is my leg, ’why, when I ask you to move like this”-he performed his graceful movement-“do you move like that,” and he would imitate your clumsiness. (Loren, 2001, p. 36)

This excerpt clearly shows both the limitations and the potential complexities of using language to explain our bodily motions. The phrase “this is my arm, this is my leg” is at the same time incredibly simple and profound. Within the tradition of the martial arts, there is a history of using deceptively simple phrases to convey complex philosophical concepts. Although even beginner students may know these phrases, it often requires a long process of reflection and training before one can grasp their deeper meanings. In the process of working with the girls to develop descriptions of how they felt during their training as martial artists, I used excerpts such as the ones above as models for the girls. I found that the girls’ writings, in response to the Loren excerpts, conveyed their feelings about physical experiences.

### **Suggestions**

Although there were instances when the girls were able to discuss and reflect on the ways their bodies (i.e. themselves) were feeling at a given point in their training, I believe that much improvement is needed in the ways that we (instructors, martial artists,

researchers) assist in this practice. After reviewing this research, I would suggest several additional methods.

First, I would suggest a greater amount of modeling (i.e., providing examples for the girls to interact with), especially of my own reflections. Too often, as researchers, I believe that we hold back from sharing our own thoughts for fear of “tainting” or otherwise influencing the responses and inputs of the participants. Despite my awareness and insistence of myself as part of the process from the very beginning of my work, I believe that my research also suffered from this fear. Considering that the research that I was conducting was driven and informed by my own experience as a martial artist, it would have been beneficial to develop and share my own reflections as a model not only of the process of talking and writing about these aspects of our experiences, but also to model an attitude of openness and safety within the group.

In my own notes, for example, I acknowledged one instance where the organization of the class (i.e., the distribution and placement of bodies) had an especially strong impact on me. At the beginning of one class, as I had done so many times, I had gone to my designated space (designated by rank), sat down, closed my eyes and began to meditate, preparing for the class to begin. During this specific class I happened to be in the first spot, reserved for the “highest ranking” student. While this was not in itself unusual, it was somewhat new for me to line up before my boyfriend. For several years, he had lined up first, since we started and progressed through the ranks together and he was (slightly) older than I. (Age becomes the relevant factor when two students are the same rank). Recently, however, I had passed my boyfriend in rank since I had taken more classes and thus more tests than he had. So when lining up, whether in class, in meetings

or in front of the instructor, I had “switched spots” with him. It was not really a big deal. Before this class started, however, our instructor instructed us to switch, so that my boyfriend was the highest ranking. What was seemingly a trivial “reorganization” of bodies in the classroom, unexplained by the instructor, became significant to me of the (sometimes) unspoken hierarchy of gender. Although to this day I am not sure exactly why we were switched for that particular class, the fact that he felt the need to do so led me to believe that, in his eyes, at least, there was something “higher ranking” about being male.

This instance does not exist as an isolated case. There were other instances – words spoken, actions taken – that fed into my beliefs and perceptions about gender within the Tae Kwon Do school. Sharing such instances with the girls, rather than waiting for them to share their own, should be an important strategy for developing a critical analysis of the Tae Kwon Do activity.

In the process of collecting my own observations during my training, there was a level of urgency to the actual writing in relation to the events that happened. If I did not have a notebook or piece of paper in the near vicinity, I found myself drafting the notes in my head in an attempt to “capture” my thoughts and feelings. It seems that the further away, in time, that one gets from an experience, the more difficult it is to remember the sensations and feelings. Trying to capture what it feels like to do a pushup, or to spar, after one finishes the action is a tricky endeavor. No matter how strong my imagination, or how adept my use of language, I cannot conjure up right now, as I write this, the feeling of tensed muscles, sweating skin, and struggling lungs. Attempts to reflect on these feelings in the moment, however, can assist in the process of remembering such

feelings. Acknowledging that all memories are constructed through social interactions and not retrieved from some memory bank, we need to develop tools for the construction process. For this reason, my second suggestion would be to use a method of reflection and collection of notes during the time in between the group meetings. A possible way of doing this might have been to use journals or voice recorders and ask the girls to periodically record how they are feeling, or to identify any moments when gender is specifically relevant in an action or interaction. Procedures such as these could help produce reflections about the experiences of girls training in the martial arts.

The process of writing, especially in response to the stories of others, elicited different responses from the girls than did the discussions we had, further supporting the argument of research as a constructive, not reflective, process. In some cases, they dealt with the types of physical experiences that I was hoping to understand, and did so quite eloquently.

It wasn't in my first class when I started feeling the sparks in my body. When doing the movements, I feel like it's a form of art. A form of art where I am the artist and its creation. (Annie)

I do not know if Annie would have shared, or even had, this thought if it were not for the excerpt from Loren's book, which described the sparks that she felt when first meeting the *sifu*, and then later when performing the techniques.

It could have been my imagination, a result of so many years of believing that 'black belts' had poison-tipped fingers, but as my hand touched Sifu's, it seemed a type of electrical current surged through my body. It felt as if he were bolted to the earth. By now, it was difficult to hide my shaking. (Loren 2001, p. 26)

Annie's account above, of a "form of art where I am the artists and its creation," is a perfect example of the moments of flow that I was looking for – the agent becoming one with the activity. To describe herself as both the artists and the creation, Annie is acknowledging that she had, at least for a moment, "lost herself" in the activity of Tae Kwon Do. Within the 4 pages of text that had prompted Annie to write this account, Loren describes this same aspect of training.

...I knew I was not very good at the animal forms. My kicks and hand strikes were sometimes fast, less frequently, graceful. Ultimately, though, it didn't matter. Even in the awkward, out-of-rhythm, off-kilter way my body moved, I could feel within me the absolute beauty and precision of the form. It was like when you're singing along with Aretha Franklin, and you believe your voice is just like hers, you feel the potential in your heart to sing exactly that way. It did not matter to me that I didn't have the voice yet. I would work hard to get it. The moves made my body feel like song.

(Loren, 2001, p. 29)

This description is useful not only because it describes the feeling of becoming one with an activity, but also because it highlights the potential for development in these moments. It is important to note that this sense of engagement does not require perfection (or even competence) in one's performance. Instead, Loren explicitly recognizes the room for development and improvement. So while contradictions and conflict certainly represent opportunities for development, so do moments of engagement – of becoming the activity. Throughout all of the groupwork, the only other instance the girls described that resembles this state of flow is the description of being hyper and relieving stress

when sparring, when the person sparring doesn't care who's watching or presumably anything else. Sometimes the girls referred to this as "going crazy" or being almost "beastlike." In those moments, these words represent an identity in line with the activity. There were also moments in the process, when we were talking and/or writing, when the girls sort of lost a sense of time and seemed completely engaged. Overall, however, I think that these moments are hard to identify and describe, and also difficult to achieve due to obstacles that stand in the way of "losing oneself," such as being self-conscious or uncomfortable.

Some of the girls' reflections about gender did not emerge until they were asked to write in response to Diana's story. Some of these instances were discussed in the last chapter. One of the girls, for example, wrote about how she sometimes used gender as an explanation of/excuse for why she can't do something, while her sister wrote of her satisfaction in proving people wrong when they thought she couldn't do something because she was a girl.

When using various means within research, it is important to understand the importance of the social practices that are being used to produce the data and findings. As Vygotsky (1994) points out, too often the research process is seen as a transparent window into a phenomenon. In the groupwork portion of the research, an important practice that was introduced was the writing of one's life story. As Eakin (1999) points out, the development of narratives about our lives is a significant practice within our society, learned as we develop in our families and communities. The writing of these stories, however, is not necessarily as commonplace.

Part of the work that I needed to do, therefore, was to structure and assist the girls with the process of writing their stories. As I have pointed out earlier, the girls' initial writings were relatively scarce – consisting mostly of details but lacking descriptive explanations of how one felt at the time of the experience. Some of this initial writing was very similar to many of the black belt essays that I have read, which often read as a list of events rather than as a story. Without providing a model of more descriptive and narrative writing, it is likely that, at least some of the girls used this practice (black belt essays) as a model for the writing that I asked them to do. One of the girls in fact pointed out this similarity: “I’m writing my black belt essay all over again,” and another agreed, stating “Yeah this helps a lot with your essay.”

As a result of this association, as well as the setting of the work (i.e., in the school, with an instructor) the girls were hesitant at first to say things that might be construed as negative. As one girl nervously asked, “Can we write ... I really didn't want to go [laughing.]” Being aware of this, I insisted and I think succeeded in convincing the girls that the groupwork was a “safe space” where they could be honest without fear of things getting back to anyone, unless they decided to include it in the group feedback.

Even once this sense of safety and openness is established, however, there is work to be done in order to produce autobiographical writing. The introduction of the writing exercises in response to both the movie and the book assisted the girls in the process of developing more descriptive and reflective writing about their experiences in Tae Kwon Do . As we have seen, the girls' writing in response to Diana and BK Loren's stories revealed thoughts and feelings about gender, physical training, and the martial arts that were not present in the girls initial writing and discussions.

My work with the girls lacked the sustained and continuous time and effort needed to produce more extensive texts, including the reiterative process of re-reading, editing and revising their work. As a result, the outcome of their writing was an initial text about their experiences followed by a collection of short, reflective pieces. With more time, it would have been possible to lead the girls through the process of producing more developed and comprehensive life stories. Considering the requirement to write a 5-page essay in order to become a black belt, it seems potentially beneficial to institutionalize a more structured set of practices (e.g. meetings, discussions, workshops) for all students to participate in as they approach this goal.

### ***Contradictions and Flow***

As we discussed the experiences of the girls, several contradictions were revealed and constructed both between and among members of the group and the various components of the activity system. According to Engeström's (1987) model, these contradictions provide the opportunity and potentially the motivation for change. When they exist within one component of the system (as opposed to among components), these contradictions represent a need for resolution, but not necessarily for transformation of the activity. For my work with the girls, I was interested in both resolutions within the activity, as it exists now, as well as potential transformations into a newly defined and enacted activity.

Throughout the process of writing about, discussing and analyzing the Tae Kwon Do school and the girls' experiences, there was a general tension between and among the girls (sometimes different girls, sometimes within the same girl's contributions at different moments) about the overall quality of their training – whether it was a positive

experience, that they would recommend to someone else, or whether it was something to be avoided and warned against. This tension was highlighted, for example, when the girls were discussing what pieces of advice they would give new female students.

Brianna: Don't get sparring gear.

More than one of the girls: (laughing) Don't get sparring gear.

Kim: No sparring gear?

Annie: Yes. Yes. Yes.

Amy: Yes sparring gear.

Madison: Split decision.

Amy: Sparring gear's the best.

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Madison: Don't join BBC.

Brianna: (laughs)

Amy: Don't join BBC. (laughs)

Kim: Why no BBC?

Amy: Why not BBC?

Brianna: Don't take the red uniform either .

Madison: It's expensive, yo.

Amy: BBC was one of my best (?)

Kim: Don't join BBC because it's expensive?

One of the girls: Not so expensive.

Annie: Those are horrible suggestions!

Amy: How about in the beginning, how about this, don't join S.Y. Kim-, no wait,

I can't say that

---

Yvette: A bathroom.

More than one of the girls: laughing

Yvette: A girls

Amy: We said a bathroom

Brianna: Cheaper prices

Amy: Get a, get, get a, get a staff lounge.

Yvette: water fountain

Annie: Make the boys clean the school.

Amy: Get a staff lounge.

Yvette: Water fountain

Annie: Well they do sweep but

Amy: They don't sweep that well either. I have to sweep again.

Amy: staff lounge

Yvette: staff lounge (laughs)

Madison: These are all like the, materialist

Annie: You're actually writing it down!

Yvette: We need a microwave.

Annie: You guys! Stop!

In the above case, Annie acts as the “positive voice,” challenging the negative tone of the other girls. This challenge that she poses leads to further analysis of their feelings that always requires the presence of another point of view (though not always the

physical presence of another person). Working with the girls in a group setting, with the explicit objective to produce something together that was not present before (i.e., a list of suggestions for the school) creates a space for this type of interaction. The various points of views emerged from various sources – other girls, the stories of Diana and Loren, myself. At times, the girls presented tensions in a single contribution. Consider the following statement by one of the girls:

Amy: I'm sorry for being negative but all the pain I went through, well not pain that I went through. Just kidding. I regret my joining SWAT. Oh! I just found out from Stamford, from Trumbull to Stamford is only 35 minutes away drive. Maybe I should transfer to Stamford. I don't know how to get there though. I have no car.

In this single contribution, Amy moves from discussing the pain that she has gone through to denying playfully that it was in fact pain to considering alternate plans to continue her training now that she has moved. Consider another statement of hers, at a different moment in the process:

Amy: Yeah. But then. Also at the same time being a staff member isn't that bad. There's some good things about it.

Madison: I like it sometimes.

Throughout the discussions, there was a repeating of this back and forth – from talking about Tae Kwon Do as a wonderful, life-changing event to portraying their training as something they don't want and need to get out of. While at times my role was that of providing a different perspective or option, more often I found myself pointing to the conflicts in the girls' own talk, trying to bring to the conversation an awareness and reflection of these contradictory elements.

Most of the contradictions that came up during the group discussions were within one component of the activity system. Especially relevant here, considering the focus on identity development, are the contradictions within the meaning of the subject. Without necessarily questioning or changing the activity system itself, the girls struggled at times between sticking with Tae Kwon Do and quitting. Much of this struggle revolved around whether they defined themselves as “honored” and “chosen” to do the work that they were doing or taken advantage of and controlled. When the girls felt that being chosen as a staff member was something honorable (again using the terminology of the school, which stressed heavily the idea that being a staff member was an honor), they expressed a desire to stick with it despite the difficulties – that, in the end, their training truly was making them better.

When they felt that too much was being expected of them, they became defined as a fool or almost as a servant. In these instances, they showed much more of an inclination to quit. Throughout our time together, the girls went back and forth between these two positions, without ever definitively settling on one or the other position. Within the group, the girls who had been at the school the longest seemed to struggle with this the most. For Madison and Brianna, the two girls who were the least experienced as staff members, it seemed as if this conflict was just beginning to become an issue as their staff training became more intense. Madison, who had been training at the school for roughly a year, brought up the issue of the value of being a staff member in relation to being a student.

Madison: I wonder, what do you think is more important to Instructor James?

Staff or class.

Kim: What do you think?

Madison: Both (?)

Yvette: I think staff.

Brianna: Staff.

Madison: I think it's probably staff cause the other day he didn't let Naveed take class, even though he really wanted to. It's like, no, let's do training.

Kim: So what do you mean by staff then, you mean like

Madison: But then, in class he's like, oh, we have to keep training. (laughing) I don't know.

Brianna: Instructor James is weird.

Yvette: Mmmhmm.

Kim: So, but by staff you mean like, everything you do outside of class?

Madison: Yeah.

Brianna: Yeah.

Kim: So you think he thinks that's more important than you taking class.

Yvette: Well, it's kind of both.

Madison: Except like, I don't know. In some situations.

Brianna: It depends on his mood.

Yvette: Yeah, it also depends on his mood.

Kim: Which do you think should be more important?

Brianna: Taking class.

Madison: Well, if you think about it, ...

Brianna: Cause we joined for self-defense.

Madison: ... we joined, yeah, to take class, not to do ...

Brianna: clean

Madison... staff training and help. Like, I guess that's been, a good thing? To become staff.

Madison: like, it's an, I guess people would see it as an honorable thing that you got chosen to be staff but then, it's not what I signed up for, you know?

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Madison: And it's not like I asked to be staff either.

In their interactions, the girls went back and forth between appreciating the red uniform as something they worked for and earned and being almost disinterested in it. Even in this ambivalence, however, the importance of their status as staff member is stressed (at least at some point in their training):

Amy: He, he, he gives you the pressure of going like "Oh, if you, you know like don't come without notice for a few days I'm gonna take your red uniform" and everything. You know that pressure? And, like, if you think about it I mean like that red uniform you earned it like, like your blood in it, you know, so it's like taking your life away.

Annie: Now that I think about it red uniform doesn't seem so interesting.

Amy: Seriously

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Amy: Neither does SWAT member. I don't know why I got promoted to become SWAT member.

Brianna: I think it's, I didn't want my uniform, my red uniform.

Amy: Like, one day I swear I'm gonna walk out on him "Sir this is my red uniform you can have it, you can have my black belt too, I'm outta here, bye."

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Kim: Where you happy? When you got your red stripe.

Madison: Mmmmmm

Kim: You can be honest.

Madison: It's kind of both.

Yvette: I was

Brianna: I didn't know what it was for, so I was just like what.

Madison: (mumbles something)... Wow, I got chosen.

Brianna: He put it on the thing I'm like looking at him like, okay.

Madison: But then sometimes when you wear the red uniform you feel like, (3 second pause) sense of empowerment. But not really, but like, people look at you different.

Yvette: Yeah they do.

Madison: Like, oh, she's a staff.

The tension between honored or chosen and taken advantage of here is intertwined with the distinction between student and staff. The question "which is more important" signifies that, for the girls, there was an important distinction between the two roles. At several moments during our work together, the girls expressed, on the one hand, a desire to "go back" to just being a student, when one could come and go as she pleased, to a sense of appreciation and honor with their role as a staff member. As they progressed,

they developed into their role as staff with these tensions in place. The conflicts, however, were not such that they existed between various components the activity system. They existed within the definition of the subject, i.e. how to understand the role of student and staff.

In addition, there was tension between this definition of staff and the perception of their own ability to fit into these roles. For several of the girls, for example, their own ability did not warrant their status as a staff member:

Madison: ...I really, I don't think I'm really good at, Tae Kwon Do...

But then like, but then you have the red uniform. So then, people also expect that you're good. But I'm not. I don't think I'm up to that yet.

They also compared themselves to others, who were not staff members, to evaluate whether they deserved it, and whether the red uniform was truly a measure of one's ability.

Brianna: No George is better than us but we got our red uniform before him.

In addition, the girls among themselves compared their experiences, to see who had it harder in their journey to staff.

Annie: But don't you think it's unfair how, like, and no offense to Brianna and

Madison, how you got your red uniforms?

Madison: Yeah...

Brianna: I didn't want it.

Madison: ... I thought that was really unfair, too.

Annie: Like I had to work for half a year to get that thing and then you guys you didn't even work...

Madison: I don't know, does it seem like he was like desperate ...

Annie: ...for a few months

Madison: ... to find more people to work for him or something?

Brianna: Cause he gave like ...

Yvette: Sometimes, no no no

Brianna: seven, eight people the red uniform in a day.

Madison: Like I don't think we deserve to (rest of sentence inaudible)

Brianna: I wanted to give it back, but then, he'll probably yell at me.

Annie: Maybe you do deserve junior instructor but red uniform I thought you guys got it too fast, compared to me, Yvette,

Madison: We haven't been training for a year yet.

Yvette: I had it, wait how many months was I training for like supposed - staff. I was like training for like 7, 8 months, and he gave it to me.

Annie: Yeah, that's half a year, it's almost half a year, and they got it like, within two or three months.

Amy: You know how I didn't get my red uniform until after I become SWAT member and after I got my black belt,

Madison: It wasn't two or three months but it was pretty fast cause we started in April,

Brianna: September

Amy How long did you train for, Yvette? Like,

Yvette: Wait I think it was like ...

Madison: We started in April when did we get it?

Yvette: ... I started in February ...

Brianna: I didn't want it, 'cause it looked weird cause you're like a colored belt and then you have a red uniform.

The girls struggled between seeing themselves (and others) as not worthy of their position and defending their status. This reveals that they are still travelling back and forth between accepting the official position of the school – of staff members as chosen by the head instructor and thus deserving of their status – and of a conflicting position of staff as fulfilling the needs of the instructor. In this case, Yvette takes the position of the school as soon as someone (a parent) challenges it:

Yvette: No like this mom complained to me, like, no offense to anybody,

Madison: Yeah.

Yvette: No offense. But like, um, she was all like, oh, back in Elmhurst, it was all just, you know the staff members were just black belts or red belts. And now I see that there's orange belts or like green belts, purple belts, like that. She's like, I don't understand.

