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NAVIGATION OF TRAINING AND ADVANCEMENT IN KARATE AND KRAV MAGA

ABSTRACT

Physical activity can be a medium for body empowerment, in turn transforming the body. This transformation can challenge gendered body discourse. This autoethnography, utilizing critical reflexivity, aims to expand the literature on aging and gender in martial arts, specifically karate and krav maga. Narratives and stories from a thirty-year career in these martial arts will be discussed to engage the reader in understanding the intersection of gender and aging in this context. The findings examine how the older practitioner must balance gender roles and the desire to advance in the martial arts. In this case, the balance resulted in delaying training, not training as much, and pushing for promotion. As an older female practitioner, gender needs to be navigated along with age, wherein the assumption is that the older body is expected to have the same ability as the younger body. To manage such assumptions, adaptations need to be made, such as training in different ways and using 'dirty' techniques in a self-defense system such as krav maga. Lastly, pregnancy is depicted as 'callusing' the body so it can train intensely as the body gets older. The pregnant body is thus framed not as a liability, but a training asset.

CONTRIBUTOR

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KEYWORDS

Gender; Age; Empowerment; Autoethnography; Reflexive Body Techniques; pregnancy

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INTRODUCTION

Physical activity can be a conduit for body empowerment. McCaughey (1998) and Dowling (2000) both suggest that when women become physically active, they have the potential to become empowered. The empowered body is instrumental, meaning one that can complete tasks and be competent, particularly within physical contexts such as karate and krav maga, the two types of martial arts practiced by the researcher and discussed in this paper. In what follows, a foundational understanding of these themes, built via autoethnographic reflections, will be discussed within a physical feminist approach. A physical feminist approach was adopted to make sense of these phenomena because of the connection it draws between the body being forceful and used in a way that is not typically considered feminine. Specifically, this paper asks: how does an older female practitioner deal with her other gendered roles and different life stages? In particular, how does pregnancy and maternity figure into the journey of the aging female martial artist? Pregnancy in this context is considered more than just the deliberations relating to planning to be pregnant, or how much less can be done afterward. This research thus examines the process of body empowerment in relation to gendered roles, life stages, pregnancy and aging impacting martial arts training and advancement; areas of women's experiences in the martial arts that have received relatively little attention in previous research (Follo 2012).

PHYSICAL FEMINISM APPLIED

The physical feminine body poses a direct challenge to traditional, societal norms. It differs from the body that adheres to accepted forms of physicality, such as those related solely to biological reproduction. In the *Frailty Myth*, Dowling (2000) discussed the female body being 'frozen' due to gendered body discourse wherein the female body is represented as weak, incapable of defending itself, and susceptible to victimization. A frozen body is thus limited in its scope of action, thanks to the internalization of such gendered body discourse which comes to inhibit and restrict its capacity for physical action. Dowling suggests that the female body begins to *thaw* when it becomes physical. The body thereby becomes a lived body; being physical, according to Dowling, begins to unlock the otherwise hidden capabilities of the female body. The *thawed* female body pushes back against gendered discourse. In this way, *thawing* the body is critical as the body is no longer constructed as a passive object but is reframed as the subject of discourse. This process can be referred to as the *transformation to empowerment*.

McCaughey (1997), in *Real Knockouts: The Physical Feminism of Women's Self-Defense*, also discusses the female body in these ways, through the concept of physical feminism. Self-defense is a medium through which the female body is *thawed* to become a lived body. When discussing women's experience in martial arts, this *thawing* of the female body is a critical gendered lens to consider. Rentschler (1999) suggests that a female body that becomes its own protector is seen in a gendered society as

unnatural. Therefore, learning self-defense teaches the body new ways of knowing and acting that are otherwise precluded in such social contexts. This new way of knowing and acting can change how girls and women think about their bodies and potentially begin the transformation to empowerment. This knowledge and action transformation creates a body that is a weapon within a context that tends to suggest the female body is incapable of doing such things (Rentschler 1999).

The relationship between social context and the body was also discussed by Young (2002). Accordingly, Young (2002) suggests that the female body is a gendered lived body. Changing how women use their bodies on a corporeal level can significantly impact their self-belief in their ability to fight. Guthrie (1995) supported corporeal empowerment when she recounted the feeling of empowerment when women learned to kick and strike. For this research, the transformation to empowerment has a corporeal element. The body transforms from objectivity to subjectivity.

Dowling (2000) suggests the 'frailty myth' creates a frozen, restricted body. The female body is labeled weak and incapable of being used to its physical potential for protection. Self-defense training can *thaw* the gendered body and challenge the discourse placed on it. For example, gendered body discourse has suggested that the (perceived or actually) less muscular female body would be unable to escape being grabbed (specifically, by a male attacker). Self-defense training has the potential to create bodily knowledge that begins to chip away at this narrative by reformulating the way the female body is experienced, thought of, and lived through. This chipping away can release and *thaw* the female body from preconceived, gendered narratives. In this way, self-defense is a tool for creating physical feminism (Rentschler 1999). Physical feminism directly challenges gendered body discourse as the body is then lived and unleashed from the ascribed submissiveness created by said discourse, which can result in the very victimhood that it ostensibly describes (McCaughey 1997). For this discussion, I am terming submissiveness as chains of docility which refer to the objectification of the female body and, by corollary, the mind. That is, the female body and mind are not by nature controlled or submissive but are active and capable of resistance when provided with a means of realising it.

