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Analysing the costs and benefits of “fake female empowerment” in the martial arts

Abstract

The martial arts are often said to be “empowering” for women. However, in some instances this purported empowerment can appear somehow inauthentic. Genuine empowerment should result in the student becoming more powerful in some way. This paper coins the phrase “fake female empowerment” to denote a form of martial arts training experience that can *look and feel* like empowerment for women and girls, while in reality doing nothing to increase their actual power, or even decreasing it. Examples of “fake female empowerment” in the martial arts explored in this paper include: the promise that martial arts training will deliver a “shapely” body; encouragement to endure harmful pain and injury in the name of desensitisation; and conversely, the encouragement to ignore the complex realities of violence in one’s practice.

The paper notes that while its starting point is women’s experience, most of the issues covered apply equally to people of all genders. It explores the differences between “real” and “fake” empowerment for female students, and presents a light-touch cost/benefit analysis in order to understand and articulate the reasons for the phenomenon of “fake female empowerment”.

Keywords

Female empowerment; martial arts; self defence

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1 Introduction

Last year, I wrote a blog article called, "Eleven differences between real and fake 'female empowerment' in the martial arts" (Morgan, 2019). It sought to name and diagnose a problem that had been troubling me for some time.

The martial arts are often said to be "empowering" for women (see for example Vidal, 2016). However, I was also becoming aware that some instances of this purported empowerment appeared somehow inauthentic. Genuine empowerment should result in the student becoming more powerful in some way. The phenomenon I've labelled as "fake female empowerment" though, can look and feel like empowerment for women and girls, while in reality doing nothing to increase their actual power, or even decreasing it.

The starting point of the blog article was a gentle, timid young woman I'd met in another dojo, who had been encouraged by her sensei and dojo colleagues to believe that she was a vicious "killing machine". Their intentions appeared benign, and grounded in a sincere desire to build her confidence; but I found the student's own lack of insight into the situation disturbing.

At the same time, "empowerment" through martial arts training is undoubtedly possible, for students of all genders. The blog article therefore explored the difference between "real" and "fake" empowerment for female students, and asked the question: *How can you spot the difference between whether you're offering, or being offered, fake empowerment or the real thing in your dojo?* It was well received, and Peter Kuhn (the former Editor in Chief of this journal) invited me to expand and develop the ideas into an "Impulse paper" for JOMAR.

In this context, I reflected on how to give the paper a practical application, over and above simply diagnosing the problem. An overriding reaction from the blog readers had been that, as martial arts practitioners and instructors, they easily recognised the issue. Many people agreed that "fake female empowerment" was negative and harmful, but felt that it was intractable in today's Western society. I started to wonder why "fake female empowerment" was so prevalent, if it was harmful. There had to be some strong benefits at stake.

This paper therefore presents a light-touch cost/benefit analysis of "fake female empowerment", exploring any pay-offs it might bring for women themselves, and for martial arts clubs, alongside any negative implications. Through this analysis, I hope to prompt martial arts practitioners and instructors to recognise, articulate and critically evaluate the issue.

Although the starting point of this paper is women's experience, most of the issues covered here apply equally to people of all genders.

The paper uses an informal, simplified version of the Multiple-Criteria Decision Analysis (MCDA) approach to analyse the costs and benefits of fake female empowerment. MCDA is "a general framework for supporting complex decision-making situations with multiple and often conflicting objectives that multiple stakeholder groups and/or other decision-makers value differently" (IPBES, n.d.).

The question at stake here is whether "fake female empowerment" (FFE) in the martial arts can have positive benefits, and I've further subdivided the concept into six distinct "faces" of FFE:

1. Beauty and a "shapely" body as empowerment
2. Selfishness/materialism as empowerment
3. Magical thinking as empowerment
4. Overestimating your own fighting ability as empowerment
5. Enduring harmful pain, injury and abuse as empowerment
6. Assuming a "Victim Identity" as empowerment

Once the question for a MCDA has been defined, the typical approach is to define your criteria for analysis. In this case I've used the following:

- a) Impact on students' happiness and self-esteem
- b) Financial benefits for clubs
- c) Impact on students' ability to defend themselves from a physical attack.
- d) Impact on students' sense of "empowerment" in other (non-physical) confrontation situations.

The next steps in MCDA are normally to define the weighting of each criterion, assess each option against each criteria, and calculate the final assessment. However, this paper diverges from this norm in two key ways.

Firstly, it does not attempt to weight the criteria for analysis. Indeed, it concludes that this weighting is the critical factor at stake here. If making students feel happy and/or generating income for one's own club are considered the highest priority, then "fake female empowerment" could be highly positive. If teaching students to defend themselves from a physical attack is considered to be the most important outcome of martial arts training however, there appears to be nothing at all attractive about FFE.

Secondly, this is an "Impulse paper", intended to give JOMAR readers "impulses to reflect on a topic, and their perspective on it", not a scientific research paper. As such it doesn't engage with any formal scientific/mathematical methodologies to calculate the analysis. (Many helpful overviews of such methodologies may be found online for the interested reader; see for example the UK Government Department for Communities and Local Government 2009).

The approach here is therefore simply to describe some of the costs and benefits under each "face" of FFE, and score each one against each criteria on a subjective "best fit" basis from 0 (No benefits at all) to 5 (Powerful benefits).