Madison: Yeah I really thought it was, I even think I thought it was weird. And like

Brianna: Yeah I thought it looked bad.

Madison: What were we?

Brianna: We were blue belt.

Madison: Were we blue?

Brianna: We were blue belt.

Madison: And I think it was like new blue belt.

Yvette: Yeah, I tried to explain the mo, to the mom, I was like, I mean they still know how to do things, you know, it's just like, they're just helping out the class, making sure that the kids do good. It's not like they're gonna do something bad, or they're gonna teach them something wrong. They already know what they have to do. 'Cause we trained them to do. And she was still like, yeah but still, like, back in Elmhurst, I was like, Ma'am, if, whatever, you can think whatever you want. It's okay, I'm just telling you what I know from like. I know that we train, and we train them how to do everything. Well you know not everything but you know.

These interactions reveal a dialectical process between defining the self and defining the subject (in this case staff member) within the activity system. We can see a tension between staff members seen as “special” as “better than” and as not meaning anything other than extra work and cleaning. When the girls become staff, they are torn between being honored and being ambivalent or even resentful. Depending on their position, they may put down being a staff member or defend it.

In an attempt to resolve this definition – to reach a conclusion – the girls consider themselves in relation to the roles. If I am not that good, and I am a staff, perhaps being staff is not really an honor? Or, if *she* is not that good and she is staff, maybe it's not that “interesting.” For the girls who had been staff members longer, they often saw this as a change in the school – in the past (i.e., back at Elmhurst school), we had to work hard; now it's different. As Annie points out in her writing, this change fits into an overall pattern of change that, at least for her, was disappointing: “A lot has changed in the past few years. Much of it I do not like, but that's life.”

Related to the conflict in defining one's self as either a dedicated, honored staff or as someone who is being taken advantage of (i.e., not doing what they signed up for) was the definition of the head instructor. The girls went back and forth between defining him as an over the top, too strict disciplinarian and a stern father/older brother figure who had only their best intentions at heart. This often was expressed in terms of whether he thought first of himself, and what he needed to run a successful school, or whether he thought about his staff and students and their development as martial artists. The girls seemed to be unsure whether the requirements of the instructor were in their best interest or in the interest of the instructor, and whether they were necessary or fair.

Yvette: He wants you to be there like, one o'clock.

Amy: 'Cause he's like

Annie: There's nothing to do

Amy: supposedly, supposedly he's like I need your support and everything.

Yvette: And he gets there like, two o'clock. It's like, there's no point of me opening the school if you're gonna come here late. Might as well just stay home and then you open up the school and then come when you're here.

Kim: So why does he want you there early?

Amy: 'Cause he's like, there's a lot of things for you to do

Yvette: Yeah things to do that he can do himself too.

Amy: Well it's true. It's true that, it's true that there are a lot of things to do but then, (?)

Yvette: He expects you to finish everything like before he gets there.

Amy: But anyway, we're just like what, how old are we? Like, only 15, 16, we're

not freakin' twenty-seven like he is. I'm sorry, but yeah.

The girls talked quite a bit about their head instructor, revealing the importance of him in their lives as martial artists. They seemed aware of his variations in mood, his sayings and philosophies, and his expectations. While often attributed to natural factors such as “women’s intuition,” this sensitivity emerges out of a need by women (and in this case the girls) to “read” the emotions and moods of men (in this case their instructor). “A good deal of research has brought to light the special perspicacity of the dominated, particularly women ... Women are more sensitive than men to non-verbal cues (especially tone) and are better at identifying an emotion represented nonverbally and decoding the implicit content of a dialogue” (Bourdieu, 2001, 31).

While all of the girls expressed a great deal of respect for him and his position, they also expressed a desire for him to pay more attention to their needs, frustrations and competencies. What seemed clear was that the girls wanted a more “caring” instructor.

Instructor James is very inspirational but sometimes, he pushes too much for what HE wants. It makes me think that he doesn't care much about other people's opinions. (From Annie's notebook)

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Yvette: Like maybe he should just show that side that, like you know, he supposedly cares about you.

Amy: Exactly.

Yvette: I like better showing that side.

An important task for those interested in transforming martial arts practices is to redefine the role of “higher ranking” individuals so that they are caring without getting rid of their ability to assist their students to develop discipline and respect.

Potentially, this could be done through the redefinition of the rules/code of conduct at the school. As with the other components, there was a conflict in the way that the girls talked about the rules of the school. Specifically, they were at times seen as a means of self-improvement, reflecting the philosophy of the Martial Arts, and at others they were seen almost as “nonsense” to be navigated. In the latter case, the girls saw the rules as reflecting only the interests of the head instructor and the grandmaster. As such, they could be broken without much consequence, or if they were followed it was only because they had to be. At times during the conversation, the girls would go so far as to call the practices of the school (especially certain fees) stupid, claiming that they were unfair. In these cases the girls obviously didn’t “buy into” the explanations behind the rules.

The thoughts shared by the girls regarding the rules of the school are closely related to the ways that the girls viewed the division of labor, as this division was largely influenced by the hierarchical nature of the school. The girls questioned, for example, the necessity and motives behind the requirements they had to fulfill as staff members. At times, the staff was depicted as a family who divided responsibilities in order to achieve a shared goal. At other times, they portrayed the staff and the division of responsibilities as the personal decision of the head instructor. As we have seen, they also questioned the ways that responsibilities were distributed between and among male and female staff. The tension here is between the division of labor as a manifestation of one’s path in the

martial arts or as unfair, perhaps even sexist, means of getting work out of the staff. And they manipulated the lessons and discourse of the school, revealing some of the ways that they questioned the school discourse. While they appreciated the promotions and the recognition, they also resented the cost, both financially and in terms of stress and pressure:

Yvette: Yeah, try hard. Learn.

Amy: Oh sure, why not.

Brianna: No too hard 'cause then you're gonna get promoted.

On a deeper level, contradictions involving both the rules and the division of labor reflected the girls' thoughts about the philosophy of the Tae Kwon Do school. Concepts such as discipline, honor and respect served as resources and tools for the girls to succeed in their training. Phrases such as "winners never quit" are used by students at difficult times to help them continue trying hard. The concept that to be a martial artist is to be special – to be dedicated, self disciplined – create situations where it is almost impossible to quit. I remember classes, for example, when the instructor's mere mention that the "black uniforms" (or red uniforms, or black belts) in the class were role models for the others motivated me to continue when I wanted to stop. The belief that one is becoming better – stronger, more disciplined, more focused – is built into the martial arts. The girls often pointed out that their training was "good for their future." For many reasons (focus, critical thinking, responsibility), the training was perceived as something that was making them better. At other moments, however, the ways that the girls talked about these same concepts revealed a dismissive, almost cynical attitude.

Kim: How does it change somebody's life?

Brianna: My attitude.

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Kim: (writing) Attitude

Yvette: Attitude? (laughs) It did, like, made mine worse.

Overall, the activity of the Tae Kwon Do school was pictured at times as a business, a means of making money at the expense of the students, and at other times as a family, a place where people cared about each other and developed for the better as a result. As Amy writes, "I can say that this school is mostly 'business' but also it is a Martial Arts School where you learn Martial Arts." During our meetings, the girls often questioned the philosophies and practices of the school (as personified by the master and head instructor). Their questioning revealed a struggle with accepting and/or believing what was taught to them in their training.

In a sense, therefore, the overall activity can be understood as involving a contradiction between the Tae Kwon Do school as business versus the school as learning community. Using this contradiction as a foundation, we can understand the tension between the subject (students versus staff, staff as honor versus staff as burden), the head instructor (as unrealistic, self interested versus caring father/older brother), the rules, discourse and other tools (as deep philosophies used to improve oneself versus nonsense used to control), the division of labor (as familial versus oppressive) and the outcome (as spreading Tae Kwon Do philosophy/helping people improve versus making money).

The process of the groupwork with the girls served to highlight these contradictions and, to some extent, to facilitate the reflection of the girls on the conflicts existing within the activity. I believe that these conflicts were not simply there waiting to

be revealed, but were constructed within the practice as the girls reflected on their experiences and the practices of the school. I also believe that, although they are presented as such here, these contradictions are not always simple (x vs. z) but are sometimes very complex and nuanced, especially within the group. For analytical and developmental purposes, however, it is useful to construct clear models of such conflicts so that reflection and resolution can be facilitated, potentially transforming the activity. It is also important to keep in mind that choices are not always between two contradictory options, but sometimes a choice of one among a few or many. The ways in which the girls themselves were defined as subjects, for example, was not limited to “chosen one” versus “fool” but also included employee, dedicated practitioner, etc. These various contradictions exist at the same time and on many levels. We have seen how contradictions exist within the various components of the activity system as well as within the girls’ discussions, including their talks about gender, sparring, and relationships.

In order to move forward from the identification of contradictions to their resolution and the potential transformation of activities (i.e., development), it is necessary to evaluate how conflicts within activity systems are addressed. A common pattern that I noticed throughout the discussions, for example, was the use of individual differences or personal moods to explain variations in treatment and behaviors. It seems that when something was perhaps conflicting or confusing, the girls would suggest that “people are just different” (i.e., when talking about gender differences) or “it depends on his mood” (i.e., when talking about the importance of staff vs. student for the head instructor). Without denying that individual differences and personal moods play a part in

understanding events and situations, it seems beneficial to analyze such explanations to see if they are, in fact, sufficient. Reviewing the interactions with the girls, too often we, as a group, settled for these without such analysis, i.e., what accounts for the differences between people and groups of people? Or in an individual's mood? Should one person's mood be able to dictate the practices at an educational institution? Are there ways that we can interfere to affect these differences? While some of these questions were raised in certain instances, they were not done so sufficiently or frequently enough.

During the group discussions, there was a lack of moving forward from contradictory explanations or ideas to a resolution. In cases when problems of conflicting opinions or possibilities did come up, the girls often accepted the possibility of both (using phrases like, "it depends" or "everyone's different") or went back to their original stance when they could not find a satisfactory solution.

As pointed out earlier, there was no new model of the Tae Kwon Do school constructed in the process of the groupwork. Such a construction would be necessary in order to transform the activity of Tae Kwon Do. What was constructed, however, was a list of suggested changes based on the collaborative group work. This list does provide an outline of key aspects of the Tae Kwon Do school that need to be considered in order to transform the activity into one that better serves female participants.

### ***Suggested Changes***

During the group meetings, the girls created a list of suggested changes to give to the head instructor of our school. After the meetings had concluded, I organized and edited the list and, with the approval of the girls, sent it to the instructor. The introductory

text to the document explains that while I organized and finalized the product, it reflected the suggestions of the girls:

The following list represents ideas discussed and outlined by the group during our meetings. While most of the suggestions came directly from the sessions, I organized them and interpreted them based on my perspective from our discussions. Any suggestions that I have added are in italics; suggestions that the girls decided to emphasize are starred. The list, as it stands now, was shared and approved by all of the girls involved to insure that my interpretations were not contrary to the girls' intentions. It is important to note that while the list is a collaborative product, the girls did differ on some issues. I have tried, where it seemed appropriate, to reflect these differences in parentheses.

The full list (see Appendix E) was organized into five key areas: facilities, staff responsibilities, teaching, training, and institutional practices. Although the majority of the suggestions did not relate specifically to gender, each of the categories can be understood in light of how gender is constructed and performed both within and outside of the Tae Kwon Do school. While I believe the girls' suggestions can be used to improve the practices of the Tae Kwon Do school, I also go further to suggest changes based on their discussions. Some of these I included in the list that was given to the head instructor, others were a result of the analysis that took place after the list had been discussed.

Before moving on to more general themes that emerged from the suggestions that the girls put forth, I believe it would be helpful to consider more closely the list, as it was put together at the end of the groupwork and passed on to the instructor.

Several of the suggestions that the girls recommended had to do with the material facilities of the school. While these were not necessarily the most numerous, they did come up several times over the course of our meetings, at one point leading one of the girls to “call out” the others for being materialistic. Ranging from requests for a water fountain in the school to a staff lounge, most revolved around making the school more comfortable. These requests are not a surprise, considering the amount of time that the girls spend at the school and also the shared knowledge of these wishes by many of the staff members. (It was, for example, a fairly common request made by the staff to have a water fountain in the school.) These suggestions, I believe, could be implemented without transforming the activity of Tae Kwon Do. The only instance that held specific meaning for the girls as females was related to the lockers and bathrooms, in which they wanted to make sure that everything was separated. (The girls did not like the fact that they had to share a bathroom with the boys, and, as mentioned earlier, that there was a small hole in the top of the wall separating the two locker rooms.)

The other categories, while also including some items that were anticipated, went further in revealing changes that could potentially transform the activity and practice of Tae Kwon Do at the school. Regarding staff responsibilities, for example, the primary focus was on the amount of stress/pressure the girls experienced based on the expectations placed on them. Some of this was related specifically to gender (i.e., make boys clean, divide work more evenly) while others addressed issues of time and feedback (i.e., more recognition, to be left alone sometimes, less days/time) without mentioning differences based on gender.

Regarding teaching, the girls expressed a desire for discussion and collaboration in

terms of how to best assist inside the class. All of the girls valued their role as teachers/leaders in the school – especially when it came to the children. Not surprisingly, then, they wished for more help in becoming better teachers, more time to work with students and more time devoted to developing their own practices based on their experience and competence (as opposed to simply doing what was told by the instructor teaching the class). Related to gender, they also wished to see an equal distribution of teaching responsibilities.

Related to their own experience as teachers was the girls' experience as students. During the overall process, I was surprised by the lack of focus on this aspect of their martial arts experiences. While the discussions may have been different had the group included students who were not also staff members, I do believe that the fact “staff member” became the salient role (rather than student) was telling. The girls expressed a desire to have more varied experiences (i.e., more practice sparring boys and girls) and more detailed training. As a result of the discussions, I also added to these suggestions the need for better-communicated, higher expectations for female students and opportunities for low-pressure situations where the girls could practice without feeling as if they had an audience.

The final category related to what I termed “institutional practices,” partially to highlight the fact that the girls did not see these choices as under the discretion of the head instructor, but of the owner/grandmaster of the schools. As such, they did not see these as possible (in a similar way they did not see some of the suggestions under “facilities” as realistic). Most of these related to pricing in the school, which the girls felt was too expensive and/or not fair. The exception was a recommendation that dealt with

promotion tests, which they felt should be more difficult (i.e., strict) and reflect the progress of the students more accurately. I also added to this category a note that the girls did not “feel comfortable, did not consider it part of their responsibilities, or did not feel that they would be taken seriously if they shared their opinions/feedback about the school with the instructor(s).”

Based on the suggestions of the girls, my interpretations of the work that we did as a group, and my own experiences as a researcher and a martial artist, I believe that there are several key aspects of Tae Kwon Do that can serve as a point of transformation, the objective of which would be to further develop the potential of the martial arts to serve as a space for women and girls to be strong and powerful.

### **Reexamine how gender is addressed within the school**

There is a common sentiment, not only in the martial arts, but in sports in general, that a positive approach to gender is to ignore it. In a vein similar to the “I don’t notice people’s race” approach to racial harmony, instructors/coaches/parents may encourage their children/students with phrases such as “I don’t care if you’re a boy or girl, ...” or “it doesn’t matter if you’re a girl, ...”. Even if we were to ignore the significance given to something by the simple act of denying its importance (i.e., Why are you bringing it up if it doesn’t matter?), these statements would prove troublesome once one is inevitably told not to punch (or throw or hit) like a girl, or “to go easy on her ‘cause she’s a girl.” Equally insufficient are approaches to gender and sex that highlight being female as a handicap or biologically determined capacity (i.e., she’s good for a girl, or even girls can do it). Instead, issues related to gender need to become explicit objects of discussion and reflection within the school. Female students and staff should have opportunities to

evaluate and transform practices based on their own experiences and goals. Within these practices, performance and progress must be seen not as a factor solely of individuals, but of the social activity, which necessarily is effected by the ways in which sex and gender have been and continue to be constructed. Based on my interpretation of the work with this group of girls, for example, several issues emerge as needing to be addressed.

- The setting and communication of higher expectations for female students,
- The need for more female role models (i.e. who can perform advanced techniques),
- The emphasis on physical training as important for females and spaces where they feel comfortable developing physical competencies,
- The need for gender equality regarding time/space/responsibilities,
- An 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 (e.g. division of labor, discourse, organization of students in class) to see how gender is constructed within the school.

### **Reexamine hierarchical structure**

Another important aspect of the school that must be addressed is the power structure of the school. The girls expressed a need to feel that they are part of school in an active, meaningful way, while at the same time maintaining the respect for the instructor(s). This is especially true if we want female practitioners to be able to initiate change based on their own experiences, particularly in schools such as ours where most of the top people (grandmaster, master, head instructors) are male. In my discussion with the head

instructor, I emphasized that as relevant as what their ideas are is the feeling that they can share them, express them, and feel that they are important to the other members of the school community. This is often difficult if students equate respect and discipline with fear and obedience, as is often the case. A possible solution is to develop new definitions and enactments of concepts such as respect and discipline for instructors from one who controls and has power over me to one who cares about me, helps me, wants me to get better, and has high expectations. In the process of redefining the power structure, some aspects to consider might be:

- The amount of time and responsibilities required
- The division of labor, especially as related to gender
- The amount of pressure and stress placed on staff
- The autonomy of participants, both as student and staff

### **Introduce Structured Reflection and Collaboration Practices**

Within many martial arts schools, ours included, there are requirements in place for students to demonstrate knowledge of philosophy. These requirements often take the form of written essays that are due around the time of important benchmarks and promotions. At our school, students were required to write a five page “black belt essay” after they are recommended for the black belt test. There were no clear-cut guidelines for this essay, beyond the direction to write about your experience and what the black belt means to you. These essays were read first by the head instructor and then displayed at the school for anyone to read.

Having read a few of these essays, I can say that the nature and quality of them varied. What they all seemed to share was some sort of recap of the student’s experiences

and a set of acknowledgements. (Often, staff members would joke about who was and wasn't mentioned in the students' black belt essays.) The practice of writing something down created an "official" space for students to think and communicate their experiences in new ways. The essays differed, however, in the amount and quality of attention paid to philosophy and the amount of reflection involved.

Practices such as the black belt essay can potentially serve as a point of transformation, to further develop the potential of the martial arts to serve as a space for women and girls to be strong and powerful. In order for this potential to be realized, however, such practices need to become more than individual exercises that simply satisfy a need for recognition and reminiscing. When we first started our work, several of the girls pointed out a similarity between my request and the black belt essay. The fact that the girls shied away from reading their texts out loud (but did not hesitate when asked to discuss their experiences) is evidence that there is a difference between what we say in our discussions and what we write. As I have pointed out, however, the writing of the girls changed throughout our work, as I introduced new tools and resources. Based on this experience, I would suggest several changes to the practice of writing black belt essays in order to capitalize on the power of written reflection.

- Such practices should be more continuous. Rather than waiting until one is about to get their black belt, for example, schools can structure opportunities for students to collect their reflections (perhaps in a journal) throughout their training
- Rather than framing these practices as individual work, schools can structure social situations, where students can collaborate and provide feedback for one another, and where instructors can facilitate discussions surrounding issues such

- as gender, aggression and violence, and martial arts philosophy. Within collaborative meetings and work, instructors and students can highlight shared themes and issues to
- Schools can integrate school and martial arts philosophy more explicitly into their requirements, providing texts and other learning materials to review such philosophies
  - Resources such as texts, videos, and guest speakers can be used both to model the writing process and to provide various approaches to issues and themes identified as important by instructors and students. This process could connect the students' work inside the school to the “outside world.”
  - By creating a more formal process of sharing and publishing written work of students, schools can further institutionalize reflective written practices.

### ***Reactions to the process***

In the next chapter, I look more closely at each of the individual girls and the construction of their own life stories as they train in the martial arts. Before outlining some conclusions from the group work and moving on to an individual analysis, however, I believe it is useful to consider what the group process meant for the girls as a group, i.e. how they reacted to and participated in this first phase of the work.