Aaltonen (2012, p.63) suggests that self-defense is a practical way of resisting gender ideology and victimization, but in addition, this very physicality can also challenge the 'social taboo of violent women'. This assumption is part of the gendered discourse and is challenged through karate and krav maga. McCaughey (1998) notes that self-defense may allow women to embrace their potential for violence. She suggests that rape culture accepts men's violence against women as normal and women's resistance to this violence as unnatural (1998) because gendered discourse suggests women should not be violent. In this regard, women's violence is somehow considered more morally problematic than men's, and the gendered body is at the center of this assumption. Society still holds the illusion of a male body that is rightly, normally, and naturally aggressive, strong, and dominant, and a female body that

is concurrently passive, weak, and submissive. The transformation to empowerment happens in such social contexts; that is, both the larger gendered society, but also the specific training environments that this encompasses. As a result, such contexts impact the ability to advance within a martial art system as female practitioners come up against the restrictive norms of its gendered bodily discourse. Complicating matters is the observation that gendered discourse seldom impacts lives all by itself; rather, it intersects and overlaps with other phenomena, including age.

The gendered aging body is similarly socially constructed as the gendered body (Vertinsky 2002). Bennett et al. (2017) suggest that cultural age and body norms frame women's physical activity experience. This framing is continuously done (Vertinsky 2002), while aging has often been framed as a source or vehicle of loss and decline. As such, the active aging female body challenges the socially constructed narrative of loss and decline associated with age (Vertinsky 2002), along with the aforementioned narratives of weakness associated with femininity. Indeed, via notions of loss and decline, the aging female body is further depicted as frail and vulnerable. Physical activity can be an intervention to counter this narrative (Angulo et al. 2020). Angulo et al. (2020) point to interventions that address strength, power, aerobic work, balance, and flexibility as the most effective. In addition, Rodriguez-Gómez et al. (2021) indicate that moderate to vigorous physical activity can positively impact the aging body's wellbeing. Therefore, the transformation to empowerment for an aging body also can be attributed to physical activity.

However, turning to pregnancy and motherhood, these are societally expected gendered roles. Specifically, pregnancy is a societally accepted state of physicality that appears to be continually contested within sports, wherein notions of feminine frailty and vulnerability are exaggerated. This is conflated with the belief that pregnant women should not engage in exercise for the protection of their own and their unborn child's health. However, evidence from the academic literature suggests that physical activity and exercise during pregnancy can be physically beneficial, such as having the ability to reduce such conditions as gestational diabetes (L'Heveder et al. 2022). In addition, current guidelines also suggest that female athletes active before pregnancy can continue to be active during pregnancy, although perhaps not at an elite competitive level (Zhu et al. 2022). Wielock et al. (2022), in their review of the literature, suggest that physical activity does not conclusively show a negative impact on the pregnant body though the review does suggest that intense training could impact the health of the fetus. This indicates that women who are planning to become pregnant or are pregnant can participate in some form of activity, which may generally provide benefits of various kinds. Nevertheless, gendered discourse persists around pregnancy/motherhood and sports/activity, which emphasizes the incompatibility of the two. McGannon et al. (2023) and Scott et al. (2023), in their studies of how media and corporate sponsors respond to pregnancy and motherhood in sports, show that maternity leads to retirement among elite female athletes. This suggests that adherence to societal norms of appropriate

physicality takes precedence over the physical female body that challenges gendered discourse. This narrative could be – and arguably often is – extended to non-elite female athletes in the construction of wider norms of acceptable physicality during pregnancy, since it refers to a universal gendered, pregnant body and not elite athletics per se.

Qualitative studies utilizing interviewing that have examined pregnancy, motherhood and sports have highlighted several relevant themes with respect to the impact of gendered discourse. Davenport et al. (2022) discuss pregnancy via the theme of 'mother versus athlete'. The five main themes that emerged in their research focused on pregnancy planning and fertility, pregnancy disclosure and discrimination, training pregnant athletic bodies, safety as it pertains to getting pregnant, and being pregnant and having a support system. These issues can impact non-elite female athletes. Davenport et al. (2023) published a further paper on athletes' return to the sporting arena after pregnancy; they found themes surrounding new postpartum bodies, injuries and safe return, breastfeeding while training, and motherhood and sports roles. Finally, Massey and Whitehead (2022) investigated the changing concept of identity as it is impacted by motherhood. They identified three themes: athlete identity, mother identity and athlete mother identity. However, it is the sub-themes that seem most interesting. These sub-themes include shifting goals, juggling athlete and mother identity, priorities, and lifestyle. This accentuates the multi-dimensional impact and the navigation that the mother role has on female athletes; importantly, these identities are still to be navigated by non-elite athletic mothers. These studies also point to the individuality of these transitions and the impact that the pregnant body and mothering have on physical activity. Thus, the physical female body lives in a social context.

THE LIVED BODY

The environment in which the body lives impacts its ability to become empowered. Merleau-Ponty suggests that the lived body exists within, acts on, and is aware of the world, which has context (Seamon 2018). Therefore, the body can become the reflection and expression of the world in which it lives at a particular time and space. However, to become that reflection, the body is modified and maintained (Crossley 2005); that is, once the body is modified to the satisfaction of the individual and society, it would be maintained to be able to live within that specific environment. Here, Crossley's (2005) concept of reflexive body techniques (RBTs) suggests that certain clusters of bodily movements are associated with specific social contexts. Such RBTs work upon the body to modify it to fit its social context, as the cluster of RBTs utilized in any such context transform or maintain the body's capacities for a specific purpose by itself or in collaboration with others (Crossley 2005). Lastly, RBTs can impact the making and reworking of one's sense of self. For example, in competitive combat sports, 'body calling' is used as an RBT to turn the body into a weapon by inuring it to pain (Spencer 2009). At this point, the mind can message the body by

identifying a particular situation (e.g., a fight), and the body accommodates by referring to the cluster of movements and dispositions that can address such situations (e.g., anticipating and tolerating pain). The ability to perform appropriately or effectively in any such scenario may thus confirm an embodied identity (e.g., as a fighter). However, the body still lives within the intersection of gender and age, which have physical as well as important discursive influences impacting upon what the body can do.

As the body lives in a social context, it can be seen as an enculturated body (Young 2002). Young (2002) understands the body to be in a situation. The mind causes the body to act and react to the social contexts it is within, while it is also trained and developed within that context. The actor uses the body to accomplish a task (Young 2002); as a body is trained in a self-defense context through developing appropriate RBTs, the body's movements become the mind's quick reference tools within situations requiring self-defense. The transformation to empowerment thus encompasses these elements, but lives under the lens of both gender and age.

MARTIAL ARTS, REFLEXIVE BODY TECHNIQUES, AND AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Autoethnography allows self-reflexively to connect personal experience to larger societal issues (Herrmann & Adams 2021; Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011). Through self-reflexivity, the process of the experience can be better understood. McParland (2012) discussed the potential of vignettes, stories, narratives, and experiences of how researchers navigated their sport and physical activity to gain a richer understanding.

The autoethnographic approach has also been used within martial arts to discover and uncover nuanced experiences. The self-reflexive experience of the researcher has allowed for an in-depth understanding of the process of how experience is developed, and can be used with other forms of qualitative research – for instance, to inform interview processes. Maclean's (2021) self-reflexive research in understanding emotion work through karate allowed for an introspective look at how martial arts can be a tool for dealing with everyday crises. In addition, Johnson (2021) used a combination of autoethnography and interviewing to examine the journey of non-Korean Tae Kwon Do practitioners.

RBTs have been addressed in research by Spencer (2009). Though this is not an autoethnography, it does use the autoethnographic approach of personal experience to inform reflexivity. Moreover, Spencer's (2009) concept of body callusing can be applied to the present research. Body callusing, as Spencer conceives, uses RBTs to train the body to turn it into a weapon. Body callusing contributed to transforming the body from object to subject. This also speaks to the transformation to empowerment suggested by physical feminism, as outlined earlier.

Spencer's (2009) body callusing complements the self-reflexive research by Green (2011) in understanding the role of pain in

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MMA, Stenius and Dziwenka's (2015) work on 'stained violence', and Channon's (2020) discussion of 'edgework'. Green (2011) suggests that pain attracts participants because it creates confidence and assists in the discovery of self. Stenius and Dziwenka (2015) expand on violence and pain within mixed martial arts (MMA) and frame MMA as a masculine space. They refer to the connection between pain and stained violence; that is, the abjection of violence being thrown out, rejected, against an opponent, and the pain felt when one accepts the strike or kick. Through one of the researcher's training sessions, they changed their perception of violence. At first, the violence in MMA was out of rage and emotion. However, training enabled the researcher to have a reflexive interpretation of violence. In addition, the training resulted in the body being conditioned and the mind accepting the pain of violence inflicted on them. Channon (2020) adds to the complexity of violence in MMA in understanding how one can engage in ostensibly 'violent' actions with others they consider friends, and remain respectful of the opponent. This discussion of violence is interesting as physical feminism has suggested that society sees women using violence, even to resist male assault, as unnatural. Therefore, women within martial arts have potentially embraced violence as an avenue to become empowered.