In general, it seemed that the girls felt positively about our meetings – perhaps due as much to the informal moments sharing pizza and talking about popular music as to the more formal discussions and reflections. Both the informal and the formal, the serious and the frivolous moments contributed to a sense of group identity. Without my prompting or suggestion, for instance, the girls came up with their own group name using

our initials (SKEMES). The girls came up with this during one of the less “serious” moments, as they were decorating a pizza box and finishing lunch. As the girls played around with the letters, they also integrated the more serious aspects of our discussions, at one point joking that they were “skeming” to beat the boys.

This group identity was protected whenever an “outsider” was present or nearby, especially if this person was a male. When Billy, a teenage instructor, came into the school and poked his head in to our meeting, the girls responded by jokingly calling him a spy and “kicking him out.” (He’s not supposed to be here!)

The girls also joked about the experience of the meetings, comparing it to being “in school” and referring to me as “miss,” a title they might use when referring to a schoolteacher. At the same time that the meetings held a structured, “like school” quality, the girls also described the meetings (especially those at the school) as feeling like Instructor James was on vacation. The girls seemed to appreciate the combination of structured, reflective activities without the pressure of the presence of the head instructor.

Perhaps most important for the girls was the feeling of camaraderie and shared experiences. They appreciated having each other to share their thoughts with. They also were relieved to hear that other people shared their feelings of frustration and uncertainty. It was clear to me that, although the girls talked and spent time together outside of our meetings, they did not have the type of critical conversations that we had during the meetings. In this way, the meetings provided an opportunity for the girls to help each other ascribe meaning to their experiences. In some cases, this process was difficult (i.e. Annie stating that there “I don’t want to ... there’s too much memories” when I asked her

if she wanted to re-read what she had written). Despite this difficulty, the girls talked and listened, actively participating in the group.

### *Conclusions*

The process of writing, discussing, sharing, reflecting on, and analyzing our experiences as martial artists highlights possibilities for us to redefine gender in order to move away from traditional dichotomies. One site for such redefinition is the interactions and overlaps between the activity of the Tae Kwon Do school and other activity systems and “cultural worlds.” In terms of gender, we can understand these overlaps as both the subject and the object of activity.

To the extent that female practitioners of the martial arts participate in other activities and can “carry over” their ways of being to these activities, new subjectivities for females can be enacted. In this way, gender is understood as an aspect of the subject of activities. As opportunities for girls and women to participate in sports and martial arts increases, it is important to challenge limitations on “being female.” This must be done at a visceral level of perception and “common sense,” as this is the site of “symbolic violence”:

The precedence universally accorded to men is affirmed in the objectivity of the social structures and the productive or reproductive activities, based on a sexual division of the labour of biological and social production and reproduction which gives the better part to men, and also in the schemes immanent in everyone’s habitus... As a consequence, the androcentric representation of biological reproduction and social reproduction is invested with the objectivity of a common

sense, a practical, doxic consensus on the sense of practices. (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 33)

In order to challenge the male/female dichotomy, therefore, we must do so at the subjective level of performing sex and gender.

In addition, gender can be understood as an object, as a concept that is thought about and a way of being that is developed. To the extent that female martial artists change the way we think about gender and sex (in addition to how we live as sexed/gendered individuals), previously limiting ideas can be challenged. As female athletes, for example, have gained popularity and challenged stereotypes and concepts of gender within their sports (e.g. female boxers and weightlifters have challenged the concept that women are frail and weak), gender has been constructed as a concept in new ways. It can be argued that gender is often an important component of one's worldview; transforming gender as a theoretical construct is thus an important step.

In order to realize this potential, I would argue, based on this research, that it is necessary to transform the activity of Tae Kwon Do, at least as it is practiced at this particular school (and the other similar institutions, which I believe are plentiful). The underlying component of the suggestions emerging from our work, in my opinion, is that gender must become part of what Tae Kwon Do schools think about and how they train their students (i.e., part of the model of Tae Kwon Do training). Neither of the two current models – gender hierarchy or gender as irrelevant – is satisfactory. In order for equality to be taken seriously within the martial arts, instructors, school owners, and practitioners must realize that the focus can be neither making things the same nor reinforcing gender differences as necessary and “natural.” Instead, it is essential to

initiate procedures, including discussions and transformations of practices, that both examine and change the way that gender is enacted and constructed based on shared, explicit objectives and motives.

A key point to be emphasized is that gender is not predetermined, but must be understood as an historically constructed component of human activity, existing at both material and ideological levels. The process of transforming activities in order to address issues related to gender inequalities and limitations is not one with a clear cut endpoint, but must be negotiated based on the values, desires, and motives of those involved. In my work, the desired outcome was not to make girls more like boys or vice versa, but specifically to evaluate the potentials, formerly and currently denied to girls, to be strong and powerful, even at times violent and aggressive.

Another important and relevant question to ask is how to move beyond the discriminating and oppressive construct of two (and only two) sexes/genders. Admittedly, this current work does not do much to challenge the binary construction of sex. I would argue, however, that challenging and expanding the ways that we understand and perform “being female” can be (but is not necessarily) a step towards erasing the dichotomy between male/female, leaving room for gender non-conforming individuals and groups to exist not as “outsiders” or “others” but within a more inclusive model of humanity.

## VII. Individual Stories

The previous chapters have explored how the collective work of our group both revealed and produced the development of material and symbolic tools and practices that were integral parts of the Tae Kwon Do school as well as analyzed how the girls' identity developed within this activity. Since human psychology has its origin in social activity, it is important to explore the social, historical activity of Tae Kwon Do and the collective actions of the girls as a group. To stop there, however, would ignore the role that individuals play (within these contexts) in their own self-definition. Each of the girls, in her own way, navigated and negotiated the tools and practices available within a process of defining who she is and is becoming. Through their current actions, which include acts of developing meaning and defining/creating the self, the girls worked to produce their lives and life stories. In this chapter I look more closely at how two of the girls, Annie and Amy<sup>13</sup>, navigated this process of self-performance and definition during their participation in the martial arts, including the role that gender plays in this process.

### **Annie**

I know for sure I can never stop learning in martial arts. There's no limit to the amount of things you can learn here, in the world or in martial arts, so I feel I've learned the basics and I've learned, I've tasted a little bit of, you know, the hard things, so I guess my rank in Tae Kwon Do in general is that, I am above the students, but I have yet so much to learn as if I am a student as well. (Annie)

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<sup>13</sup> The analysis of individual stories was limited to two girls for the sake of time and space. I chose Amy and Annie because they had been training at the school for the longest periods of time.

Of all the girls, including myself, Annie has been at the Tae Kwon Do school the longest. As this quote reveals, she has adopted the lesson of the martial arts that tells us that one is never done learning, never done becoming. The martial arts are, in their ideal form, a set of processes that are not meant to end.

Annie remembers that she started in the summer of 2002, which is about 6 years before we conducted our groupwork. She was in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade when she started, and like most of the girls she shares a somewhat indirect path to training. She recalls a friend of hers, who was enrolled in Tae Kwon Do, “showing off” some of the moves at lunchtime. Annie thought that the moves that her friend demonstrated were “cool,” and decided to check it out for herself.

Despite her feelings that the moves were cool, Annie did not, at the beginning, appear to have any strong feelings about training. In her writing, she questions her motives, writing that she doesn’t know exactly why she joined. Like Madison, she references watching and enjoying Jackie Chan movies. She does not, however, seem to see a direct connection between her watching the movies and her joining (as was the case with Madison, who always wanted to try martial arts specifically because of them). Also like Madison and Brianna, whose father had trained in Tae Kwon Do in the past, Annie was introduced to the martial arts by her mother, who for a brief time trained in the martial arts as a child. This also did not seem to have a direct effect, in Annie’s perspective, as to why she joined.

In fact, when her mother first introduced Annie to Tae Kwon Do, a few years before she joined our school, she chose instead to do ballet, noting that Tae Kwon Do

was “scary.” Indirectly, Annie highlights here the “appropriateness” or “inappropriateness” of certain activities for boys and girls. Ballet did not include any of the yelling and screaming of Tae Kwon Do, and thus was not scary for her.

[W]hen I was little in the Philippines my mom gave me the choice of choosing Tae Kwon Do or ballet class, and at the time when I was little I saw Tae Kwon Do and they were screaming and everything, I thought it was scary, so I just went with ballet instead and now, when I was in elementary I thought it was kind of nice after seeing all of the Jackie Chan movies and all...

She later notes the lack of lead female actors in martial arts movies as a possible reason that martial arts are not seen as “for girls.”

Tae Kwon Do in general doesn't seem very feminine to me because ... in the movie, where Jackie Chan is, you never see like a female martial artist. I guess it's the way people view things from when they started growing up cause you did-, you didn-, never seen a female person starring in a martial arts movie. Much.

Both her choice of ballet over Tae Kwon Do and her argument that martial arts could be seen as inappropriate for females provide insight into why Annie may not have been enthusiastic about training at first. Although Annie believes that Tae Kwon Do is good for girls (because it teaches them how to protect themselves), she also does not believe that she, herself, is completely capable of defending herself, even after 6 years of training: “I know for sure I will be able to defend myself some way but I don't know if it's like fully defended, you know like able to keep them on the ground.” What's missing for Annie is both physical strength and “mental strength” or confidence. These two things are of course related. Because Annie sees women as naturally weaker than men, it should be

hard for her to believe that she is capable of defending herself against a man: “Um, they [women] have equal rights, but, no matter what I think men are stronger than us, but we, we do have equal rights.” To some extent, Annie continue to see training in the martial arts, especially the fighting part of it, as not for girls:

Mmhmm. So, when I do look at it, it's not feminine at all, I guess. It's just, I don't know how to explain it, it's just something that you, you start to learn when you, like, well maybe when you started watching martial arts movies, you see it's mostly guys and then you start realizing that if girls fight, you know, it's cool cause they can do guy things as well, but you, you never really think of it as, fighting as a feminine thing to do.

Despite her somewhat indirect path to Tae Kwon Do training, however, Annie revealed a strong appreciation for and connection to the underlying philosophy of Tae Kwon Do throughout our interview, as well as during the groupwork. In regards to gender relations for example, Annie makes a point to say that “strength should not be something that should stop ... respect for one another.” As we will see, concepts such as respect and discipline become important tools for Annie. From the beginning, she accepts the rituals and practices of the school that signify respect for others. She even refers to her initial response to the grandmaster as “instinctual”:

They didn't exactly tell me to say “sir” and stuff, they just say, greet him, greet him, but, um, they didn't tell me anything about saying "goodbye, sir" when we leave, like, you normally, what Instructor James does now, but I just did it on my own instinct...

Unlike many other students, Annie responded to the structure of the school by performing the rituals that communicated respect. Her use of the word “instinct” reveals a lack of discomfort; reflection and effort weren’t necessary for her to get it. Her bowing was just an automatic response based on the situation. As she continued with her training, these rituals progressed from rules to follow into a commitment to the underlying philosophy. This has allowed her to remain dedicated to training in Tae Kwon Do (at least in her talk about it) despite breaks in her training and dissatisfaction with some of the changes at the school. Unlike some of the other girls, it seems that Annie has elevated the philosophy to something that goes beyond the practices of our specific school. In fact, she uses the philosophy to evaluate and critique some of the practices and changes that occur at the school, and at times even the actions of the head instructor. In other words, she does not see Tae Kwon Do as limited to the concrete practices at the school, but believes there is something greater.

At the beginning of her training, however, Annie was not necessarily interested in the greater meaning of Tae Kwon Do. In her own words:

Um, I just wanted to join beca-, like, at the time, I wanted to do it, because I just moved in the area, and I wanted some kind of activity to do aside from school, so. I wasn't very enthusiastic about joining it, I just wanted something to do after school.

Like most of the girls, she had fun at the initial lessons, and the enjoyment was enough to get her to return.

Kim: Did you like it from the beginning?

Annie: Tae Kwon Do? Yeah, it was a rough start, but it was fun. I made, I made

um, friends pretty fast.

Within the practices of the Tae Kwon Do school, this emphasis on “fun” at the beginning makes sense as an introductory phase in one’s training, when students are not yet expected to have subscribed to the philosophy. In the quote above, Annie relates having fun at the school with making friends. The relationships that Annie formed at the school throughout her training served different purposes as her participation in the activity changed. At the beginning of her training, for example, Annie felt more comfortable at the school because there were instructors who shared her ethnic background.

I felt nervous, um, I didn't want to exactly like make a fool out of myself but, um, Instructor Erik was Filipino, so, I have no idea why that made me a little bit calmer (laughed) and my parents are talking to him in Philippines, Filipino, like Togalog.

The practice of matching incoming students (when possible) with instructors who were similar in age, ethnicity and gender was often done intentionally to create a feeling of comfort and familiarity. This is especially important considering the unique rituals and practices of the Tae Kwon Do school. In many instances, these rituals can be a source of embarrassment. Annie discusses several moments at the beginning of her training in which she was embarrassed.

Annie: Mmm, my first class was an embarrassment.(laughs)

Kim: Why?

Annie: Um, I was the only white uniform there. I just realized that after I sat down and everybody started staring at me and giggling at me. It was just like, okay,

maybe I got, I came at the wrong time but, uh, yeah, um, I came and I sat down, and I was really early and I remember like a lot of kids started coming in and most of them are black belts... But I guess like it was weird cause people were staring at me.

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Annie: So, um, those classes that I had my white belt, I don't know, it was a bit embarrassing. (laughs). I did a jumping snap kick, I remember falling, and I was like brushing it off, like it's okay (laughs) ...

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Annie: When I was a student, I respected everybody. I remember like being laughed at actually because of my, respect, 'cause when I was about to, when I leave, you know how we say, goodbye, sir, goodbye, ma'am, they usually say it once, like sir and ma'am and that's it, but if there's like as bunch of instructors in the desk, I remember doing sir, sir, ma'am, ma'am, ma'am, sir, sir, I remember doing that so I respect everybody but, and then they told me it's okay, just say sir and ma'am and that's it.

As she progressed through her training, the friendships that Annie formed helped her to deal with potentially embarrassing or frustrating moments. When comparing events such as promotion tests and tournaments, for example, an important factor is the number of friends she has with her. This is even the case when comparing the tournament with the black belt test. For Annie, the tournament was more stressful than the black belt test, which one would assume would be the more stressful event, because of the presence of friends.

Um, I think I was more nervous for ... my first tournament than, than a black belt test. Cause, black belt test I knew, like, I knew already a lot of people, like I knew you, John, and Amy were with me, at the time... I didn't make that much friends back then, like most of the friends I had uh, when I first joined, their contract expired already, so I don-, um, I was alone at the time with my first tournament, so, I was more nervous about the tournament than about the black belt test.

Besides relationships with fellow students, Annie developed strong relationships with her instructors. These relationships, rather than being tools for “having fun” or companionship in difficult situations, provided a structure for Annie to develop into the philosophical aspect of Tae Kwon Do , especially in terms of respect.

So, as a student, I did respect everybody the same way, but I, like, those who punished me more I'm a bit more scared of, like Instructor James, so I even like when he scared me, I knew like I had to respect him a little bit more differently than I do for the others, ... when Instructor James passes by, I immediately go like (demonstrates attention stance).

The respect and discipline that Annie developed throughout her relationships with her instructors translated into her behavior outside of the Tae Kwon Do school.

Um, it's made me more disciplined towards my teachers. Um, my, my Italian teacher surprisingly calls me the most best student out of all her classes, and I, I, I didn't know how to explain, because she asked me, "Oh, why are you so good?" and I'm like, I guess it's cause of discipline. She's like, "Where do you learn discipline?" I'm like, definitely not from my parents but um Tae Kwon Do helps.

She's like, "Ohhhh." So, it has made me more disciplined as a person, it's made me more active. Um, it made me more outgoing because I made more friends. And, more healthier I guess.

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Training in Tae Kwon Do made me respect my mom more because, I guess how Instructor James usually lectures us about how we should appreciate our parents for brining us to Tae Kwon Do today 'cause they could of either had a choice of staying home, not doing anything, but instead they walked you all the way here, they bought you food and stuff. So, it has shed some light on me to respect my mom a little bit more and my teachers, as well. And, other people, who are strangers to me, I do respect them. Like, uh, Tae Kwon Do has taught me not to fight back unless it is necessary to, for, protect myself. Like, how normally, if I wasn't a Tae Kwon Do student and some pervert comes up to me and starts talking I would normally start screaming yelling blah blah blah, blah blah, right make a big scene out of it. But Tae Kwon Do has taught me to like if a pervert does start talking to me, Tae Kwon Do has taught me to just walk away instead of making a scene and such.

At these moments Annie acknowledges that her participation in Tae Kwon Do stretches beyond the time spent within the school. This is very much in line with the philosophy of the martial arts that was especially professed by the head instructor. As demonstrated above, the relationship with the head instructor was of particular importance for Annie, being the one who "scared her" the most. This relationship with

the head instructor was one of the most important Annie formed at the school. In our interview, he is the first person she refers to as part of her “second family.”

As a student, he was a good instructor, a great instructor to me, cause I do remember him throughout my training. And, when I do, when I did become an instructor I remember him more because, um, in the timespan to become an instructor, um like when I first started training to when I become an instructor, he helped me out a lot because, uh, between that time, when I was training, my dad, um, left my mom, so um, usually when I came, I was a bit more quiet than I used to be, and I didn't, I, I wasn't very focused, I, I had so many things in my head, at the time, and he, he made me sit in his office, talk to, talk, like talk, um, normally how you're supposed to talk to a guidance counselor, and stuff like that, and he did help me out as an instructor but also as a brother? I guess, so to speak.

This excerpt from her interview shows how the instructor assists Annie to develop competencies, such as focus, that are already valued within the Tae Kwon Do school. The extension of her instructor's role to include caring about her beyond her role as a Tae Kwon Do student or staff member (i.e., like a guidance counselor) becomes part of Annie's philosophy about Tae Kwon Do . I believe that this conceptualization of caring that Annie values goes even beyond the philosophy of the school. As we will see, Annie places a lot of emphasis on caring for others, especially as she progresses to become an instructor. This is revealed not only in her talk about herself, as she develops into a staff member, but also in her critique of the school and the head instructor. When she describes their relationship now, for instance, she expresses concern that he does not care about her in the way she thinks he should (i.e., no longer as a brother).

But, as time progresses, um, he seems, he's losing that brotherly touch to me, and started getting more as the instructor, demanding. And, I know it's nothing to blame him about, cause, um, it's what he's supposed to do, but, um, the way he pushes me to come and to choose Tae Kwon Do over my studies, is something that I thought, doesn't seem, what an instructor is supposed to do.

This reflection on her instructor reveals a transition that seems to have occurred (or perhaps more accurately, is occurring) for Annie. The transition is a movement from using the instructors' feedback and practices as tools to define herself and Tae Kwon Do to using the philosophy she has developed as a tool to define not only herself and Tae Kwon Do, but also her instructors and the school. By stating that the instructor is not doing what she thinks an instructor should do, while also pointing out that the instructor is doing what he is "supposed to do" (presumably as defined by the school), Annie demonstrates that she has developed a philosophy that has developed beyond that "provided by" the school. It is at these moments when the potential for transformation of not only the self but also the activity is highlighted. Annie does not simply "internalize" or appropriate the knowledge of the school; she actively constructs her own meaning through her participation in the school. The potential for redefining the philosophy is especially important when considering the ways in which groups and individuals, in this case females, have been oppressed or limited within martial arts practices.

During our interview, Annie moves back and forth between these two positions (i.e. defining herself using the school's philosophy and structure and defining the school using her own philosophy). As we see in the quote above, she is committed to neither blaming nor condoning the pressure she feels from the instructor. An important aspect of

this “movement” back and forth is the way that she sees her instructors. At several moments during the interview, Annie revealed how the instructors provide her with a means of seeing herself.

He does it because he doesn't want me to leave. He, he, I know, like, he sees me as a great student. He has told me that he wants me to be a part of the staff team, and to remain here, as an instructor.

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I know for sure they see a lot of potential in me. They wouldn't strive to teach me so hard if they don't see any potential in me ... I guess my rank to them is, of course, I will forever be more, a student to them.

As Annie progresses in her training and takes on more responsibility as a staff member, she is able to place herself in the position of her instructors. This allows her to not only see herself through her instructors' eyes, but also to see the instructors in a new light. I believe that this new position as a staff member allows Annie to develop her philosophy further, as she now not only uses her instructors' feedback to evaluate herself, but also uses her own experiences to understand and evaluate her instructors.

Um, I guess when you first look at them, as a student, you don't know anything about them, you, um, you see them just as your teacher, just somebody there to help you, and teach you what's supposed to be known, the basics, from what, like what you're supposed to know before you become a black belt. And, as training as a junior, like training as to become a bl-, an instructor, you come to Tae Kwon Do to do more than just take class, like a regular student. You do things to help out and um, when you help out you realize the things they feel when they help out,

you as a student, so you have a certain connection of um, like, as an instructor you feel, you feel the same things your instructor feels when they teach you, and when you do become an instructor, you realize that they went through the things that you went through, and they understand completely how, like, how certain things make you mad, and such.

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...[W]hen Ma'am Maggie, whose much more like grown, adult than me, um, when she was like, uh, telling me orders, I normally get, very mad easily, but she is older than me and I know that I'm supposed to respect her but, um, I don't know, it, it applied to me a little bit differently. But after I started ordering Manuel around, I understood Ma'am Maggie more. How it is to re-, um like teach an instructor how to become better, even though it seems a little bit harsh.

Again, we see a move from listening to instructors simply because they are older, or because she is supposed to, to understanding the philosophy – in this case the concept of trying to make someone better through teaching. When developing her own teaching, for example, Annie takes bits and pieces from different instructors, depending on how well she feels they meet the needs of the students. Thus as her participation changed, so did the meaning she had for various practices and people. This process of becoming a staff member changes her philosophy as a martial artist.

Annie did not have an especially easy time when she started training to become staff. She discussed the stress and pressure she felt, as she had to learn new things and take on new responsibilities. The difficulty of the training added to Annie's developing philosophy, which emphasizes the payoff of overcoming difficulties.

And, um, between that time when they recommended me and I became a red uniform, um, it was a bit hard, because, I learned about how to clean the school and, how like, how, ways they keep um, things organized and certain methods that Instructor James wants to stay the same. And, also, before I got my red uniform they, they told me to teach class, so I got pretty nervous about that. (laughs)...And it was a bit hard throughout the whole entire training but when I got my red uniform it felt all the training was worth it...

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How does it feel? Um, first of all, getting a red uniform is pretty hard, but, after you do go through all the hardship, it's worth it. And, you start to realize how students look up to you once you get your red uniform. They look, they look at you in a whole new light after you get your red uniform. It's much more different. You're respected more, and um, you also start to respect yourself more, cause, you realize that you have more responsibility on yourself as a red uniform than a black uniform.

As she evaluates the school now (which in her opinion, has changed a lot since she started), Annie uses this concept of “payoff” to critique new practices of training staff members, who in her opinion are given the red uniform too soon, without earning it. Annie does not express jealousy or resentment towards the new staff who “had it easier,” but instead believes that this change somehow violates the philosophy of the martial arts; in other words, the pressure and tough time she dealt with is seen in a positive light, and therefore as something that was withheld from new staff.

Mmmmm. It's a bad change because, I think that the less training you give them the more likely they'll be to quit, mm, like earlier. Because, if you train them longer you discipline them longer and they earn more respect for you um throughout the whole entire time that you're training them. But if it's a short train, I think that they don't have as much discipline as they're supposed to have when they become an instructor and when, like when they have a short train, like they get their red uniform when they're about, purple belt, they get a little bit obnoxious and they start thinking, "Oh, I'm a red uniform, I can do whatever I want." Blah, blah, blah, like that.

The risk of becoming obnoxious is worrisome because it goes against what, for Annie, defines being a staff member, which involves being respected because she cares about others as well as about herself. This care for others, coupled with the process of improvement, is what Annie identifies as her favorite thing about Tae Kwon Do, "But, I like, I'm not only seeing myself improve but seeing those, others improve. Not just students just also, you know, the, the people who've been there with you for a long time, ... So, improving myself, improving students, seeing others improve..." The progress from student to staff not only changes the way Annie sees herself (i.e., with more respect) but also changes the nature and meaning of Tae Kwon Do for her.

When I first came I didn't really think about any other people, I just thought about myself training until I got my black belt, but when I got the red uniform I thought more about the junior instructors whose striving to get higher and higher and also the students that I've been helping out. Their problems and stuff like that, what

they need to fix and it made me focus more like on the school. The responsibility I got as soon as I got the red uniform.

For Annie, it was not only the transition to a staff member that helped Annie to further develop her philosophy, but also the transition to a black belt. While the transition to staff member changed the nature of her training from focusing on her own self and technique to also focusing on others, becoming a black belt changed how she understood the training aspect of Tae Kwon Do, i.e., the technique: “I would say that from yellow to red 4 you're just learning the basics, from when you got black belt, um that's when you start to have more fun playing around with the basics and doing more different things.” This “playful” aspect of training also informs her philosophy; Annie is the only one of the girls to emphasize Tae Kwon Do as art.

Martial arts is basically an art, of course, but it's not, usually, when you think of art you think of something beautiful and graceful, not like sparring you know aggressive, fighting and such, but martial arts somehow combines all that together when it comes to form ‘cause form, the reason for it is to, like the movements are techniques to do when you are under attack ...[b]y a bunch of, bunch of people. But, at the same time, I look at it as an art, as a dance to do, so, form, in my opinion, is in a way, if performed live action, with a bunch of people jumping you, is aggressive but just performing in front of thousands of people in like Queens College tournament, it's like an art, so.

This transition at black belt – to a deeper understanding of the martial arts - is understood by Annie in terms of the school’s philosophy, while at the same time it allows her to expand her understanding beyond the school. In the following exchange, for

example, Annie explains how she has come to be critical of the way schools are run in America as a result of her research about the martial arts, which was prompted (perhaps indirectly) by the head instructor of the school.

Annie: First, I'd tell them that the way America does it is not right cause, in Korea, the way they do it is that you train for a year, and you went from white to black. There's no colored, right. So, the American systems are just, you know, corrupt because they wanted to make more money, like \$50 each belt. But, um, you do learn more each time you level up, like, um, you realize a huge difference from the way you were when you were a yellow belt from the time span till purple belt. Like, you notice you've improved a lot, so I guess, colored belts are a good way to show your rank, but I somehow prefer Korea's um, method of doing things better.

Kim: ..[D]id you ... think that way from the beginning, like did you always, when you first joined, know the difference between here and Korea or is that something you learned recently?

Annie: No I rec-, um, I found out about it through training, like when I recently became a black belt I found out more, like um, how the-, how Instructor James said that becoming a black belt is like the, your true journey begins after you become a black belt. Um, and it was true, after I became a black belt I started to get more into Tae Kwon Do and I researched more about it, I learned more about the difference between Karate and like Tae Kwon Do and how it's better. So, um, I learned about the way Korea does it after I became a black belt.

In several ways, then, Annie's participation in the school allows her to develop a martial arts philosophy that goes beyond the one provided by the school. This is done through her relationship to others (both in and out of the school), her changing roles and participation, her own research and reflections on the art and herself, and in general a process of making sense of and interpreting Tae Kwon Do. Today, even though Annie doesn't "really wanna do it anymore as an instructor," she still sees herself as a martial artist – in part because she still wants to reach further goals as a student (i.e., "reach third dan") and in part because her philosophy stretches beyond Tae Kwon Do, into what she refers to as a "life lesson learned."

I know for sure it's made me strive to do a little bit better when, 'cause, I tried imagining myself, life without Tae Kwon Do and I know, like for sure I would be very dull and boring and probably the only goal I have in life is to go for college, heh. But as a Tae Kwon Do martial artist, not only do I have a goal to become a third dan, but I have more goals for other people, such as my mom, to make her happier. Not only to go to college but also to raise money and help her manage the bills, the house and such. But also made me have goals to improve other people's lives such as my students. And, to help them reach black belt and also make them have more goals as well as me, like similar to me.

If we consider where Annie is today, after 6 years of training in the martial arts, we find that she has constructed her philosophy so that even her decision to cut back her training is done based on this philosophy. Her main issues, for example, have to do with her own goals for the future and her evaluation of the current school practices:

Uh, I guess it's because, um now is a crucial time, cause I'm debating whether I

want to go to the Philippines, back home, or um stay here and go for college here, and it's kinda a crucial time because I don't exactly have the money, and my mom doesn't have it either, so, Tae Kwon Do takes a huge amount of, you know, that savings for college, that I've been um working hard for so I just wanted to stop uh being an instructor for a while, like and tr-, like um focus more on another job, like doing something else that, that's a little bit more, um has reasonable pay. And, um, also because I've been studying more for college. Like the SAT tests that I have to take next year. And also, I felt like I've lost my passion as an instructor throughout the years that I've been an instructor. 'Cause, ummm, I guess, cause the changes that have happened and how we moved to a new school and how the way things are ordered now and the new people that joined Tae Kwon Do, like the new instructors, and how they got theirs, their uni-, red uniform, I thought it was a bit different from the way I got it. And that's just one of the changes that I don't really like.

So as the research comes to an end, we leave Annie at a critical time, trying to decide what her role is and will be at the school. She describes how her feelings have changed toward the school.

I know for sure my feelings have changed as a student. Uh, when I was a student I used to be more excited as I was. And, an instructor I used to be a bit tired, but at the same time excited to see some people, like my second family. But, so, my moods have changed after I walked into the door. And, right now, um, I guess I'm, um anxious is the right word cause I haven't taken class in awhile. After I walked through that door I was a bit anxious. I didn't, like when you saw me

walking around reading stuff. Um, I haven't been here for a while. And, but at the same time, I am tired, so um, my feelings changed throughout the times that I've walked in.

Whatever she chooses, it seems likely that Annie will take the philosophy of the martial arts with her.

### **Amy**

When I left I was really upset cause I was kind of feeling left out. 'Cause I was like, if I leave will they still treat me the same like they treated me when I was in there? ... I'm like, if I do leave is the school gonna be okay? Yeah, I started thinking and then, um, I was like, wow, like, James really trusted me to like you know go after his steps but, it felt like I kind of let him down.

If I had to choose one theme that consistently emerged during Amy's interview it would be the tension that existed between her desires to both belong (i.e. be part of a group) and be distinguished, or separate. In the ways that she talks about both her self and the Tae Kwon Do school, there is an underlying, persistently present sense that her activity in Tae Kwon Do helped her to stand out – to be accomplished, respected, and notable. Yet at the same time, there is also a certain desire to be a part of the group – the “Tae Kwon Do family” – that leads to concern and in some cases, regret, that others might not like her specifically because she is special. This tension, while at first a bit baffling, makes sense when one considers that it is precisely through the group, and the caring, respect, expectations, pressure that come from it, that Amy was able to distinguish herself. So it is not surprising that the mentions of any accomplishment are done almost

with a forced modesty that allows for Amy to remain at the same time part of the group and distinguished from it.

Although we did not spend much time talking about Amy's experiences before she started training in Tae Kwon Do, there were several key aspects of her life before martial arts that illuminate her story. The first involves her family, specifically the perception by Amy that she didn't get the kind of love that she got in Tae Kwon Do at home.

Because like, I didn't really get that kind of love at home. Cause I'm al-, cause my mom and my dad are both working. My brother's always like, whatever, somewhere else. So I was basically home alone, until I joined.

Because she was often alone when at home, Amy seemed to especially appreciate the close, family-like relationships she formed at the school, referring on many occasions to instructors and staff as "like a father," "my brother," "my sister," etc.

The second aspect of her life before Tae Kwon Do that informs the rest of her story was the experiences she had at her church group, when other members in the group would make fun of her. These experiences were still particularly relevant for Amy, who still feared getting hurt by many of these same people. It also appeared to drive some of her effort and dedication to Tae Kwon Do (as well as, perhaps, other things); she revealed an "I'm gonna show them" attitude towards those who made fun of her. This attitude seems to feed much of her drive in Tae Kwon Do, and the pride she gets out of trying hard and accomplishing things she might have thought she couldn't.

It's probably because of the fact when I was younger, when people used to make fun of me. And I, that's when I started building up, I'm like you know what, I'm gonna show them when I grow up.

This was not, however, apparent in her description of how she came to start training in Tae Kwon Do. As discussed in previous chapters, many females appear to join martial arts due to reasons other than their own personal interest in them. This is the case for Amy as well. In her accounts of starting at the school, Amy mentions three individuals who influenced her. First, her friend suggested that she come along and visit to check out a boy she thought was cute. Second, one of the instructors at the school pressured her into trying. Finally, after she talked to the instructor, her mother “decided” to bring Amy and her brother to the school.

Following the procedures at the school, Amy took two trial lessons before joining. The second lesson in particular signifies a key moment in Amy's story. At this trial lesson, her instructor was a fellow Korean who would become a significant part of her experiences. In our interview, Amy acknowledges that the fact that he was Korean was significant on that day; it made her feel more comfortable and allowed her to open up and be more excited during the lesson. (It also helped that this particular instructor was very energetic and hyper in his teaching style).

Umm, when Instructor Chris gave it to me, I was like, kind of really shy. Well not really shy, but then I was kind of like, okay let's just do punch, punch, whatever, kick, punch, punch, whatever, kick. And then the second trial lesson that kind of got a little bit exciting cause I got a Korean instructor (laughs). So I was like, okay, let's go do this.

Once she started, Amy quickly became fully engaged in Tae Kwon Do. In her own words, she became a “Tae Kwon Do maniac,” attending the school “24/7” and sticking around to help out. During the early months of her training, Amy would attend class almost every day. When she came to the school, she would often take 2 or 3 classes in a row.

Interestingly, as she looks back it is as if much of this initial training (as a student) is overshadowed by her later experiences as a staff. When she provides a brief overview of her experiences, for example, she barely mentions any event that occurs before she starts training to be staff.

Uhhh, let's see. First I came because of my friend. And then Instructor Maggie kind of like made me do a trial lesson that day. After that I joined, and then, um, let's see, um, I almost came like every single day, 24/7. (laughs) Always just to help out. And then I got promoted to junior instructor and then got the red stripe. And then, yeah I became SWAT team. So all together I've been like in it for four years now.

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Kim: What are the key moments that stand out for you about Tae Kwon Do?

Amy: About Tae Kwon Do? Um, let me see. Uuuh, first thing, when I first um, joined. Second, when I, uh, I guess when I started training. For the staff. Even though, even though it was pressured a lot, I still had a lot of fun. Third thing, when I became SWAT member. At that ti-, at that point I'm like, wow I could kind of like, you know, be a little bit relaxed or even though I'm pressured, and then fourth, let's say, when I, left. Cause I was like, all that pressuring and

everything, it's like kind of going to go to a waste but then I can't keep a hold onto that right now, cause you know, it's not gonna help me really in the future of what I want to be. So that's why, yeah.

In her account, it is as if she joined, and then she became junior instructor. Events such as her first classes, her promotion tests and moving to the honor student program (i.e. black uniform) are relatively inconsequential in her story. When describing getting her black uniform, an event that is typically hyped up by the instructors of the school, Amy says it was “no big deal,” and only seems to note that she got it extremely fast (“like that,” as she snaps her fingers). The only event that she seems to recall clearly is her first tournament, which she describes as scary (whereas the promotion test was “just a test”).

Perhaps this can be explained if we look at what Amy offers as her reasons for joining Tae Kwon Do. Amy identifies two of the main reasons she joined Tae Kwon Do as 1) losing weight and 2) gaining confidence, respect and responsibility – all which would hopefully help her realize her dream of being an actress. It is likely, in my opinion, that the latter reasons were constructed as she progressed through her initial trial lessons and classes, as these (confidence, respect, and responsibility) are “selling points” that are emphasized by instructors when signing new students up. In several of her statements about her early experiences, Amy reveals further how she developed into the philosophy aspect of Tae Kwon Do, including the importance of the black belt.

But then when, I don't get what I expect, like reading posters, sitting down reading posters. That's just like, are you serious, this is such a waste of money. You know? But then, I'm like, at the same time, oh, Tae Kwon Do is not only,

only about kicking and punching. It's also about philosophy and everything. So I start thinking, I'm like, hmm, now I understand.

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Kim: Did you wanna get your black belt?

Amy: Um, well, that's, that was like a goal that he made us think about it. But then that really wasn't my goal. I was just like, oh it's just a belt. It doesn't really matter about what belt I get but if I improve or not.

Although her initial interest in Tae Kwon Do may have been as a vehicle for becoming an actress, as she became active in the school, as a student and later a staff member, Amy recognized the potential for standing out in Tae Kwon Do (so that Tae Kwon Do became interesting for its own sake). This desire for standing out is always matched with a feeling (perhaps even a fear) that she does not deserve to stand out. The one event that appears to be most memorable from her early experiences - the tournament – signifies an important aspect of Amy's story – the feeling that she does not deserve accolades, recognition, and promotions. At various moments Amy reveals a feeling of not deserving something that she has gotten (i.e., double tests, black uniform).

Well, at first when I got, um, double test, at first shot I was like, do I really like deserve this, you know? But then you know how the instructors make you feel like you deserve it. And then you feel like you don't, but then, to prove myself that I did, that I did already, I, that's, I kept on coming, I kept on like doing the classes and everything. So, yeah. So that's how I like convinced myself that I was ready for it.

At these moments, it is the staff that convinces Amy that she has, in fact, earned what she gets. I believe that this motivation from the staff is what made it possible for Amy to put the effort that she did into Tae Kwon Do – as she strived to prove that she did in fact warrant the attention she was getting. This is the beginning of the tension between “why me” and “I’m exceptional” attitudes toward herself.

The events at Tae Kwon Do that have had the biggest impact on Amy are those that led up to her role as a SWAT staff member. While switching from white uniform to black uniform was no big deal, the switch to junior instructor and then red uniform, two promotions that mark a leadership role in the school, made a big difference. Several events in Amy’s training highlight the change from student – when Tae Kwon Do was a hobby – to staff – when Tae Kwon Do was like a job.

The first is how she describes the feelings she had when she first started being called “ma’am” at the school.

When I first heard it I was like, ahh. That, I guess it means that I'm gonna become an instructor too one day? That's how I felt. But then after hearing it, like after I got used to it, I'm like, okay this sounds good. This sounds, yeah. This sounds like if they're respecting me and, I should respect them back.

The element of respect, emphasized at the school in many ways, became extremely important for Amy. Especially important was the concept of reciprocal respect – she gave respect to those who respected her. She brings this up in relation to the head instructor as well as students and fellow staff members, both higher and lower than herself.

Other events highlight the tension that Amy felt as she trained first to be staff, and later to be a SWAT member. In one instance, for example, Amy gets so fed up with the pressure that she runs out of the school:

Um, I think it was around like fall or something. I'm not sure, it like, like he, like it was because, um, I think I did something wrong with the information or something. And he got really pissed off. He was like, "How, how many months have you, have you like trained for this?" You know, "You should have known and everything." But then, I was only what, 13! So I was like really upset and then he was like, "Go, go." It was like the end of the day, too. He was like, "Go throw out the garbage right now," and then I, I just like left. And then Billy comes chasing after me, he's like, "It's okay..."

Significantly, it is Billy who runs after her, as he is the instructor whom she follows as a staff member (the same instructor who motivated her during her second trial lesson). As we will see, the approval of Billy, as well as the head instructor, is very important for Amy. Another similar occasion has Amy claiming "I'm done" after an especially difficult day.

Uuuuh. At first I didn't like giving trial lessons. I hated them. 'Cause every trial lesson I got he would always make me do it. But then after that, I was like that this is fun, you know, I'm like this is, I felt like I was part of, I was helping out the school. I felt proud of that. But then when I get too much, in like one day, like 10 trial lessons in one day I'm just like, done, I'm just tired.

These moments when she almost quits but doesn't reveal how Amy is torn between being proud of the work that she does at the school and resenting the amount of

pressure that is placed on her (especially at such a young age.) She accepts the notion fully that she is helping the school, that she *needs* to do certain tasks or else (the school will fail, or she will disappoint everyone). Amy obviously is proud of the work and effort that she puts into the school.