Sossa Rojas (2022) applies RBTs to her discussion of shadowboxing. Her interpretation concerns how the body is trained in movement by the mind to achieve various goals. The body movements are intentional so that the goals can be accomplished. In shadowboxing, the body is in solitude (Sossa Rojas 2022). Sossa Rojas (2022) suggests that RBTs allow the body to be trained so the knowledge becomes instinctive action. This process allows the mind to quickly message the body for the appropriate cluster of movements needed.

Finally, Martinez (2014) and Maor (2018) present common explorations of gender and sport, the performing of femininity and masculinity. Martinez (2014) focuses on gender performativity as it connects to masculinity. She explores the experience of conditioning her body to embrace manliness. From the appearance of the white karate gi (uniform) creating a generic body to the violence of kumite (sparring/fighting), she was relinquishing her femininity. As Martinez highlights, this is contrary to the place of women and femininity in the hyper-masculine environment of Argentina. Even within the title of her article, she describes herself as no longer being a girl (Martinez 2014). Martinez appears to be in a male-dominated space where she must conform to the dominant male culture. As presented, this experience is a woman who perceives herself as unnatural because she had embraced violence within the realm of kumite (fighting). Within such a context, it is no wonder she sees herself as no longer a girl because of this acceptance of violence; such notions draw on the belief in women's embrace of physicality as 'unnatural' due to its incompatibility with femininity. However, this can also be seen as Martinez *thawing* her body through karate. Her body has become her weapon. She has callused her body and allowed it to resist gendered body discourse through the

development of RBTs associated with masculinity, fighting and violence. As a result, the body has experienced a transformation to empowerment.

Maor (2018) suggests that physical feminism increases women's sense of embodiment through activity. Through this participation, male and female differences decrease. Maor (2018) also refers to literature that suggests one's femininity is relinquished, and one becomes masculine, through learning to fight. However, Maor argues that a layer of social change can occur with women's participation in martial arts, where men adjust their training for female practitioners. She concludes that male practitioners facilitate physical feminism. Physical feminism is accomplished by men moderating their force and speed so women can train their technique, mentoring female novices, and creating a more welcoming environment. Many male practitioners thus mentor and facilitate female embodiment. However, Maor seems to generalize her experience to a more significant social change movement within martial arts. For example, male training partners altering their speed and force in a drilling session differs from a fight or self-defense scenario. The accommodation can also be seen as demeaning to the female practitioner; the male practitioner still places gender body discourses on women's bodies by 'going easy on them'. The fact that Maor suggests she needs to let go of her femininity implies martial arts as a male space.

These martial arts autoethnographies focus on gendered perspectives and violence. Age, life course, and intersection of all these areas are rarely, if ever, discussed. Gender is more than just narrow perceptions of masculinity and femininity, and this paper seeks to extend the current literature by reflecting on how gender norms and their impact on female martial artists change as the life course progresses.

METHODOLOGY

Autoethnography is utilized as a method for this research. At its base, autoethnography analyzes personal experiences within a larger social context (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011). Ellis, Adams & Bochner (2011) draw a reflexive connection between ethnography and autoethnography. Here, the authors point to ethnography's ability to bring the insiders, that is cultural members, to the experience yet draw in outsiders, those not familiar with the experience, to a greater understanding. From this perspective, autoethnography brings insiders and outsiders into the experience by presenting vignettes, memories, and impact points drawn from the author's own experiences of a particular cultural group or phenomenon.

Important with the autoethnographic approach is that the reflexive account is brought to the larger social context and condition (Herrmann & Adams 2021). Herrmann and Adams (2021) point to the purposeful use of personal experience to elicit larger cultural values and beliefs. This personal method is a way of highlighting social issues. Prior research within gender and sport, specifically martial arts, suggests this perspective creates a deeper

understanding of the martial arts experience. Wall (2008) suggests that the researcher does not live apart from their social context, and thus personal stories reflect the gendered issues that girls and women live. I, too, live in this gendered context and hold experiences that are relevant to critically explaining and understanding it. The events and narratives that distinguish autoethnography provide an enriched understanding of the process within the experience. The researcher uses their 'self' as a methodological tool to examine concepts. Therefore, I am using my 'self' as the tool to collect data on training within a context impacted by physical and discursive aspects of gender and aging.

Important to autoethnography and to this research is how self-reflexive analysis has brought a critical lens to gender and the martial arts. When researchers do autoethnography, they point to their own lives as they are part of the cultural identity of which they write (Ellis et al., 2011). The stories they share provide moments of inspiration and realization; Ellis, Adams & Bochner (2011) called these epiphanies. This research describes, explains, and highlights the moments in my martial arts career that are the most memorable, impactful, and (I believe) relevant, in further understanding what women experience in the martial arts. These self-reflexive critical analyses are intended to let other women know 'you are not alone' as the insider and others, the outsider, feel and understand the lived reality of women in the martial arts.

The narratives, vignettes, and events for this discussion spanned the time of my martial arts career, which started in 1990 and continues to the present. I chose these events thematically. Much of the literature I have reviewed in terms of gender and sport in general, and martial arts in particular, has focused on femininity and masculinity in a somewhat narrow sense. But as established above, the gendered experience does not only focus on these two driving forces, and so the research knowledge on this topic seems limited. As such, I chose to examine the events and personal experiences that spoke to wider aspects of the gendered experience. I realized the importance of external gendered roles that impacted training and advancement in martial arts, but moreover, as I grew older, I realized my aging body and my older life course responsibilities added another layer to my martial arts training and advancement. These made me reconsider how gender is examined in this field and inform the bulk of the discussion that follows.

With respect to research ethics, this study was approved by the Wright State University institutional review board (IRB #06457). Méndez (2013) discussed two ethical issues pertinent to autoethnography: positionality and consent. Ethically, how close does the researcher allow the reader to get to the story? The researcher places themselves in a vulnerable position. Using first and third person allows the researcher to be close to the narrative or distance themselves from it (Méndez 2013). I have chosen to bring the reader close to my experiences. I aimed to allow subcultural insiders (i.e., other girls and women in martial arts) to reflect on their own lives and allow the outsider (i.e., male practitioners, or people with no martial arts experience) to understand what female martial artists may be experiencing. In

terms of consent, I presented these experiences with consent in mind. The experiences and narratives are described so that they do not infringe on the privacy of those in my narratives. To accomplish this, I did not use names, I left out any acutely embarrassing moments, and focused on my experience. The narratives provided illustrate the 'essence' of the experiences being described and analyzed.

FINDINGS

The following autoethnographic narratives outline events that have taken place where gender and age have individual impacts but, at times, intersect. The purpose of this research is to use a self-reflexive analysis to get an 'insider' perspective of a gendered lived reality in karate and krav maga. As I travel through my martial arts career, I describe narratives and stories of my experience in terms of gender, pregnancy, motherhood, and caregiving.

Gendered Arena

I learned early on in my martial art career that the majority of the participants were men. Every story I had heard about the 'old masters' centered around men. One of the first stories was about a female master who pretended to be beaten by her partner so her partner would not feel inferior. As the story was told to me by my karate instructor, one of the founders of this style of karate had tried to beat his wife as she was walking to some destination. I cannot remember where. However, what I do remember is the wife, who was an accomplished martial artist, allowed her husband to tie her to a tree suggesting he had beaten her in a 'fight'. The gendered narrative reflected gendered society at the time but also impacted me. Did I have to hide it if I was good at martial arts? At the time, I was 19, and I had just started karate. However, I was fortunate to have two women who were prominent in the club and held black belts. I had role models that allowed me to believe I could achieve a high rank. In retrospect, they provided an example of an empowered female body. I understand now what I most likely did not back then. What would have happened if those women were not there? If I relied on that story, I would assume that I would have to hide my martial arts ability. Seeing other women reach and demonstrate empowerment was crucial because it showed me 'I could do this'. I practiced martial arts throughout my undergraduate university career; I moved cities, and I switched karate styles. In my new club, I became the club's first female black belt – on the second try.

It has been a while since I graded for my shodan (first-degree black belt). I was grading with two men. One was much younger and a superstar in the club; the other was well-liked by the head instructor. I use 'superstar' to suggest he was very successful in tournaments, practiced consistently, and was good. The superstar was in his teens and I was in my twenties. The other black belt candidate was closer to my age, although I do not remember their specific ages. The superstar did great, but the other candidate

seemed to get a cramp that caused him to lie down. I thought, 'Who the heck lies down at their grading, are you kidding me?' Before this grading, I was required to do 1,000 kicks off each leg, 1,000 punches off each arm, 1,000 sit-ups, 1,000 push-ups, and a five-mile run. This was a practice in callusing my body, and these requirements were to be completed on my honor in a week. I completed it and here I stood. I did the best I could for me. However, at every stage, comparisons were always made. I always seem to be compared to the men, and they are usually younger men. I understood I was older than the other black belt candidates and did not represent the ideal image of a young, fit, female martial arts body. In the end, I failed. I was angry. To this day, I believe I failed because one of the other men did not do well, and I paid for it. It was as if the instructors wondered how I could be passed if the other candidate – a male – was not. I chose to try again and got it. Interestingly, the man who failed with me before got it this time too. I left the club; I needed a break. Was my aging body pushing against perceived societal norms? Did I not belong here? I had been in the martial arts for a while but was still transforming.

I begin with this story because I constantly felt I had to prove myself to others; not just male black belts but also women. I joined another karate club. There were a few other women there, and I felt like I was part of the group, not only among the women but the whole group. Though the head instructor was not perfect regarding gender inclusion or equity, he accepted me, and I felt like he believed I would be *good*, unlike the club where I was simply the *first*, and I had felt alone. Fast forward to my sandan (3rd-degree black belt) grading.