She is also proud of being cared for – of being part of the group. When discussing one of the highest-ranking female instructors, for example, Amy says, “But then, I also learned that she actually really cares about me. And that's why she does the things of what she does. So I'm really proud of that.” This desire to be looked and cared for (i.e., part of the group) was also revealed when Amy reveals that she felt, at several moments, that some of the instructors did not like her:

Instructor Esther is really nice,, sometimes she can be really strict, and we just joke around and everything. At first I really thought that Instructor Esther didn't like me.

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I'm like, looking at her like, um, excuse me, like, a little weird. and that's why Maggie kind of, didn't like me in the beginning.

So while Amy wants to stand out and be recognized, she does not want to do this at the expense of belonging to and being liked by the “family.” One group that she seemed particularly concerned about in this regard was the junior instructors. As she progressed from student to staff, and later to SWAT, Amy made it a point (at the suggestion of the head instructor) to “separate herself” from the others. Looking back at this process, Amy describes herself as getting “cocky,” “bossy,” “arrogant” and too “full of herself.”

Um, when I got higher, and I knew that I was gonna become SWAT member one day, I started thinking, you know what, I'm higher than them. And I started kind of, like, kind of worrying. Should I, be um, a leader to them, like should I become a leader? Like have good leadership or should I still stay friends with them cause I'm still a teenager, you know. So I was kind of worrying but then when Instructor James told me to separate myself from the juniors I knew the answer, I was like, you know what, I have to build up my leadership. So, that's what I chose. It didn't become a good outcome and it didn't become a bad outcome. It was just like in the middle.

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Amy: Only to build up my confidence and get cocky. I don't know, I didn't want to get cocky. But it just happened. It just happened.

Kim: When do you think that you were cocky?

Amy: I think I started getting cocky when I was training for jr. instructor. Then when I got my red uniform, became SWAT.

Kim: And what made you think that?

Amy: 'Cause, before that I was really close with the jr. instructors and everything.

And after that I was like just bossing them around, as if like I was the boss, so.

Kim: And during that period did you feel like you were being cocky?

Amy: Yeah, I did. That's why, that's why I kind of like kind of cooled down on it.

Before I quit. But, I still regret it.

Kim: Do you think other people thought you were?

Amy: Mmmhmm.

Kim: Did anyone say anything or

Amy: MmmMmm, but I could like tell, you know. You know how there's rumors, going around. So, rumors get back to you, so yeah.

She regrets that perhaps she was too aggressive and bossy with the “juniors,” but at the same time believes that her efforts worked to create that distinction between herself and the others that, in line with the school’s philosophy, she believes being a leader required. The regret she feels as a result of this cockiness is partially a result of “rumors” that Amy heard. The feeling left out or disliked here is reminiscent of her feelings being made fun of at her church group.

During the process of becoming SWAT, Amy moves from being one of the “teenagers” to hanging out with the adult staff. This belonging to the adult group satisfies several needs for Amy. First, it seems to be a sign of status. Very much in line with her “separating herself” from others is her being a teenager who can “hang out” with the adults. The adults also form the familial relationships that she values greatly – as mentioned earlier, knowing that the instructors cared about her made Amy proud. In addition, hanging out with the adults, in some ways, allowed Amy to act like a teenager. In her discussions about her maturity, Amy notes that she actually acts more mature and “serious” when she is around the teenagers at the school (as a way to keep her leadership), but more carefree and “hyper” when she is with the adults (perhaps as a way to stand out when with the adults). In her own words, being in Tae Kwon Do, with the adult staff, lets her act “like a regular teenager.”

This is also related to how she relates to others outside of Tae Kwon Do. Amy explains that she is not able to carry her carefree attitude into her relationships outside of

the school. Several of her friends, for example, lament the fact that Amy had become too serious, too committed to Tae Kwon Do (i.e., not like a teenager.) In her talk about herself, Amy notes that she cannot act this way around most people because she is still afraid of getting hurt by them. Related back to the experiences she had being made fun of at her church group, Amy has chosen to “show them” by becoming mature, serious, and in control of her emotions (i.e., I don’t just cry at any little thing now.)

The developing leadership and distinction of being a staff member brought certain privileges that Amy valued. Here, for example, she discusses taking class when someone who is lower ranking than her teaches:

... ‘Cause I got the privileges. Like especially if somebody, if I'm taking adult class, and let's say if Manuel is teaching, I got the privilege to like, to like, you know, leave when somebody needed me. Or like, when I needed to, you know, do something. I just left. I feel bad for Manuel, but, when he was teaching, I would always like, you know, I would assist at the same time. It's not really taking class but assisting.... ‘Cause if he does something wrong, I could correct him. I felt bad, but, okay whatever. I feel really bad correcting him but I'm like, sorry Manuel, but you did good ... He got better.

Moments such as this, when she can correct another instructor or highlight her own expertise, allow Amy to feel privileged, to distinguish herself from the group. Other events, on the other hand, challenge this status. When another staff member also became SWAT, for example, there was some tension over who was “in charge.”

I think, me and Yvette's relationship kind of changed. Cause after she became SWAT she became kind of like really. Not bossy. Not bossy, like. Yeah, a little

bit bossy but at the same time a little bit more like ignorant, I guess ... Like, um, even though she was lower than me, she would like tell me what to do and everything. And, I ha-, I kind of had to respect that cause she's older than me. And then, um, other times when I asked her to do something, she wouldn't do it. So she kind of thought like she was higher than me and everything. So I didn't really like that but I didn't say anything.

Amy's status was further threatened when she perceived that the head instructor was favoring Yvette. This first occurred when Yvette becomes SWAT: "... when Yvette became SWAT, I kind of was like, how come I had to separate myself from the junior staff, but she isn't. You know. I was like, why couldn't, why did he, why did Instructor James specifically tell me to separate, me, myself from them, but he's not saying anything to Yvette?" In this case, Amy is able to understand the difference in a way that highlights her own strength: "Is it just because, like, she can't handle it or, you know, I kind of started thinking that..." At some moments, she is able to rationalize these moments with this "I can handle it" attitude, that places herself in a positive light even when she believes someone else is being favored. At other moments she is not able to do so. At a later moment in our discussion, the perceived favoring is brought up again, in relation to the tough time Amy has as a SWAT member:

'Cause for the three years, I've been SWAT, I never once got a vacation. And then, um, he, it felt like he was kind of like favoring Yvette. And I was like, you know what, whatever. It doesn't really matter anymore. And I, I, I think at that point I kind of went like from this point of loving Tae Kwon Do to like that.

The tension in this case was enough to lead Amy to leave the school for a short time, right before she left for good (she moved to Connecticut). This choice may have been made easier by the fact that she already knew that she was moving anyway. Even after considering her imminent move, however, it is interesting to note that what finally causes Amy to be “done” is the perceived favoring of someone else, which leads Amy to feel that she is not being treated fairly and perhaps not as “special” as another.

While her status may have been threatened, however, Amy continues to value her contribution to the school. When discussing her feelings about leaving the school, for example, Amy reveals that she feels bad about letting the instructor down and not being there to help out at the school. This attitude is in line with her discussion of all of her responsibilities – which she felt “needed” to get done. As was the case with the trial lessons, Amy may have resented all of the work that she had to do, but she took it as a sign that she was needed and, in some cases, of her superior ability and effort: “I didn't like the fact that I was the best one in trial lessons. ‘Cause every single time there was a trial lesson he's like Amy! Amy! Amy! Trail lesson! I'm like, (sigh) okay.”

When discussing her status and pride in her efforts, however, Amy was careful not to talk too highly of herself. This reveals her desire to still be liked (i.e., not wanting to be too cocky) as well as to be part of the group/family. This is especially true when talking about her actions in the class. Interestingly, the level of pride and accomplishment that is demonstrated in her talk about her staff responsibilities does not carry over to Amy's discussions of her technique in Tae Kwon Do. During several instances, Amy puts down her abilities inside the class.

Technique training, I didn't like it cause, every single time, the hardest person, or

like the front line would have to demonstrate each time, and I hated demonstrating cause I couldn't do the kick right. I mean, if I, if I did really good like Billy does, right, then I wouldn't s-, complain, but I can't even do the thing. Or I couldn't even kick. And they made me demonstrate.

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I have some bad experiences in breaking, pshew. I have bad exp-, I have bad experiences in breaking. I don't like breaking. Each time when I h-, hit the board with the wrong part I always scratch my, my heel. And I hate that. Not only that but then, the board is like really tough to break.

The progress of her technique and training actually took the reverse direction than one might expect, based on the emphasis on the black belt as the beginning of one's "serious" training. According to Amy, once she earned her black belt (and shortly after became a SWAT member), she actually decreased her training in the class. (A look at attendance records backs this up). Based on her account, once she became SWAT staff she became even more stressed out, focused more on business work and became lazy in regards to taking class. She also believes that this happens more often with female instructors as opposed to male, who still focus on their training after becoming staff.

The emphasis on business is a site of conflict and contradiction for Amy. At different moments, she seems unhappy or disappointed with the focus on business, rather than training, at the school. When asked what she misses the most, however, she replies that she misses giving trial lessons and information, two activities that are related to business. She also justifies her being lazy in class by claiming that she "needed" to get the business stuff done. So while she does identify the business stuff as most important to

her now (it is, after all, what she misses the most), she also recognizes that it stands in the way of her progressing inside the class. The tension, therefore, lies between wanting to help out and “enjoying” Tae Kwon Do - between Tae Kwon Do as a job (which it became) or as a hobby (which it once was).

As a result of the emphasis on business, Amy began to feel “left behind” inside the classes, especially in the more advanced ones:

... I, had a feeling I couldn't really follow up after being, being like, kind of like, left behind from training. So I was like, yeah, I don't think I could do that... Yeah, like, I didn't feel like I could follow up with everybody else who always just came for the jr. instructor class while I was in the front desk doing the stuff, you know.

The fact that she was falling behind in the advanced classes most likely was problematic for Amy, who claims that the only moment she really felt proud inside of the class was when she was able to perform an advanced technique – the 540 roundhouse kick.

That's the only time, the only time. I was like, “Oh! Did you see that? Did you see that? (laughs) Do you remember that time, when I first did it, I was like (clapping), yo, I did it, I did it, I did it! I was like going crazy, I was like, oh my god did you see that? ... Because that's something I really looked forward to doing, and then when I finally did it I was like, “Oh my God!” I didn't think that I was gonna do it, ya know, I was like “Wha!” Like, oh, I did it.

The pride that comes from accomplishing something that she did not think was possible is an important part of her “distinctness.” She expresses this when talking about teaching and assisting class, doing trial lessons, giving information, and doing business

stuff. As she moves from being too nervous, shy and slow to accomplish these things to being respected in her position, Amy is able to live up to her place as Billy's "successor. Since she sees him as an "older brother"/mentor, this success is especially important.

As Amy became more and more involved with the business and teaching aspects of the school, these areas provided the opportunity to distinguish herself from others, something she could not necessarily do inside the class. This coincided with the switch from Tae Kwon Do as a hobby to Tae Kwon Do as a job.

She does, however, highlight two of her favorite activities inside the class—sparring and form:

Form and sparring. Form I like it. 'Cause, when I first started, um, I liked, you know, doing it, but then after I was the one who was teaching it and I'm like, "Yay! I'm proud." And I'm like looking, I'm like, aw, this is something that I learned from my instructors so I should teach them. So I kind of have that proud feeling. And sparring, I don't know it just like relives all my stress. Like in the beginning, when Instructor James always put me with Billy to spar, I would hate it. I would real-, I would be scared, like, I wouldn't even get close. But then, after Billy left, I'm just like yay!, flying around. And then and, now, now, we really don't care like me and Billy, when we see each other we're like always kicking each other. And he kicks me really hard though. He doesn't, he doesn't like go lightly just because I'm a girl. He goes like bam! Especially with no gear, and it hurts, but, then I get him back. We play around like that.

Both of these activities provide Amy with the chance to distinguish herself – form as a teacher, and sparring as a girl that can be "hit hard." Other in-class activities that she

likes also share this pride factor (e.g. sweeping an opponent in self defense and learning a kick that took a long time.)

In her discussion of sparring, Amy focuses on the effort rather than the outcome as a source of pride: “When I'm sparring, even though like, I know that I can't win, but the, but the feeling of trying hard makes me proud.”<sup>14</sup> This is not only related to her pattern of using language to establish herself as special, even as she minimizes her ability, but also to her ideas about gender:

... [T]he girls, when I spar them I'm just like, okay, whatever. 'Cause I basically, like finished all the girls. Except for you and Ma'am Esther. But, but um, but, like the guys they have more stamina and they have more speed so it's like hard to beat them, so that's like my goal to beat the guys but I never did. Yeah.

The phrase “finished all the girls” establishes Amy's status as better than the girls, but at the same time doesn't challenge her status as female. Amy continues to express her beliefs about gender as she explains the differences she believes exist between boys and girls, which include that boys are generally stronger than girls, better at sparring and advanced kicks, and girls are better at form and stretching kicks. These differences may in fact be accurate categorizations based on her experiences. What is limiting about such categorizations, however, are the physical explanations that she gives, that seem to be accepted as just the way it is. Above we see the way she ascribes the guys' superiority to better stamina and speed. In another instance, we can see her constructing an explanation as to why guys are better at more advanced kicks:

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<sup>14</sup> This doesn't carry over to sparring at the tournament, however, when Amy is angry when she loses. Her anger is not directed at herself, in this case, but at the judge who she believes favored one of his own students. Again we see Amy angry when she feels that she is wronged as a result of another being favored.

I guess because gi-, guys are kind of more, even though they say girls are more lightweight, I think guys are more, more able to like fly around. Because they have more like, leg muscle I guess? And you need that, a lot of leg muscle to jump.

The way that Amy comes up with a physical explanation (evidenced by the words “I guess?”) seems to disclose a belief that there must be some physical explanation as to why guys are better than girls at certain tasks. Perhaps even more disturbing, however, are the social norms that go along with these categorizations, and how they inform Amy’s actions and her feelings about herself. At one moment, when discussing a female staff member who is exceptionally good, Amy seems to reveal that girls who are strong are seen as exceptions.

Like you know how Instructor Jelena would always kick everybody's ass. So she's, I think, pretty strong. And then, um, I don't know. I think that's about it. And then, there's girls who try to be strong like and beat guys, like, like you and Instructor Esther. That's pretty much it.

Continuing the discussion, however, Amy expresses a belief that girls could be as good and as strong as boys, if they tried. Girls are less inclined to try, however, both because they are more likely to become consumed in staff responsibilities or because they don’t want to be “too strong” or protective, as this may challenge gender roles.

Either one, they get tired of it, or two, they don't want to be too like, protective of themselves. Cause you know how some girls want their boyfriends or whatsoever, to protect them. So yeah, if you think about it like, let's say you had a boyfriend and he's weaker than you, what are you gonna, you know, what are,

it's gonna be a little weird.

This concept as females not being too strong comes up several times during Amy's interview. For Amy, it is important that she fits the accepted parameters for being female. She is, in fact, one of the girls who fears becoming too strong (aka masculine).

Amy: And then I did it, but then I had the muscles, so ... I looked like a guy.

Kim: So you felt like you looked like a guy with muscles?

Amy: Yeah. Like a broad shoulders, big arms, leg muscles. Whose not gonna think you as a guy?

Kim: I take it from your voice that that's not a good thing

Amy: Of course not (laughs).

So while Amy wants to get fit as a result of Tae Kwon Do (one of her main goals was to lose weight), she is afraid of gaining too much muscle. According to her, this fear is enough to effect her feelings about working out.

Like when I'm doing push-ups or sit-ups I mean, it is tough because you have to use your arm strength and sit-ups is like, cramps up your stomach. But, at the same time, like after you do it like you feel good. But then, after I do it, I kind of like regret for doing, trying so hard and doing it. Cause then I know that I'm gonna gain the muscles that I don't want. So, yeah.

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I start, I start thinking more like, oh, man I'm gonna gain muscle again. Like I just keep thinking like, oh man, I should not do this.

There is a certain tension between being able to excel at the physical aspect of Tae Kwon Do and becoming less like a girl. This seems to bother Amy less when she is

at Tae Kwon Do, where she feels like she gets along better with the guys than the girls (i.e., she is just one of the guys.) In fact, at Tae Kwon Do, she seems to think that other girls are either too shy or nervous to hang out with the boys (again distinguishing herself from others)

Amy: Mmmm, Mark, Joseph, TJ, we just, we're just like those, we're just like that group where we just joke around, hit each other and make fun of each other. So we're just like, you know, but then, I think the girls got a little bit more jealous of me. 'Cause I'm so like outgoing, and more like open to the guy staff. And they're, they can't do that, they're like a little bit more shy and everything. So, um, the girls, I think I got along with more of the guys than the girls.

Kim: Because,

Amy: Because, because the girls are kind of like, in their own world gossiping and everything while I was like talking and hanging out with guys and everything, just like talking about this and talking about that and ...

But these relationships, she emphasizes, are platonic friendships, ones she would not want to ruin by becoming romantically involved. Outside of Tae Kwon Do, there are different types of relationships with boys. In some cases, being a tomboy outside of Tae Kwon Do is also good, when it comes to being friends with boys.

Amy: Actually boys since, ever since I told them I did Tae Kwon Do they get more friendly with me. They start like punching me and everything, I'm like, punch them back. And then, I'm more, I'm more like instead of like a girly girl I'm more like a tomboy.

Kim: And why do you think that is?

Amy: Because, I think it's because I've been hanging around with guys too much. I'm sorry mom (laughs). I didn't want to.

Kim: How does that change your relationship with boys. Like, if you were a girly girl, how would it be different, the way you interact?

Amy: Uuuuuh. Then they would probably pick on me, and everything.

Kim: So you think boys pick on girly girls.

Amy: Or like they don't really talk to them much, you know? But then I'm more like a tomboy, I, express myself, and I think they like it that way.

Kim: And what about like dating and stuff? Do you think that they want to date you more because you're a tomboy?

Amy: I think they just think of me as a friend.

In some cases, however, she believes that males have a different reaction to her being a tomboy.

Amy: 'Cause all the guys are like, what are you a guy? They always make fun of me.

Kim: Who makes fun of you?

Amy: Like all the guys.

Kim: Here at the school?

Amy: No, like, other places. Like my friends. They're always going like, oh, oh, I heard that you go to Tae Kwon Do, right, can you do fifty push-ups and everything. So I'm like (sighs).

Kim: And then what happens if you say yes?

Amy: Huh? Then they go, oh show me, show me, show me. So then most of the

time I'm like, whatever. I just like ignore the question.

Kim: And how do you ... feel when they say like, show me, let me see you do fifty push-ups.

Amy: I just feel (laughs) like, I, maybe I do like ten and then I'm like okay that's it.

Kim: And why do you feel like that's making fun of you?

Amy: 'Cause like, I mean like, what, what girl wants to really you know show off, doing, how to do pushups when you know, other girls are showing off their new clothes or new shoes or whatsoever. So yeah.

This sentiment is especially relevant for Amy around Korean guys, who she claims are very traditional and like to “protect” their girlfriends. In a sense, Amy is happy to be just one of the guys at Tae Kwon Do, but when her success in masculine related activities (i.e., pushups) is highlighted outside of Tae Kwon Do, Amy becomes frustrated. Again, she is torn between wanting to distinguish herself (being different from other girls) and belonging (being like other girls). This is especially true when it comes to romantic relationships, when distinctions between male and female seem to be highlighted for Amy. This is revealed when we speak about different roles for girls – namely “girly-girls” and “tomboys.” At one point during her interview, Amy speaks positively about becoming a tomboy at Tae Kwon Do. She speaks somewhat negatively about “girly girls” – or girls who focus on being pretty. At another point, however, Amy does not want to consider herself a tomboy nor a girly-girl, but is instead frustrated that there are no other options (“Why can't I just be normal?”)