Leading up to 2009, my head instructor had indicated that I would be ready to grade to sandan, a 3rd-degree black belt in Isshinryu karate (a particular style in karate). I was ecstatic. I remember training by myself in the State of Kansas. I tried understanding kata (patterns) and each kata's bunkai (practical application). This training used RBTs to understand and embody bunkai and through this training, I callused my body to prepare for testing. My mind would be able to message my body to enact the cluster of RBTs to be used when the time came. I know I must have gone against some martial arts rules, but I pushed to get this grading (testing for the next rank). Generally, the head instructor will let a person know when they are ready to advance. The instructor had told me I was ready but the date was not clear, and I had to plan it so I was in town for the grading. In addition, I was planning to get pregnant, and I knew I would not have the chance to grade if I did not get this done. The aging body had called on me; I was unsure what my pregnancy would bring. Would I continue to train, take a break, or stop altogether? Then, my role as a mother would change many aspects of my life. I was unsure of a lot, but was sure of this: I wanted to grade.

By the time the grading occurred, I was three months pregnant and 39. I was at the stage of my life where I needed to get pregnant if that was what I wanted to do. It did impact my life. As the one who carries the child, my training would stop during this time. I am not sure what would happen. As I knew this could be a

possibility, I pushed. However, perhaps all those years in martial arts strengthened and empowered me to push. It had transformed me. I was protective of the life that was growing in me. I knew I would need to tell my head instructor so he would understand why my movements were perhaps different. I also did not want anything to threaten my unborn child. I protected my baby. However, I asked my instructor not to tell the other black belts on the panel (the grading panel, which consists of other black belts in the club who evaluate the participant's skills), since I did not want the pregnancy to influence their decision. I understood the gendered narrative that comes with a pregnant body and assumptions of its associated weakness. However, it did impact the grading; my head instructor ensured that nothing came close. The pregnant body was indeed gendered. Gender, age and the body always seemed to play a part in martial arts for me.

At this point, I would like to focus on my pregnant body. I had heard many times to be careful when I was pregnant, and I was. I also, as a sociologist, was aware of the societal narrative of the pregnant body and women's ability to be pregnant – that is, it was taken a sign of weakness. However, as I transitioned from karate to krav maga (a reality-based self-defense system), I realized that my pregnant, cesarean-sectioned body had strengthened me.

The Pregnant Body

Once I received my third degree black belt in karate, I shifted my martial arts training from karate to krav maga. The krav maga system I practiced has eight levels. Each level represented techniques and concepts that were learned. Therefore, each level was an advancement on the last. As I progressed to Level 8, the highest level, Level 7 had a 'pain test' that I needed to navigate first. The name sounds worse than it was, at least for me. I have two children and being pregnant was a trial. There is no romanticizing having your internal organs being pushed against as your fetus grows. However, I also had two cesarian sections (c-sections). During this time, I could not lift more than 20 pounds (from what I can remember). In addition, I was not able to lift my child. If I did, sudden jerking would open my internal stitching. The pain was unbearable, and during the first 24 hours after both c-sections, I had a 'magic' morphine button. I could not put my arm behind my back or lift my leg to step up on a curb.

Thus, the aforementioned 'pain test' was not such a huge concern for me. It took place during the Level 7 testing in my krav maga system. It was a perseverance test where you were hit for two minutes, and would be similar to the perseverance testing I went through for my first-degree black belt described earlier. This was not what Green (2011) would consider a method to build confidence or discover self, but rather was a test to get beyond in order to prove one's core competences: specifically, the ability to look beyond pain and focus on the task at hand. I had done this physically before, while experiencing pregnancy and delivery. I was prepared.

I felt this preparation again as I battled through the six days of training – including two nights in the desert, with limited food

and lack of sleep – that encapsulated my later, Level 8 test. Pregnancy again had prepared me for this physical endeavor. It had callused my body. As such, I did not believe in the societal narrative that a pregnant body is weak and vulnerable. Instead, I saw power within it, emanating from its lived memory. By this time, I was transformed and perceived my body as an empowered and capable subject. My body was a tool for protection.

Thus, the gendered pregnant body, which may typically be seen as vulnerable, prepared me for the 'pain test' and for the desert. I refer again to Spencer's (2009) concept of body callusing. The rigors I had to endure while pregnant allowed my body to be trained. Presenting pregnancy and delivery as a positive, preparatory experience to larger physically demanding training in martial arts is not typically examined in the literature and is all but absent from popular discourse on the matter. I argue that this depiction of pregnancy and delivery can be placed within the 'thawed' body (Dowling 2000) discussed above. Even the studies by Davenport et al. (2023) and Massey and Whitehead (2022) suggest that though there is inner conflict around the meaning of pregnancy, it is navigated by athletes and can be reconciled with an athletic identity and the demands of sports training. I add to this by arguing that the pregnant female body affords an experience of perseverance. The pregnant body is thus, primarily, a strong body, and pregnancy an ongoing source of strength for the body that perseveres through it.

Overall, through the nine months, I carried additional weight as the fetus grew. I was bending. I was walking. I was working out. Life was navigated through nine months. Two minutes of being hit or six days of intense training with two days in the desert flipping a tire in soft sand, performing techniques and drills, and carrying a stretcher, were not comparable to pregnancy. I had used an experience so central to gendered discourses of female frailty, supposed to 'freeze' my body, in a way of not only 'thawing' (Dowling 2000) but evolving into an empowered body as it is described by the concept of physical feminism (McCaughy 1997). However, I still had to navigate a gendered social context whilst I trained.

Mother and Caregiver

Within my gendered context, I had to manage my roles of mother, daughter, and caregiver. The following narrative recounts the events leading up to the Level 8 test in my krav maga system, and how I navigated my gendered roles during this time of preparation. I am a mother of two young boys and was a daughter/caregiver at the time to both of my parents. I began training approximately eight months before May 2019 and was in the best shape I had ever been when I went to Israel to take the Level 8 test. However, my time and thoughts were not my own. My gendered obligations seemed to follow me. I was not only persevering physically but also mentally.

In April 2018, my mother was placed in long-term care. I was taken aback, shocked. I was consumed not by training for the challenge to come but by the one that was present. I was

heartbroken. I had one more testing hurdle before Level 8 was even a reality. At the end of July or early August, I was to test for Level 7. I was traveling practically every weekend that summer to make sure I was with my mother. This was the time I was supposed to be training, but my time and thoughts were not there. The harshest time was yet to come. This external barrier to training can be considered as gendered but goes beyond the typical nature of gendered restrictions on women in sport as are typically featured in the research. Caregiving is a gender aspect that impacts women's martial arts training that warrants further research.

I began training in October/November 2018 for Level 8. I would get up at 4 am. I needed to do my krav visualization, workout, get the boys up, and then go to work. During this time, it became apparent that my father needed to be in a retirement home. As the only child, and female, I was obligated to help him transition from his home to the retirement home in January 2019. During this time, my mother was deteriorating. I relied on training as my salvation. I used the training to deal with everyday emotional crises (Maclean 2021). As I used training as a strategy for crisis management, I was callusing my mind. My mental health needed to be callused as much as my body. Spencer (2009) discusses body callusing. However, mental callusing also needs to take place. In the transformation to empowerment, the body is used to thaw oneself from the restrictions of gendered discourse, but the mind also needs to be thawed. It is by transforming both body and mind that gendered discourse is challenged.

But how could I focus on training for the most physical test of my martial arts career? I thought I had more time. I was wrong. It was a Tuesday night. I got a call from the hospital. My mother was in the emergency room with double pneumonia in both lungs. I made the four-hour trip to see my mother with my family. The next day, Wednesday, I told my mother I loved her, and she told me she loved me. My father and I decided to let her go. On April 4, 2019, my mother died. It was a profound loss. One that still brings tears to my eyes as I write this narrative. I relied on the complex RBTs I had trained and the mental callusing of this event to get me through. Approximately one and a half months later I was in Israel. I was 49, and I was older.

Training does not happen in a vacuum. I had to balance my training with the obligation to care for my parents, first by laying my mother to rest and then managing my father's care. The funeral preparations were left to me, but I remember working out in the retirement home. I stayed with my father. I would get up early. Go to the 'theater' room. I would work out. It was an emotionally heavy time, but the training helped me overcome it. However, I felt like I was not training enough. This life course event occurred approximately six weeks before I traveled to Israel. It seemed a blur. I trained, and I thought of my mother. The mental cycle repeated. As mentioned, I was 49 when I went to the Israeli desert to try to pass my Level 8 test. Therefore, I lastly share reflexive thoughts on the intersection of gender and age as a krav maga practitioner.

Aging and Small Body Narrative

As I was testing for Level 6 in krav maga, a younger participant mentioned they wanted to test for Level 8 before they got older. At the time, they were 20 years my junior. I laughed and proceeded to look around. I was one of the older participants and one of the few women at the higher levels. This experience was not new to me. I had continually been 'one of the few women in higher ranks' for most of my martial arts career. It was a familiar place. However, I had an older body that I did not want to injure as I pushed to its limits. The training was a balance. As the primary income earner, mother of two young boys, caregiver, and partner, an injury would impact many aspects of my life. I trained with less intensity but with more detail. It changed how I trained RBTs and how I callused my body. I trained slowly when I could and only went fast and intense when needed.