It is this struggle between distinguishing herself in some way (i.e., being a tomboy – a girl who can “spar with the boys”) and fitting in to the group (i.e., being “normal”) that facilitates Amy’s development both within and outside of Tae Kwon Do. At the conclusion of this research, Amy has returned, in a sense, to acting as the activity in which she can resolve this tension. Despite her being a self proclaimed “Tae Kwon Do maniac” for much of her time at the school, Amy does not see Tae Kwon Do as a significant part of her future. Although her choice to leave is not completely hers to make (it is after all, he mother who decides to move), Amy rationalizes the decision to leave based on what she needs to succeed as an actress:

‘Cause I was like, all that pressuring and everything, it's like kind of going to go to a waste but then I can't keep a hold onto that right now, cause you know, it's not gonna help me really in the future of what I want to be. So that's why, yeah.

Although Amy has, at least for the time being, chosen to emphasize acting instead of Tae Kwon Do as a means of “standing out,” she admits that she misses the school and leaves open the chance to return to Tae Kwon Do one day:

Because, I don't know about the future yet. I don't even know if I'm gonna succeed and become an actress or not. If I don't succeed, I think I'm gonna come back to Tae Kwon Do and become like a business person like Instructor James.

## VIII. Conclusions

On some level, I suppose that this work has been and continues to be much more about my own “why” than it is about either the “why” or “how” (or who, for that matter) of the girls that I worked with. I would suspect this is the case with much work in the social sciences (and “hard” sciences as well), although it is very rarely presented this way. Perhaps because of this tendency to (try to) separate the subject(s) from the object, to remove oneself (or one’s *selves*) from presentations of “objective” findings, I have experienced, at times, a discomfort from or concern of being “too present” in this work. In considering my own role and participation in the work, however, I can say that my own actions as a researcher and writer are in line with the theoretical and practical position I am putting forth. More specifically, this position relies on the conceptualization of the self as an ongoing performance or “doing,” always situated as part of historical and cultural human activity. Identity, therefore, is defined not as an essentialist concept, but as a continuously constructed understanding of the self, as we act (and construct meaning, which is also a type of action) together in the world – the “doing of” research must be considered as much a performance of identity as the “doing of” martial arts. The emphasis on creation, transformation, and collaboration are reflected in Stetsenko’s (2009) discussion of the uniquely human processes of “being” and “becoming” that occur within socio-historical worlds.

According to this view, humans come to be and come to know – each other, themselves and the world – while transforming their world and, in the process, while collectively creating their own life and their own nature,

along with their society and history. (Stetsenko, 2009, p. 5)

As a key component of this process of being and becoming is the “life project” (Stetsenko, 2009) “The hallmark of human practices is that they do not narrowly conform to existing reality and do not aim to fit in with it. Instead, the goal is to change the world and the persons in it – with the two being instantaneously created in and through human practices” (6). I can understand this project as developing a practical and theoretical worldview that honors potential in human beings (both humanity in general and individuals more specifically) as rooted in desire and action within socially and historically produced situations, and thus sees potential for transformation (of the world and of the self) in collaborative human activity. Specifically, with this work, I am interested in the potential for females to excel at activities traditionally considered “for men” and both be and see themselves as strong, powerful, and physically adept, thus contributing to the breakdown of the traditional male/female dichotomy. Developing and elaborating such a point of view involves many interactions – with the girls, obviously, but also with other martial artists, with my Tae Kwon Do instructors and students, with advisors and editors, and with theorists whose works I have read and been influenced by. This research represents a collaborative process that not only reflects and influences the girls whom I write about, but also defines myself and, in a broad sense, the world(s) of sports and martial arts, psychology, and gender studies.

As with any broad “worldview” this life project is not simply a driving point in one specific piece of research or writing, but infiltrates all aspects of my life. And although I can trace this project to emerging interests and desires as a child (who was more interested in and inclined to play “with the boys”), I believe it took on a stronger,

more cohesive relevance as I negotiated two contemporaneous process of becoming, specifically 1) as a martial artist and 2) as a graduate student interested in the interrelated concepts of learning, development, and identity.

Although as I write this, I am no longer training in Tae Kwon Do, I still feel a deep connection to the practices in which I took part, and the people with whom I trained and learned from. I believe that I continue to reap the benefits I found during my time in Tae Kwon Do. Despite the limitations of the art and my school, and the frustration I felt as gender stereotypes were reinforced rather than challenged, I would recommend training to others. As a site of intense, focused physical and mental agency, these practices can provide the activity necessary to develop a strength, power and agency often denied to females in our society. Since I stopped training in Tae Kwon Do, I have considered (and tried) training in other disciplines. Each discipline carries with it unique practices and philosophies, and therefore provide their own sets of benefits and sacrifices. Styles such as wushu kung fu offer artistic aesthetics, perhaps at the expense of practical fighting. Styles such as MMA seem, at first glance, to offer fighting without the art (although I am inclined to believe that this is related more to the art of selling the sport than to the sport itself). Some arts, such as aikido, are built upon the concept of peace and self-defense rather than fighting.

Although I believe that martial arts offer something beyond sports in terms of an explicit emphasis on the mind/body connection (for lack of a better word) in self formation, it has also become evident for me that the potential to challenge and reinvent the traditional gender dichotomy exists within other sports as well. Regardless of the style of martial art or the type of sport played, the processes of defining selves and defining

societies are directly related to the nature of participation individuals and/or groups have considering the type of actions and philosophies that constitute various activities. This participation is constituted by a body image that mediates our action in the world as it informs and is informed by our mind. In this sense, ideas and theories about humanity and the world are important tools in our everyday living. Worldviews, especially as they are incorporated into a life project, become visible everywhere. To give a quick example – while reading up on dog training, I repeatedly came across discussions of a mistake many people make when dealing with dogs - forgetting that dogs, unlike people, only exist in the “here and now.” This simple statement, in the moment that I read it, revealed the complexity and ubiquitous quality of Vygotsky’s theory, which simultaneously acknowledges the dynamic, situated quality of human life and the unique abilities of humans to surpass the limitations of their present situation using cultural tools. Thus, the tendency of pet owners to interpret their pet’s behavior as spiteful, for example, can be seen as a projection of our own capacity to transcend the “here and now.”

### ***Objectives and questions***

My goal for this concluding chapter is to summarize how my own theoretical/practical perspective was both revealed and produced in my research. In order to do so, I must first take a moment to review the objectives I initially set out with.

In short, my objective was to explore how participation in strength related activities (such as sports and the martial arts) that have traditionally been associated with masculinity can both challenge and strengthen patterns of male domination by providing a space for girls and women to develop identities as strong and powerful agents. This

exploration was done considering the social, political and cultural<sup>15</sup> relationships between gendered persons in our society, the growing practice of martial arts within our society, and the importance of identity formation in adolescent girls – as they are navigated in the everyday actions of young girls who are currently training in the martial arts. In line with an activity theory approach to identity, this research is meant to explore how girls actively perform who they are within the framework of training in the martial arts – how they use the tools available to them to create a shared activity while at the same time being shaped by the very activity they are creating.

Furthermore, this research was meant to direct and transform the participation of young girls in order to better facilitate the development of reflective and analytical strategies among and within the girls themselves. The goal was not merely to observe or identify variables within the participants, but to participate in the ongoing transformation of a historical activity (i.e., Tae Kwon Do and martial arts) in order to best recognize the potentials for developing strength, power, and physical agency in young girls.

Three main questions influenced my research:

1. How do girls in the martial arts (as individuals and in groups) construct their identity using the ideological and physical tools that are available to them,
  - a. at different moments, including those of conflict and engagement?
  - b. through specific actions (including physical conditioning, sparring, demonstrations, forms/poomse, meditation, practicing techniques alone and with others, and training others)?

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<sup>15</sup> The focus of this work was the culture of the Tae Kwon Do school. It should be noted that the girls' cultural heritage was an important aspect of their identity as martial artists. Admittedly, this aspect is not addressed to the extent that it deserves here, but it is an important piece for future consideration.

- c. through specific rituals, materials and ideas (including bowing, using the words sir and ma'am, wearing the uniform, and the use of words such as respect, honor, and dedication)?
    - d. through the social relationships girls are involved with during these actions (with instructors, other students, outside observers) and outside of the school (with parents, peers, siblings, teachers)?
2. What are some categories/themes that emerge from the stories of female practitioners. including
  - a. the obstacles girls face during their training and what types of strategies they use to address them?
  - b. the aspects of the girl's experiences, both inside and outside of the school, that influence the possibility to see themselves as capable (strong, powerful, effective), including ethnic and family identities?
3. How institutional, group, and individual actions constitute the activity of Tae Kwon Do , including
  - a. how girls can work individually and collaboratively to construct stories that will inform institutional practices?
  - b. how, if at all, the process of writing and reflecting on self-narratives can facilitate this process?
  - c. how martial arts schools, as communities and institutions, can foster and encourage dialogues that will encourage and facilitate reflective participation and communication within and among the girls who are a part of them?

When considering the process of the work, it is clear that these questions were not established (at least not in their current state) “at the beginning,” but instead were shaped by the theoretical and practical approach I took – which was developed as I began to explore the literature on gender, activity theory, and narrative studies. What became most prominent as the work progressed was the need to place the exploration within a framework of ongoing activity, looking at the role of contradiction (as revealed in epiphonic moments) and cohesion (as revealed within movements of flow) within these activity systems, and implement strategies to help the girls individually and in a group reflect on and critically evaluate their participation. This need is informed by the theoretical principles that conceptualize gender as an ongoing performance that is mediated by ideological and material tools and actions that are culturally and historically situated. Inherent within the principles is the concept of becoming. The “findings” that I present here are therefore not presented as end-products, or conclusions in the traditional sense, but instead as contributions to ongoing discussions about gender, identity and sports/martial arts.

### ***Process of Group and Individual Identity Formation:***

Understanding social contexts as collections of dynamic, historical interactions helps to see how the world of martial arts schools are created by and create the students, instructors and observers that enter them – what Butler refers to as an embodiment of possibilities (Butler, 1988). Perhaps the most important aspect of martial arts for our purposes is the status of the martial arts as a self-defining activity. Also important is the status of sports as a traditionally male set of activities. The martial arts are a collection of practices that fall at the same time within and outside of the realm of sport (with

traditional programs falling more “outside” and modern programs falling more “inside”). Because they potentially offer spaces where females can participate in practices that have been traditionally assigned to the “male” spectrum, sports and the martial arts can be understood as spaces where gender can be redefined, through the action of individuals and groups. While this process can allow female practitioners the opportunity to explore ways of being that are often denied them in our society (especially 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. This research has revealed not only how a specific group of girls negotiated their own selves as martial artists, but also demonstrates which aspects of the culture of the martial arts are salient. Below I have listed some of the characteristics, both of the martial arts on general and of my school, through my observations.

### **Martial Arts Philosophy**

- Emphasis of the mind/body relationship in the understanding of the self;
- Emphasis of challenge/potential in the martial arts training (becoming);
- Traditionally hierarchical distribution of power in the martial arts;
- Importance of rituals
- The stereotypically male aspects of violence, power and aggression associated with the martial arts; gender – stereotypes
- The dynamic relationship of apparently contradictory forces in the martial arts (with the body vs. pushing the body; moving quickly and standing still) that allow for both learning and development, as they challenge us to develop new ways of performing ourselves in everyday life.

- “Mushin” or “no-mind”; transcendence; being in the moment;

### **Our school**

- Philosophy/character development (Courtesy, Integrity, Perseverance, Self Control, and Indomitable Spirit);
- “Tae Kwon Do is honest” – reflection of individual effort
- Inequality based on gender (i.e. “Same sex” pairings and lowered expectations of females that are detrimental not only because of the messages about abilities, but also because it doesn’t allow for circumstances that simulate the “real life” situations that martial arts is supposed to prepare students for)
- Material and ideological mediation – verbal cues, material tools (targets, partners’ bodies); body image
- Main actions: sparring, form, breaking, teaching, assisting, front desk work
- The scream
- Dedication
- Staff work: dedication, perseverance discipline; feedback from instructors, acceptance of authority
- Tradition above all else (i.e. scientific advise)
- Continuous modeling and reminders of staff and more advanced students (everyday “being”)
- Strictly structured: a sense of respect and order, uniform and belt, tests

The martial arts school and training area is constantly being re-created by its constituents. The process involves not only the current practitioners, but also the history of the practice in the world in general and our society in particular. In this way we can

understand not only the individual as being produced through human activity, but also the social. Based on my observations and participation at the school, my main conclusion is that Tae Kwon Do has the potential for providing a space for challenging limitations based on concepts of gender on self and identity of (individuals) and to challenge the traditional gender binary as part of our social existence (humanity), but it hasn't explicitly or effectively been used in this way. There are several possible explanations for this. In our particular school, both the head instructor and the grandmaster were not particularly interested in promoting change in gender roles or stereotypes. The grandmaster, a Korean American, held very "traditional" beliefs about gender (i.e., based on ideas of male superiority). Although the head instructor was not Korean, his experiences in Tae Kwon Do had resulted in a strong appreciation for Korean traditions and traditional values; he very much shared the grandmaster's views on gender.<sup>16</sup>

By looking at the collective work I did with the girls, we have a better idea of the girls' process of developing identities. As an analytical tool to make sense of the transcripts and written texts that were produced, I used an activity system model. A review of the groupwork shows the continual process of meaning making and performance.

### **Subject**

All of the girls at some point attributed to Tae Kwon Do a "life changing" quality. Most of the girls came to martial arts somewhat unwillingly, but soon after they joined

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<sup>16</sup> In one instance, the head instructor approached a male instructor at the school and urged him to take a more involved role, specifically because the "next in command" was a female instructor. The head instructor, as taught by the grandmaster and another Korean master, believed that it was important to have males "at the top" of the school's hierarchy.

the school, all of the girls became dedicated to their training - first as a fun activity or hobby, where they made friends and took class, and eventually as a more serious job or responsibility. Each of the girls revealed ways in which their participation in the school intertwined with their emerging life stories – Amy’s desire to “stand out,” Annie’s commitment to helping others, Yvette’s focus on family. Throughout the process, they defined themselves as shy and nervous (at the beginning) and less shy and nervous, but still uncomfortable with “being watched,” as they progressed. They used the various tools available to them – the discourse, rules, feedback from instructors – as they grew into their role as martial artists. During the time we met, as staff members, the girls saw themselves as “followers” or even disciples, of a tradition that was passed on to them through the school. They defined their role as “helpers” in keeping the school running smoothly. At different times this meant helping the students, talking with parents, assisting the class, even making phone calls. The way they saw themselves in this role was related to their ideas and performances of gender. They revealed a value placed on modesty, discipline and respect, on helping others before worrying about oneself. While the boys are seen “show offs” who just want to have fun and worry about their own training, the girls are more serious, dedicated and disciplined. At times the girls struggled between their belief that gender doesn’t matter and the talk of gender as salient features, for example in their fear of sparring guys who don’t hold back, of guys as being more confident, and “good” girls being exceptions, because they tried harder or are just “naturally” good. Ascribing any difficulties faced solely in terms of individual differences, without any mention of gender discrimination, has been identified by Cole and Hribar (1995), Helstein (2003) and Cooky and McDonald (2005) as part of the

dominant discourse about sports that female athletes often adopt as they become participants. The girls often downplayed their own physical abilities – sometimes using gender as an excuse, other times ascribing it to simply “feeling weak.” When the girls did feel strong, they made a point to position this strength in relation to other females (i.e., I am stronger than most girls, or I like to show people that girls can do this) but rarely placed themselves as stronger than or as strong as boys. The specific type of athletic success that is deemed acceptable for women creates conflicts between perceptions that gender discrimination is no longer a problem and the deeply ingrained ideas of what women are (i.e., “the fairer sex”). In their process of defining themselves, the girls performed these ideas about gender within the structure of the school, which often reinforced the image of women as the fairer sex (i.e., by pairing women together, expecting more from men, or joking about women’s capabilities or struggles). Thus gender is a feature of activities that can be revealed by looking at, in this case, how bodies are organized and interact, symbolically and materially so that boys, for example, were willing to keep trying (assuming that they would get it) and girls would give up (assuming that they wouldn’t get it). As they developed their identity as staff members, they struggle with seeing themselves as chosen or special and seeing themselves as fools who are being taken advantage of. I believe this is the current space where the girls are most notably negotiating their identities.

### **Object**

The perception of Tae Kwon Do as life changing was related, for the girls, mostly to the dedication as staff members (e.g. assisting, making phone calls, cleaning) and less to the physical hard work and training that takes place in the dojang. Tae Kwon Do gave

them something to do and a place to be. While they did appreciate the increased competency and feeling of getting better at various exercises (push-ups, sit-ups) techniques (kicks, punches) and activities (sparring, form), they didn't feel that this was the only or even the main reason for coming to the school. The emphasis placed on females' discipline and dedication is tied to the way the girls defined the object of the activity, namely to improve the self and others as they work to make the school successful. More so than what they could get out of the training, the girls focused on what others expected of them and not wanting to let important people down. In line with the discourse of the school, the aspects that they identified as changing were those that were valued by the school – discipline, respect, positive attitude, responsibility, and patience. The girls believed that the process was good for their future. So they endured tough times and lots of responsibility because they believed, in accordance with the school philosophy, that this would make them better “in the future.” While there was some tension between their role as student (getting better in the class) and staff (helping others – which also helps self) – the girls did, for example, say that staff was “not what they signed on for” – the girls did not do anything to address this. Within a context of being a “disciple” or “follower,” it makes sense that the girls' questioning only went so far.

### **Tools and Rules**

In the process of trying to achieve the objective of the Tae Kwon Do school, the girls incorporated various cultural tools that were available to them. These tools, within the culture of the Tae Kwon Do school, include pressure and feedback, initially from the instructors and later from both the instructors and themselves, mental and written notes, official rules, rules of thumb, much repetition and practice, and discourse and concepts

such as discipline, respect and dedication. The Tae Kwon Do school places a high level of importance on the official set of rules – for students and for staff members, which also become tools for the girls as they negotiate their participation. Issues of choice and decision-making are shaped within the school using such tools, so the girls are able to act in the school (and thus to define and perform who they are) based on the cultural tools that are available to them. When discussing when they would (or could) leave the school, for example, the girls referred to the duration of their contracts – a tool of the school that defines one’s “membership.” Judgments and comparisons of themselves and other staff members were done using shared language and concepts (discipline, respect) of the activity. This shared discourse and structure/hierarchy also provide a space for perspective taking, which was used by the girls as a way to understand/define concepts such as patience, a good attitude, responsibility and discipline. The strict hierarchy of the school, and rituals that went along with it, provided a structure within which the girls could develop respect, patience, discipline and dedication. In some instances, the girls used the development of these concepts to judge the practices of the school, when they expressed desire to earn their accomplishments fairly, or insisted that the selection and training of staff members be tough. Based on my analysis of the way the girls used the tools, I believe that there is a need for assistance (tools) in helping girls to develop their body image as competent and strong. Based on the previous experience of boys, they often physically “understand” things differently, which leads students and instructors alike to interpret the situation as “boys are just better at this,” rather than considering what types of support would help girls improve. These various tools, including the official school rules, were seen at times as strong philosophy and at times as silly

annoyances. Thus a review of the tools, and how they are used and understood by various participants, would help martial arts schools evaluate how well they meet the potentials of female students.

### **Community**

These tools were negotiated and substantiated within the school community, which became a source for the girls' development, as the community provided feedback, models, sources and rules for comparisons, and support for the girls' development (i.e., moving from interpersonal to intrapersonal). When the girls started, as students, friendships with others provided entertainment, fun and a safety net of sorts, as they experienced new situations. As they became more involved in staff activities, their relationships changed; the girls described their fellow staff members as a "second family." Throughout the entire process, the structure and hierarchy defined how the girls were allowed to interact with each other (e.g., were they "allowed" to hang out outside of school, did they use the word "sir" or "ma'am" when addressing each other). The community established the girls as "special" – first as martial art students, then as staff members. The uniforms and belts further separated and organized members of the community. The number and relationship of males and females was also an important aspect of the organization. The girls pointed out that the head instructor, who was male, preferred to have more female staff because they were less selfish, more disciplined, and more serious. The ratio of male to female staff and their respective rankings had important implications for the division of labor at the school.