These smaller and older body narratives also required constant review and understanding that 'dirty' techniques would be necessary. These 'dirty' techniques were part of the RBTs included in the cluster of body modifications I trained. Here, 'dirty' techniques means techniques like putting my fingers in eyes and hitting the groin; movements which would be illegal under most forms of combat sport, and perhaps considered dishonorable in other martial arts contexts. With a smaller and older body, I am under no illusion that I can outbox a bigger body; that is, I would not be able to stand with a bigger opponent and just punch back and forth. I needed to include the eye gouge, boxing the ears, groin strike, attacking the neck, palm strike, and biting is always an option. In addition, I use elbows, knees, and hammer strikes from my traditional martial arts training. I have to use all of these combinations to overcome a strength differential. None of this is to suggest that I was weak or incapable in an absolute sense; on the contrary, I was willing and able to use all means necessary to fight, to survive. Such is a mentality supported by a subjective body, a transformed body; a body that experienced physical feminism. I have accepted the use of violence as resistance and self-protection. I have not lost my femininity or become more masculine because I have permitted myself to use violence. I am transformed in what I can do, but also in how I interpret the meaning of those abilities.

As I have progressed through the levels within this krav maga system, I have been navigating the older body and smaller body narrative. The older body, for me, is a body that may be unable to do what others may do. For example, I cannot run as fast as I once could, or as some of my younger training partners can. I cannot do as many push-ups. I do not want the impact of being put to the ground (flipped or thrown) constantly, as I know I am more likely to sustain an injury and less likely to recover from one quickly. Meanwhile, the smaller body narrative is one that is weaker and structurally smaller compared to other bodies. However, in each narrative, my equalizer is attention to technical detail, body mechanics, and the use of 'dirty techniques'. It is the summation of my transformation to empowerment.

DISCUSSION

Many external and internal factors impact martial arts training. This autoethnography discussed the intersection of gender, age, and the ability to train and advance within karate and krav maga. Although I experienced a transformation through my years in martial arts, there were moments where gender and age impacted that experience and perhaps never left each other. The intersection of these two life experiences sometimes created difficulty, fatigue, and doubt. ‘Thawing’ the female body is empowering (Dowling 2000), but that does not negate the difficulty that has to be persevered to reach it. The earlier sections of this paper illustrated the perpetuation of gendered discourse and how ‘thawing’ the body is relevant to McCaughey’s (1997) concept of physical feminism. I used karate and krav maga to aid in breaking down the gendered narratives I had internalized. As an older practitioner, I was able to dispel societal aging narratives of loss and decline (Vertinsky 2002). This does not suggest that an aging body does not need to adjust to a lack of ability, but understands that physical activity can positively impact the aging body (Rodriguez-Gómez 2021), and that much remains possible thanks to an aging body’s accumulation of relevant RBTs. Ultimately, physical activity not only ‘thaws’ the ‘frozen’ gendered body, but also reconstructs the gendered aging body.

Most interestingly, the self-reflexive analysis on pregnancy, motherhood, and caregiving have provided an ‘insider’ perspective of how these roles are navigated. Pregnancy themes highlighted by Davenport et al. (2022; 2023) were reflective of my experience as a non-elite athlete. I had planned my pregnancy resulting in ‘pushing’ for my promotion to advance in karate. Similarly, during my third degree promotion, I was concerned about the safety of my unborn child. However, as I was concerned about my child, I also did not want the rest of the promotion panel to know I was pregnant since I did not want any gendered narratives to impact my result. Finally, Massey and Whitehead (2022) spoke of the identities their participants were navigating. It was their sub-themes I found most relevant in my self-reflexive narratives. I had shifted my goals and my priorities had changed several times to accommodate my role of mother. It seemed I was continuously balancing my time and willingness to train with what I had to do with respect to caregiving for my children and, later in life, my parents.

Finally, the most profound, introspective ‘epiphany’ moment in my reflexive analysis was understanding how impactful my pregnancies and c-sections were in what Spencer (2009) labels the ‘callusing’ of the body. I had endured two pregnancies. My body had endured the internal manipulation that a fetus places on the body. I had two c-sections where the abdomen is cut right through. I had survived this arduous process twice, and in doing so, understood that my body was strong, powerful, and competent. During the pregnancies and parental caregiving, I had callused my mind. Through thawing, pushing, and callusing, I was physical feminism applied.

CONCLUSION

The intersection of gender and age has been explored in this discussion of martial arts training. The exploration focused on the process to body empowerment experienced as the female body was thawed through karate and krav maga. The body’s training in self-defense contributed to the mind challenging internalized gendered body discourse. Therefore, in collaboration, the mind and body can transform to a body in control; a body that is powerful and empowering. However, this is continually negotiated through a gendered society. The connection of mind and body transformation can be used to challenge narratives in professional and work environments, policy development to achieve personal agency, and societal narratives that limit through othering and labeling.

Though limited in its autoethnographic presentation, this paper signals the need for a larger discussion of intersectionality and martial arts. Factors such as ablism, race, ethnicity, class, and others must be investigated inasmuch as they impact on the dual factors of gender and aging. Clearly, a variety of factors impact training, advancement, and broad experience in martial arts. As other autoethnographies have suggested, the lived experience in martial arts varies. Most importantly, research examining the intersectional lived experience of girls and women needs to continue.

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