### **Division of labor**

The responsibilities of the school were clearly divided and assigned. Depending on belt levels, age, and experience, staff members are “allowed” to do different things. Generally cleaning and assisting class are at the bottom, and teaching class and signing up new members are at the top. The head instructor has an additional set of responsibilities such as running the business, training staff, and opening and closing the school that may be shared as well. Each staff member is informed of what he/she should be doing at any given time. Although there is some room for improvisation (and sometimes more experienced staff would be expected to change or adapt what they were doing based on how the school was functioning), in general much of the work at the school was highly structured and standardized (e.g., scripts for making phone calls, specific ways to assist the class, and detailed schedules for teaching class). This is decided in a very top-down process – the head instructor is in charge of setting up the schedule and making sure everyone is following it. While there were more female staff members than male, the top spots in the organization – i.e. the grandmaster, master, and most head instructors – were male. While much of the girls’ talk about gender reflected “no problems” in regards to the classroom and staff practices, further exploration revealed a sense of “unfairness” related to gender. In our discussions, this was expressed in comments about “making the boys clean more” or having the boys be more serious. From my observations, often the girls became associated with the front desk, with helping out, supporting others, and the boys were associated with the classroom, training, showing off, and helping themselves. When teaching or assisting, the girls more often were placed in the children’s classes and the boys in the adults’ classes. The different

responsibilities related to the awareness of differences between males and females (i.e., boys were better at or more confident in sparring and advanced kicks, boys could take more pain, boys were less self-conscious). When the placement of individuals and groups is made by a seemingly “all powerful” instructor who “knows best” (and happens to be male), it is difficult to question his choices. The girls often tried to interpret why he made his decisions (i.e., he knows that girls are more mature/more disciplined) but rarely questioned the validity of his choices or confronted him. The placing of the head instructor as an older brother or father figure, and the staff as a family, often put pressure on the girls to do what they could to help – to be a responsible member of the family. This resulted in a feeling of stress that was commonly discussed by the girls and which was, according to them, unfairly distributed.

### **Flow and Contradiction**

The two processes within this system that I am interested in are engagement (flow) and contradiction (potentially epiphonic moments). I believe that these two aspects of activity systems can be sites for development. The girls discussed two actions where they sometimes felt fully engaged – sparring (when they “lost it” or “were totally into it”) and form (when the form is like art work). I believe that issues related to gender are often obstacles for girls to become fully engaged (i.e., they are worried about other people, they feel self-conscious, they feel weak or incompetent). In order to facilitate moments of flow, martial art schools (and other sports programs) need to address these obstacles.

There were many conflicts, both within our discussions and within the stories of the girls that potentially could serve as points of development. There was, for example, a back and forth between talking about Tae Kwon Do as a wonderful, life-changing event

to portraying their training as something they don't want and need to get out of – this was often related to their discussions of the roles “student” and “staff.” There was also a dialectical process between defining the self and defining the subject/role (in this case staff member) within the activity system, which revolved around whether they defined themselves as “honored” and “chosen” to do the work that they were doing or taken advantage of and controlled. There was tension between this definition of staff and the perception of their own ability to fit into these roles.

From my work with the girls, I believe the overall activity can be understood as involving a contradiction between the Tae Kwon Do school as business versus the school as learning community. Using this contradiction as a foundation, we can understand the tension between the subject (students versus staff, staff as honor versus staff as burden), the head instructor (as unrealistic, self interested versus caring father/older brother), the rules, discourse and other tools (as deep philosophies used to improve oneself versus nonsense used to control), the division of labor (as familial versus as oppressive) and the outcome (as spreading Tae Kwon Do philosophy/helping people improve versus making money). The school was pictured at times as a business, a means of making money at the expense of the students, and at other times as a family, a place where people cared about each other and developed for the better as a result. In the section on the activities of Tae Kwon Do and the research, I will discuss further the means of moving forward from these conflicts.

### ***Important Themes***

From both the stories presented by the girls in a group and the individual stories revealed in their writing and in their interviews, several themes proved salient. I believe

that these themes, many of which run through other accounts of female martial artists that I have read, provide researchers and martial arts instructors and students a look into what aspects of training are often important for female practitioners.

- Perception that rough or aggressive sports/activities are not “for girls/women,”
- Tension between being good at Tae Kwon Do and being feminine (tomboy vs. “girly girl”),
- Sense/belief that martial arts is good for girls/women because it challenges stereotypes,
- Sense of accomplishment when able to do things or do things better,
- Importance of feeling that I can or can’t do it,
- Organization of bodies as a source of developing gender roles and identities, including the pairing/grouping of students, the division of labor within space, and the moment/interaction of bodies in space,
- Sparring as a “difficult” space for females – not “natural” for girls to fight, fear of facing males, expectations for males to “go easy on them,”
- Sparring as a space to prove toughness (especially in relation to other females),
- The importance of instructors’ expectations (and how they are perceived by students) for developing competencies and confidence,
- Fear of/discomfort with being watched/observed,
- Gender performances - Boys as “show offs”; girls as more humble, boys as more confident, boys should “go easy on” girls,
- Tae Kwon Do as a place of equality – “girls can do whatever boys can do,”

- Role of others (family members, friends) in shaping their decision to begin training,
- Role of others in shaping motivation to continue (students, children, parents, instructors),
- Interest in/desire for helping others,
- Friendships/second family,
- Staff member became the salient role rather than student,
- Pressure/stress is often believed to be too much, “unrealistic,” but at the same time it represents someone else’s belief in one’s abilities,
- Comparing self to others is important,
- Hierarchy provides structure, but also limits questioning,
- Although the structure (hierarchy and rituals) proposes a strict “passing down” of philosophy and behaviors, the girls displayed a willingness and interest in being critical of school when in a safe environment,
- Head instructor becomes an important figure – often a parental figure for young girls; he was often seen as “all knowing,”
- Distinction that comes with being a martial artists,
- Carry over into other aspects of life (school, home, friends),
- Philosophy/moral code – discipline, respect, dedication, patience, perseverance – important to develop for life,
- Desire to earn accomplishments,
- Importance of having “something to do,”

- Life changing – Tae Kwon Do changes personality, builds character, is good for one's future, and
- Life projects – the emerging life projects of the girls both influence and are influenced by the girls' participation in the martial arts. The interaction of life project and participation reveal important ideas about gender.

### ***The Activities of Tae Kwon Do and Research***

The current research was meant to both explore the processes of identity formation and to facilitate some change in the practices I was studying. While reviewing the findings of the research, it is worthwhile to look at how the practices of the Tae Kwon Do school and the practices of the research process interact to see how they can inform each other, specifically to explore how schools can do a better job with female participants. On another level, I want to understand how the process of collaborative reflection and analysis used in this research can continue to play a part in martial arts training, by introducing it to the practices of the school.

The previous sections demonstrated how using an activity system to define the situation of the Tae Kwon Do school provides a deeper insight into the participation of the girls. We have also seen how engagement and contradictions within each component serve as spaces for development – both of the school practices and of the individual and group subjects. The research process served to highlight these contradictions and, to some extent, to facilitate the reflection of the girls on the conflicts existing within the activity. I believe that these conflicts were not simply there waiting to be revealed, but were constructed within the practice as the girls reflected on their experiences and the practices of the school. The research process included introducing new tools, revolving around the

concept of life stories, to understand and evaluate the practices of the school. The collaborative, reflective, and analytical process of reading, writing, sharing and analyzing life stories provided opportunities for transformation. The process of producing a text is as much about inventing our thoughts as it is sharing them. Looking at the discussions the girls had about the life stories, it is clear that they are not simply answering questions and contributing to the discussions based on what they already know; the process of the groupwork was one that involved the co-construction of explanations and understanding. This is especially clear in cases where the girls challenged each other's statements or offered new explanations or solutions to problems. This process of sharing and discussing experiences facilitated a camaraderie and stronger sense of group identity. Without my prompting or suggestion, for instance, the girls came up with their own group name using our initials (SKEMES). The girls expressed appreciation of the "safe" space created by the research - the combination of structured, reflective activities without the pressure of the presence of the head instructor.

Furthermore, the use of others' stories (i.e., Diana and Loren) allowed for ideas and concepts to be explored that may or may not be present in the girls' experiences and that wouldn't have come up otherwise. These stories presented the girls with a different set of experiences with which they could interact. Certain themes emerged as they compared their own experiences to those of Diana and Loren. What was striking, for me, was both the presence of themes, feelings, and experiences that were not expressed prior to watching/reading the stories and the insightful character of their writing. In certain instances, the language of Loren influenced the girls' reflections by providing more sophisticated tools. The various points of view of the group and of the outside stories, and

the reflection and discussion of these differences allowed for the development of new ideas and understanding about not only oneself, but also about the world.

An analysis of the research process reveals that while the process did provide new opportunities for transformation – at an ideological and material level – several aspects could have been altered/improved in order to better satisfy my objectives. First, I suggest a greater amount of modeling, especially of my own reflections, so that the participants have a greater amount of tools provided for them to interact with. In addition, these models could provide instances where conflicts and contradictions are used as foundations for development. In many cases, I believe that my work with the girls did not move beyond the conflicts and lack of coherence within the girls' explanations and meanings. I would argue, however, that the ways in which the girls addressed these issues proves that there is much room and potential for discussions about gender to take place within martial arts schools. I would also argue that because we are so rarely asked to reflect on our how gender and sex are socially constructed, that models of such practices need to be developed. The work that was done in this research provides a foundation for such development. Continuation of the work that was started here would necessarily include additional resources (i.e., writings about gender, additional movies and books, models about gender and sex, and structured guidelines for reflection and analysis) that could help the girls develop together a new model of martial arts training. Providing a clear structure and continued assistance could help the girls with the process of writing and analyzing their stories.

This assistance with the writing would necessarily include additional help and modeling with talking and writing about the physical aspects of our experiences. While

verbal and physical experience and knowledge are equally valid, there is a value in being able to translate our visceral experiences into words, especially when we acknowledge the characteristics of language and literacy that allow humans to move beyond the here and now, and reflect on, analyze, and transform the world. To this end, the use of other stories and texts can work as models of sharing and reflecting on physical experiences. In addition, tools could be introduced that would help ritualize the recording of physical experience, such as the use of journals or voice recorders to use a method of reflection and collection of notes during the time in between the group meetings.

Through the research process, I was interested in not only working within meanings and conflicts within the activity system as it currently existed, but also in trying to initiate a new activity system, one in which the potentials of the female practitioners could be challenged. Although we did not succeed in transforming the entire activity of the school, I do believe that the work that we did led to a set of suggestions for our school in particular, and all martial arts schools in general, that could potentially transform the activity of Tae Kwon Do schools.

### **Recommendations/Suggestions for schools**

As a result of the collaborative groupwork sessions, the girls and I created a list of suggestions to share with the head instructor of the school. This list, included in Appendix E, was comprised of both suggestions written directly by the girls in the sessions as well as my own interpretations and suggestions based on this list. One interpretation that I made was the organization of the list into four categories. Here are excerpts from the descriptions, taken from the document that was shared with the head instructor:

**Staff Responsibilities:** There were several conversations that took place around these issues. One had to do with pressure and the amount of time they dedicated as staff. While they expressed pride in being recognized and expected to do well, the girls also felt that sometimes it was too much pressure and felt that they performed better with less pressure. A second had to do with the differences between different staff members, especially the boys and girls. There is a perceived difference about how male/female staff members are treated and in what ways they were given pressure. Specifically, the perception that the boys were concerned more with showing off and technique while the girls were pressured more (and did better) at other staff responsibilities such as working the front desk, teaching, and helping students. The feeling was that this pattern fit the expectation of the instructor(s).

**Teaching:** Overall, the girls expressed a deep sense of responsibility/pride in their role as role models and teachers for the younger students. In some cases, it seems like this may even be the main reason for continuing with their training.

**Training:** From my perspective, one of the more surprising aspects of the group meetings was how the conversations were dominated by discussing their role as staff rather than as students. It was almost as if their own training became secondary to their role as a staff member. When we did discuss actual training, in some cases feelings of frustration and a lack of confidence was evident.

**Institutional Practices:** Both for their own families/selves and their students, the group felt that the school was expensive and families had to sacrifice a lot for the students. Another issue was the promotion tests; the girls felt that students progress

to quickly and without enough evaluation. In some cases, students (and in some cases the girls) passed tests even after messing up/forgetting their form at the test. They expressed that the test would mean more if students felt that they earned it.

In addition to organizing and the suggestions of the girls, I added some of my own:

- Once they fail at something, the girls are quick to assume that they can't do it, especially if there are not many other females they know that can do it. As a school, it seems we need to communicate higher expectations for the development of their technique.
- Provide low-pressure situations where they can experiment/practice more advanced techniques. Something that came up a few times was the idea that the male students/staff were more willing to show off, and less likely to be self-conscious about trying new things, while the girls felt more wary/self-conscious about trying advanced techniques. Maybe providing time for them to practice on their own, without an "audience," would allow the girls to feel comfortable with trying more difficult techniques.

While I strongly believe that the list created by the girls has a special value for our specific school, the analysis of the work provides further suggestions that, on a more general level, can be used by martial arts schools and other institutions. Considering, for example, the contradictions that arose within the various components of the activity system allows us to envision ways of resolving conflicts and in the process further developing martial arts practices. Based on these conflicts, I would recommend that martial arts schools:

- Avoid becoming too “business oriented.” It seems unlikely that schools that are organized first and foremost around profits can adequately create learning environments that prioritize the development of all participants, which may involve challenging traditional roles and stereotypes.
- Redefine the role of “higher ranking” individuals so that they are caring without getting rid of their ability to assist their students to develop discipline and respect. This should include an open discussion/sharing of the reasoning behind decisions that are made and structures that are in place.
- Provide students with more opportunities to participate in decision making, both about their own activities and progress and the school in general.
- Create a more collaborative environment, where power structures are not strictly hierarchical.
- Redefine rules and the discourse of the school (i.e., contracts, dedication, commitment) so that they are flexible tools that are interpreted and defined by the students in the process of developing a model, rather than as established and inflexible structures and rules that shape the actions of the participants.
- Assure that divisions of responsibilities are fair, and not divided based on gender.
- Assure that activities in the class are structured so that all students, regardless of gender, are allowed and encouraged to participate in all activities with various partners.
- Involve students in the development of short and long-term objectives, and assure that staff members are aware of these objectives.
- Create situations for analysis, assessment and transformation of school practices.

Based on these recommendations, it is clear that a key issue is the distribution of power within the student/instructor relationship. A possible approach to this issue is to develop new definitions and enactments of concepts such as respect and discipline for instructors, from “one who controls and has power over me” to “one who cares about me, helps me, wants me to get better, and has high expectations of me.” In the process of redefining the power structure, some aspects to consider might be the amount of time and responsibilities required, the division of labor, especially as related to gender, the amount of pressure and stress placed on staff, and the autonomy of participants, both as student and staff.

Considering the hesitancy with which the girls faced the task of giving feedback to the instructor, suggestions that involve creating more open spaces for communication and criticism seem called for. It is important to note, however, that as educators, martial arts instructors have a special responsibility to not only give students opportunities to share, but also to construct and develop, ideas and attitudes. Keeping this in mind, further suggestions involve the creation of educational practices that would further female practitioners’ development within the martial arts. Several changes, for example, can be made to the practice of writing black belt essays in order to capitalize on the power of written reflection.

- Such practices should be more continuous. Rather than waiting until one is about to get their black belt, for example, schools can structure opportunities for students to collect their reflections (perhaps in a journal) throughout their training;
- Rather than framing these practices as individual work, schools can structure social situations, where students can collaborate and provide feedback for one

another, and where instructors can facilitate discussions surrounding issues such as gender, aggression and violence, and martial arts philosophy. Within collaborative meetings and work, instructors and students can highlight shared themes and issues to;

- Schools can integrate school and martial arts philosophy more explicitly into their requirements, providing texts and other learning materials to review such philosophies;
- Resources such as texts, videos, and guest speakers can be used both to model the writing process and to provide various approaches to issues and themes identified as important by instructors and students. This process could connect the students' work inside the school to the "outside world"; and
- By creating a more formal process of sharing and publishing written work of students, schools can further institutionalize reflective written practices.

A shortcoming of activities such as writing black belt essays is that they fail to move beyond an individualistic perspective. Within martial arts practices, performance and progress must be seen not as a factor solely of individuals, but of the social activity, which necessarily is affected by the ways in which sex and gender have been and continue to be constructed. Based on the work with this group of girls, for example, several issues emerge as needing to be addressed.

- The setting and communication of higher expectations for female students,
- The need for more female role models (i.e., who can perform advanced techniques),

- The emphasis on physical training as important for females and spaces where they feel comfortable developing physical competencies,
- The need for gender equality regarding time/space/responsibilities,
- An 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, and
- 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.

Furthermore, I believe that the entire activity of Tae Kwon Do specifically, and martial arts in general, must be transformed. Gender must become part of what Tae Kwon Do schools think about and how they train their students (i.e., part of the model of Tae Kwon Do training). Neither of the two current models – gender hierarchy or gender as irrelevant – is satisfactory. In order for equality to be taken seriously within the martial arts, instructors, school owners, and practitioners must realize that the focus can be neither making things the same, nor on reinforcing gender differences as necessary and “natural.” Instead, it is essential to initiate procedures, including discussions and transformations of practices, that both examine and change the way that gender is enacted and constructed based on shared, explicit objectives, and motives.

### ***Gender, Martial Arts, and Identity***

Throughout this work, my focus has been on embodied, relational, social, historical, cultural, practical activity. Without denying the self (or better, selves) as an entity, I wanted to account for the reality of the self as a process – as a dynamic, in the

moment construction that is only possible within human social activity. For this reason I looked at the girls as part of the activity of Tae Kwon Do from the beginning. Through the lens of their social practice and participation, I hoped to gain a better picture of each girl as a subject within this activity system. The work that we did together, along with the analysis of this work, reveals a process of being that occurred during the time that we were together. The dynamic nature of such a process makes claims of “essential” or “true” identity impossible. Although each of the girls has a history that predates their training and this work, the selves that they are now “being and becoming” did not exist “before.” Even as I write this, I am struck by how different each of the girls is now from how they were during the time we were working together. So my hope is not that this work reveals the identities of the girls, but provides an excerpt of a continuous process that can inform how female practitioners construct themselves through training and how we, as educators, instructors, researchers, and fellow practitioners can influence the individual and collective definition and enactment of gender.

The process of writing, discussing, sharing, reflecting on, and analyzing our experiences as martial artists highlights possibilities for us to re-define sex and gender in order to move away from traditional dichotomies. One site for such re-definition is the interactions and overlaps between the activity of the Tae Kwon Do school and other activity systems and “cultural worlds.” In terms of gender, we can understand these overlaps as both the subject and the object of activity. To the extent that female practitioners of the martial arts “carry over” or transfer the ways of being developed within the martial arts (i.e., as strong or powerful) to other activities, new subjectivities for females can be enacted. In this way, gender is understood as an aspect of the subject

of activities. As opportunities for girls and women to participate in sports and martial arts increases, it is important to challenge limitations on “being female.” This must be done at the visceral level of perception and “common sense,” as this is the site of what Bourdieu refers to as symbolic violence. In addition, gender can be understood as an object, as a concept that is thought about. To the extent that female martial artists change the way we think about gender and sex (in addition to how we live as sexed/gendered individuals), previously limiting ideas can be challenged. As female athletes, for example, have gained popularity and challenged stereotypes and concepts of gender within their sports, femininity has been constructed in new ways (i.e., as fit and athletic). It can be argued that constructions of gender are an important component of one’s worldview; transforming gender as a theoretical construct is thus an important step. Recent research on media representations of women, for example (Daniels, 2009), have shown that images of performance athletes prompt less self-objectification among female audience members than either images of models (sexualized or nonsexualized) or sexualized athletes. Thus we can see that the representations of female subjectivity and objectivity have an impact of the way females exist and see themselves. We also see that simply moving women into the realm of sport, without critically evaluating the way that they participate and are represented, is not enough to challenge the effects of traditional gender stereotypes (i.e., women as sexual object).

The process of transforming activities in order to address issues related to gender inequalities and limitations is not one with a clear cut endpoint, but must be negotiated based on the values, desires, and motives of those involved. In my work, the desired outcome was not to make girls more like boys or vice versa, but specifically to evaluate

the potentials, formerly and currently denied to girls, to be strong and powerful, even at times violent and aggressive.

One of the most common questions asked when discussing females and sports, especially strength related sports, has to do with the overall capacity of men and women, especially at the elite level. A common response is, “But you don’t *really* think, when all is said and done, that women can compete with men, do you? I mean, men *are* stronger than women right?” Many argue that due to differences in hormones, or muscle mass, or even psychology, women will never reach the same level as men in sports (and here I am considering martial arts as sport). Some feel that despite this insurmountable difference, women’s sport has it’s own value and should therefore be supported. (In other words, there is no need to compare the two; perhaps it is even unfair to do so). The truth of the matter is that I don’t really care. It is irrelevant to me, and to this work, whether the top female tennis player (or basketball player, or martial artist) will ever be able to compete with or outperform their male counterparts. It is also irrelevant whether the average man is stronger (or faster, or more competitive) than the average woman. My concern, instead, is what these ideas and accompanying definitions of masculinity and femininity provide (and don’t provide) in terms of development – of individuals, of groups, and of ideas and actions in our society

So regardless of whether the physical gaps between men and women will ever be erased, I argue that beliefs that men will always surpass women are harmful – for both men and women. (It is important to remember here that women, both the elite and the average, do outperform men in some sports and athletic activities. While beliefs that men will never catch up to women in these arenas are just as limiting, they do not have the

same dangerous and oppressive connotations.) I also argue, along with McDonagh and Pappano (2009) that separate is not equal when it comes to sports. Women should be allowed (but not required) to compete alongside men when they qualify. I believe that this is the only way that women can develop their potential, for lack of a better word, for strength and power. Often, potential is discussed as if it is some fixed, measurable quantity, something that can be assessed and determined prior to one's development. When referring to potential here, I do not mean to imply that there is some predetermined level of competency or achievement that women can reach. Instead, I simply mean the capacity for development – for moving beyond where they are now. If we look at the history of sports (or anything, for that matter), we must recognize that there is no endpoint for development. Because humans are always in a state of becoming, it makes little sense to think about potential as a fixed entity.

Considering the recognition of continuous human becoming, I am not interested in defining or redefining gender in any universal or essentialist way. Instead, my aim in conducting this work has been to consider ways that gender is acted and reenacted using material and ideological tools, and to analyze the outcomes of such history. As discussed throughout this work, several theoretical perspectives were used in order to develop a framework for examining gender. Both Bourdieu and Butler emphasized the “performance” aspect of gender in order to reflect on how the social construct of gender becomes naturalized – the “eternalization of the arbitrary,” to use Bourdieu's terms. Together with Grosz, who emphasized the mind/body as an integrated whole, these theorists demand of us to understand gender as our body – our perceptions, sensations, movements, and actions - interwoven with ideas and beliefs about people and the world.

This body and these ideas are not “natural” or predetermined, but come into existence historically through social activity. This is in line with an activity approach to identity, which positions individuals as participants in historical and social activity.

Within this framework, the relevance of studying gender is not related to the discovery of an underlying nature of masculinity or femininity, but instead on the circumstances of individuals and groups acting in the world. Considering the reality of violence, direct and indirect, overt and covert, against women in our society, there is a desire to “empower” women – to create situations and spaces where women can develop strength and power without apologizing. Sports and martial arts have been proposed as such a space.

In sum, there is no “ideal” definition of male or female (nor is there an “essential” or “true” identity) that I am trying to get to, but instead my desire is to contribute to the understanding of how conceptualizations about gender, specifically the traditional dichotomy, are “played out” in the everyday lives of men and women. These conceptualizations, which include abstract ideals and material, physical actions and existences, are tied to power relations and, as I discussed in the opening chapter, the issue of violence against women. Such problems, if they are to be addressed, must be analyzed in terms of the material and ideological aspects of historical human activity. My work with the girls has emphasized that the martial arts is often touted as a place where women can challenge traditional stereotypes and empower themselves, but this often does not happen. Using participatory methods and an activity system framework allows for a deeper analysis of how individuals and groups live and understand the world and themselves. Deliberate, goal directed practices that explicitly address gender are

necessary in order to realize the potential of martial arts as a space where gender dichotomies are broken down.

### ***But enough about them...***

There is no doubt that my own identity has changed, not only over the years of participation in the Tae Kwon Do school and work with these five girls, but from moment to moment as I have navigated the multiple roles, from graduate student to martial artist to teacher to former martial artist to sister, daughter, girlfriend, friend, etc. My “identity,” as I suggest here it must be, has been a matter of doing and performing rather than of an essential “being” – it is dynamic, relational, multiple. Despite the fragmented and multiplicity of my own agency, however, it would be a mistake to abandon the concept of self or identity. I began this concluding chapter referring to my own (current) “life project” - developing a practical/theoretical worldview that honors potential in human beings (both humanity and individuals) as rooted in desire and action within socially and historically produced situations, and thus sees potential for transformation (of the world and of the self) in collaborative human activity. More specifically related to this work my interests lie in the potential for females to excel at activities traditionally considered “for men” and both be and see themselves as strong, powerful, and physically adept, thus contributing to the breakdown of the traditional male/female dichotomy. So perhaps the largest impact that this work could have is on my own “being and becoming,” as I now take with me a more expanded and developed view of the world and myself. This includes a tendency to view myself, in various activities, as challenging or failing to challenge the traditional gender dichotomy, as well as developing and promoting a realization of human beings as “works in progress” – as both the “artist and the creation,”

to use Annie's words, creating not only themselves individually but the collective existence(s) of humanity.

## Appendix A – School Information and Photos

Table 2: School Curriculum

Belt Level	Approximate # of Classes	Form (Poomse)
White	10	Basic 1
Yellow	15	Tae Guk 1
Orange	30	Tae Guk 2
Green	45	Tae Guk 3
Blue	60	Tae Guk 4
Blue 1	75	Tae Guk 1-4
Purple	90	Tae Guk 5
Purple 1	105	Tae Guk 6
Purple 2	120	Tae Guk 1-6
Red	150	Tae Guk 7
Red 1	180	Tae Guk 8
Red 2	210	Tae Guk 8
Red 3	240	Tae Guk 8
Red 4	270	Koryo
1 <sup>st</sup> Dan	300	Tae Guk 1-8, Koryo

Table 3: "Kicking Curriculum" (from my notes)

<b>Belt Level</b>	<b>Kicks</b>	<b>Combination</b>
White	Stretching high kick Snap kick Roundhouse Kick Side Kick Jumping Snap Kick	Any 2 straight kicks
Yellow	Ax Kick Front Leg Side Kick Front Leg Roundhouse Kick Jumping Roundhouse Kick Running Jumping Snap Kick	Any 2 straight kicks
Orange	Step Behind Side Kick	Any 2 straight kicks
Green	Turn Roundhouse Kick Turn ax kick Back Kick	Any 2 kicks, one turning kick
Blue	360 Jumping Roundhouse Kick 360 Jumping Ax Kick Jumping Ax kick Flying Side Kick	Any 2 kicks, one turning kick
Blue 1	Front Leg Hook Kick	Any 3 kicks
Purple Purple I Purple II	Backswing Step forward hook kick 360 Side Kick	Any 3 kicks
Red	Double Roundhouse Kick Jump Back Kick	Any 3 kicks
Red I Red II	Running Aero Back Kick	Any 4 kicks
Red III	Jump Backswing	Any 4 kicks
Red IV	360 Back Kick 360 Backswing	Any 4 kicks



Image 1: Black Belt



Image 2: Black Belt Certificate

## Appendix B - Focus Group Agenda

**Goal:** how can we understand the participation of girls in the martial arts in order to understand possible sites of change

**Participants:** 5 female “junior staff” members (advanced students) at the Tae Kwon Do school ranging in age from 13-16

### **Interventions (not in a linear fashion):**

1. Introduce/frame the work for the group
2. Writing “life stories,” i.e. experience in Tae Kwon Do
3. Sharing our stories
4. Reflections of experiences, class participation and other interactions
5. Analyzing stories together with group
  - a. What are some shared themes?
  - b. Who are the characters?
  - c. What are main events?
  - d. What are settings? Resources?
6. Using other stories (film, text) to reflect on and compare to our stories
7. Determining courses of action as a group
  - a. Brainstorming – what are some things that we can improve based on our shared experiences and analysis (in ourselves, our environment, our relationships, TAE KWON DO, classes, philosophy, equipment)
  - b. Proposing changes
  - c. Implementing changes
8. Evaluation?

## Appendix C: Interview Outline

Table 4: Interview Outline

Concept(s)	Questions
General Story (Key events, plot, etc)	<p>How did you come to join Tae Kwon Do? What is the connection of Tae Kwon Do to other activities you did before (sports, hobbies, etc)</p> <p>What were your reasons for trying out?</p> <p>How did you feel during your trial lessons? Your first class? Belt? Your first promotion test, tournament, etc?</p> <p>What were your expectations of the school? Of Tae Kwon Do in general?</p> <p>Key moments (tournaments, medals, BBC, Jr. Inst, Black Belt, Red Uniform, SWAT, etc)</p> <p>How have you changed as a result of training? (within TAE KWON DO school, at home, in school, with friends)</p> <p>How do you see yourself in the future? (5 years, 10 years, 15 years) How has TAE KWON DO influenced who you are and who you want to be? (Has it changed your goals? Do you see yourself training in the future? Teaching?)</p> <p>Do you think you would be different if you hadn't started training?</p>
Appropriateness of Activity for Females	<p>Is Tae Kwon Do (martial arts) a good activity for girls? Why/Why not? (What does it mean for you to be feminine? Are girls supposed to act a certain way?)</p> <p>Do you think others believe TAE KWON DO is appropriate for girls (parents, friends, boys, relatives, etc) Do their beliefs affect you at all?</p> <p>Does Tae Kwon Do require you to be aggressive? Assertive? Strong? Violent? Are these characteristics that are generally considered to be female? Do you feel any contradiction between how you are supposed to act as a girl and how you are supposed to act as a martial artist? Do you feel Tae Kwon Do helps you to be more feminine? When you are taking class/behind the front desk/assisting class/teaching class, do you think people view you a certain way because you are a girl?</p> <p>Are girls strong? As strong as boys? Should they be?</p> <p>Are there certain things that girls (or boys) can or cannot better or worse do because of their gender?</p> <p>Have there been any moments/events during training where you were treated a certain way because you are a female (By who, what was said, how did you feel)</p> <p>Are there any obstacles you have faced specifically because you are a girl?</p>

Relationships	<p>Describe your relationship with (inside and outside of school):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Other Jr. Staff</li> <li>Adult Staff</li> <li>Inst James</li> <li>Master</li> <li>Students (adults and children)</li> <li>Parents of students</li> </ul> <p>How have these relationships changed?          Explain the ranking of various people... Where do you fit in?          How does it change the way you interact with each?          Does Tae Kwon Do affect your relationship with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parents</li> <li>Other relatives</li> <li>Friends</li> <li>Teachers in school</li> </ul>
Perception of Self	<p>Do you see yourself as strong?          Do you see yourself as aggressive?          Ability – Strength and weaknesses as a student, as a staff. Outside of Tae Kwon Do? How have you changed? (Improved?          How do you see your potential?          How do you think boys see you (different because of martial arts?)</p>
Presentation of Self	<p>Do you think you look different to others as a result of Tae Kwon Do?          Do you think you act different? (around boys? Around girls? Around family? Friends?)</p>
Space	<p>Access to spaces          Time          Taking up space(?)</p>
Actions of Tae Kwon Do	<p>What is your favorite thing to do in Tae Kwon Do? (as a student, as a staff)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Physical training (push-ups, sit-ups, etc)</li> <li>Stretching</li> <li>Technique Training</li> <li>Partner Training</li> <li>Form</li> <li>Breaking</li> <li>Target Kicking</li> <li>Sparring</li> <li>Warming Up Class</li> <li>Assisting Class</li> <li>Trial Lessons</li> <li>Information</li> </ul>

Rituals and Language	<p>How is it different from “outside”</p> <p>Do you use any of the rituals/words outside of the school?</p> <p>How do these things change who you are (how others see you, how you see yourself)</p> <p>Repetition of activities – why is it important to be consistent with the language, behaviors in the school? What do they mean?</p> <p>Bowing</p> <p>Attention Stance</p> <p>Uniform</p> <p>Hierarchy</p> <p>“Sir”/”Ma’am”</p> <p>School Rules</p> <p>Korean Terminology</p> <p>Tenets of Tae Kwon Do</p> <p>“Key Words” (discipline, respect, dedication, loyalty, etc)</p>
Physical Self	<p>How have you changed physically?</p> <p>Explain how it feels to train (challenging body, results – muscles, soreness, body shape)</p> <p>Do you see yourself as more fit? What does this mean? What is the ideal body for you? Does Tae Kwon Do help or hinder?</p>
Group Work	<p>According to you, what is the significance (if any) of the work we did as a group?</p> <p>How, if at all, has the work we have done changed how you see your participation in the school? In martial arts in general?</p> <p>Has it changed your relationship with the other girls?</p> <p>Talk about the work you produced in the group (writings, etc)</p> <p>How do you feel about it?</p> <p>How does it relate/compare to the work of the group as a whole?</p> <p>Do you think it will change how you participate as a student and/or staff?</p> <p>Do you think it will change how you see things outside of Tae Kwon Do?</p>

## Appendix D: Notes from Meetings

### ***Shared Aspects of Stories***

Nervousness for first class

“crush”

someone else recommended

same process: info, trial lesson, and 2nd trial lesson

even though didn't necessarily want to come, enjoyed trial lessons

started out shy

less shy or not shy now

tournament = scary

hate sparring at first → some like sparring now

don't like getting hurt, getting bruises, getting mad

promotion tests

motivation – parents, when Instructor James is not there, instructors, helping kids, being a role model, friends, responsibilities, \$, too much homework = lack of motivation

do not feel like taking class

not able to take class

instructors expect too much (especially Instructor James)

don't want to disappoint others

change from student to staff (schedule, flexibility)

different levels of “toughness”

### ***Notes from Diana's Story***

What did boxing mean for her?

Relieving stress

Controlling her anger

Fit in

Stay out of trouble (fighting)

Easy before → tough

Even though she was a girl

Wanted to fight

### Gender

Challenges all guys

Think she is not strong enough

- Guys, Adrian, fellow boxer, trainer, Hector, Dad, brother

Family conflicts

“Love Problems”

Adrian - didn't want to hurt her; couldn't fight her

She was used to fighting guys

Wants to show him she can fight (something that guys usually do)

She didn't care about gender

No emotion – just fight

Adrian – couldn't avoid emotions (feelings/love), or didn't want to, she could

### ***TAE KWON DO – What does it mean for us?***

Patience

Relieving stress

Creating stress

Life changing

Attitude

2<sup>nd</sup> family

Discipline: respecting others, treat others nicely, listen (respect)

Something to do

Physical Exercise (in shape)

Pressure

Mental

Positive thinking, critical thinking, multitasking

Personality

Increases responsibility

Training – good (physical), relieves stress

Improving

+ form, breaking

- sparring, competition, stress, opponents from other schools

Girls: Mature, Persevere, Responsible, Quick learners, Balance

Business

Front desk

Classroom

Staff – change in focus

No difference between boys and girls

Tournament/sparring: guys = confident, girls = no confidence

Guys – don't care/not supposed to care about gender

## Appendix E: Recommendations for School

The following list represents ideas discussed and outlined by the group during our meetings. While most of the suggestions came directly from the sessions, I organized them and interpreted them based on my perspective from our discussions. Any suggestions that I have added are in italics; suggestions that the girls decided to emphasize are starred. The list, as it stands now, was shared and approved by all of the girls involved to insure that my interpretations were not contrary to the girls' intentions. It is important to note that while the list is a collaborative product, the girls did differ on some issues. I have tried, where it seemed appropriate, to reflect these differences in parentheses.

**Facilities:** Most of these recommendations have to do with comfort level while at the school, especially when they are there for a long time. Some suggestions:

- Separate bathrooms for males/females.
- Water fountain (some girls mentioned water breaks during class, especially longer classes)
- Staff lounge
- Food

**Staff Responsibilities:** There were several conversations that took place around these issues. One had to do with pressure and the amount of time they dedicated as staff. While they expressed pride in being recognized and expected to do well, the girls also felt that sometimes it was too much pressure and felt that they performed better with less pressure. A second had to do with the differences between different staff members,

especially the boys and girls. There is a perceived difference about how male/female staff members are treated and in what ways they were given pressure. Specifically, the perception that the boys were concerned more with showing off and technique while the girls were pressured more (and did better) at other staff responsibilities (front desk, teaching, helping students). The feeling was that this pattern fit the expectation of the instructor(s). Some suggestions:

- Less pressure \*\*\*
- Less days and time \*\*\*
- More recognition
- No attention (no one watching)
- To be left alone sometimes
- Less cleaning
- Make boys clean \*\*\*
- Divide work more evenly among staff (trial lessons, teaching, cleaning, assisting class, front desk stuff, etc)

**Teaching:** Overall, the girls expressed a deep sense of responsibility/pride in their role as role models and teachers for the younger students. In some cases, it seems like this may even be the main reason for continuing with their training. While they each had different levels of comfort in teaching/assisting/warming up the class, they shared some general suggestions:

- More help with teaching \*\*\*

- 1<sup>st</sup> orientation should be emphasized more as a way to make new students feel comfortable/less nervous.
- Alternate boys/girls teaching \*\*\*
- More time teaching form \*\*\*
- Less rushing in classes (i.e. moving from one activity or technique to the next before having a chance to really improve/help students)
- More communication/feedback in/about the classes. The girls sometimes feel frustrated because what they feel needs to be done to help the students is sometimes not the same as what the instructor teaching the class feels, and there is no time to discuss this.

**Training:** From my perspective, one of the more surprising aspects of the group meetings was how the conversations were dominated by discussing their role as staff rather than as students. It was almost as if their own training became secondary to their role as a staff member. When we did discuss actual training, in some cases feelings of frustration and a lack of confidence was evident. Some suggestions by the girls:

- More practice sparring different people (boys and girls). For most of the girls, sparring boys was more “scary” than sparring girls. After some discussion, it was suggested that more practice sparring different people (without pressure) would alleviate this.
- Review old forms \*\*\*

- More detailed training, especially with new techniques and advanced techniques. (IE, not just demonstrating and asking them to follow, but by breaking down techniques, taking more time to instruct and practice, etc)

*Some of my own suggestions:*

- *Once they fail at something, the girls are quick to assume that they can't do it, especially if there are not many other females they know that can do it. As a school, it seems we need to communicate higher expectations for the development of their technique.*
- *Provide low-pressure situations where they can experiment/practice more advanced techniques. Something that came up a few times was the idea that the male students/staff were more willing to show off, and less likely to be self-conscious about trying new things, while the girls felt more wary/self-conscious about trying advanced techniques. Maybe providing time for them to practice on their own, without "audience" ...*

**Institutional Practices:** Both for their own families/selves and their students, the group felt that the school was expensive and families had to sacrifice a lot for the students. It was especially difficult when it came to charging \$2 for boards and double the price for a double test... Another issue was the promotion tests; the girls felt that students progress too quickly and without enough evaluation. In some cases, students (and in some cases the girls) passed tests even after messing up/forgetting their form at the test. They expressed that the test would mean more if students felt that they earned it. Some suggestions:

- Cheaper prices \*\*\*
- Free boards \*\*\*
- One price for double test and triple test\*\*\*
- Test should be about forms, kicks, and not how many classes. Each student should be evaluated before being recommended for the tests, which should be harder. \*\*\*
- *Feedback about school: it seemed that some members of the group either did not feel comfortable, did not consider it part of their responsibilities, or did not feel that they would be taken seriously if they shared their opinions/feedback about the school with the instructor(s).*

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