2 Analysing the six “faces” of “fake female empowerment”

2.1 Face One: Beauty and a “shapely” body as empowerment

This section focuses specifically on the purported aesthetic, physical benefits of martial arts and self-defence training, and whether the promise of these is empowering for women or not.

The strength and fitness elements of training are out of scope, on the basis that they should enhance a student’s physical power. It is worth noting in this context though, the problematic status of “health” in relation to women’s exercise for some scholars. Physical exercise has undoubted health benefits (National Health Service, 2018). However, Kennedy and Markula (2012, p. 6) argue that the fitness industry tends to focus on the equation of a thin, toned body to “health”, when “health” is in fact a broader state covering physical, social and psychological well-being.

When martial arts schools market specifically to women, they often focus on the impact of training on students’ physical appearance. Anecdotally, several instructors have told me that this makes sense, as in their experience the prospect of a “better” body powerfully draws female students in and inspires motivation, while learning self-defence simply doesn’t appear to appeal in the same way. For example, a flyer advertising Matt Fiddes Martial Arts (Stovell, n.d.) shows a beautiful woman with the thin, well-muscled body and long hair often seen as the current “ideal” for Western women. It proclaims nine benefits of ladies’ kickboxing, of which self-defence is only one. Five of the nine relate to physical appearance: *Lose Weight; Get in Shape; Stay in Shape; Tone and Tighten; Look & Feel Great*. The large print header of the flyer also proclaims: *Ladies Kickboxing - Lose Weight + Get in Shape!* (Stovell, n.d.).

This is arguably a “fake” form of empowerment, in that it appears to promise a form of power, but may in fact disempower students. Naomi Wolf famously compared the modern-day social imperative for women to look “attractive” to a medieval torture instrument - the “Iron Maiden” - a cruel body-shaped casket painted with a beautiful woman on the outside, which trapped, tortured and killed the victim placed inside it. In *The Beauty Myth* (1991), Wolf traced this argument through diverse lenses including work, pornography, eating disorders, cosmetic surgery and so on. Although thirty years old, her book is arguably still highly relevant today (Reilly-Cooper, 2014).

In a similar vein, several feminist scholars have used Foucault’s notions of disciplinary practices that produce the “docile bodies” of modernity, and his metaphor of the Panopticon, to describe the pressures on women to accept and ultimately internalise the tyranny of dieting, beauty, hair removal and comportment norms, with these norms constantly reinforced by friends, the family, men and other women alike, the media, and even complete strangers (for example Bartky, 2016).

On this basis, the Matt Fiddes flyer could be seen as representing cruel and cynical exploitation of women’s insecurities for commercial gain. As Reilly-Cooper (2014) argues, “the ideals of the beauty myth aren’t intended to be realisable. They are designed to keep women in a state of

perpetual anxiety, engaged in constant warfare with their recalcitrant flesh". Therefore, no amount of kickboxing yourself "into shape" will ever satisfy its harsh demands.

A contrasting perspective is found in Catherine Hakim's controversial bestseller, *Honey Money* (2011). This book argues that beauty and sexiness can be a woman's most powerful assets, and the means to self-advancement in a world of men generally suffering from what she dubs a "sex deficit". Hakim proposes an addition to Bordieu's typology of forms of human capital – economic, social and cultural – coining the term "erotic capital" to denote a *magical combination of attractiveness and charisma*. Hakim posits that this form of capital has been consistently devalued and marginalised from a number of powerful directions, including organised religion, men who resent women's potential to have power, and envious feminists who don't possess erotic capital themselves, and fail to grasp its criticality for women.

Hakim's book is open to criticism, for example regarding her unkind treatment of "fat" people and idealisation of prostitution. Yet elements of her thesis do ring true, uncomfortable as it may feel. We know intuitively that people viewed as physically attractive do seem to have certain advantages in life. Hakim enumerates some of these advantages, and cites studies to back them up, although interestingly she notes that attractive women applying for senior work roles appear to have a disadvantage.

Of course there can also be considerable costs to relying on physical beauty as a form of empowerment, not least because it can depreciate with age. However, physical beauty certainly can be a source of empowerment, even if this is an "empowerment" that many people disdain; and it would be disingenuous to pretend otherwise.

This is not to attempt to dismantle the powerful arguments cited above that the imperative to achieve "beauty" inflicts suffering on countless women (and increasingly, people of all genders). It's conceivable that both positions can be correct – that the quest for "beauty" is a general source of oppression, but for those on the winning side, it can be a source of power.

L. A. Jennings (2015) notes this tension in the context of women's mixed martial arts (MMA). She argues that physical beauty is often extremely important in female competitors' careers. Jennings coins a phrase – the "centrefold imperative" – to describe the pressure on female fighters to present themselves as "feminine" "sex objects", and explains that this can be both empowering and disenfranchising. As noted above, there are clear winners and losers in this game. Jennings also describes how more "beautiful" female athletes from the 2012 Olympics gained generous funding and spokeswoman opportunities, while some competitors deemed less attractive ended up living below the poverty line, unable to access the same resources. With regard to MMA, Jennings narrates how Carla Esparza won the UFC 20 division, but was overlooked for "prettier" fighters such as Paige VanZant when it came to endorsements and further opportunities to compete (Jennings, 2015, p. 84).

This presents a difficult conundrum: should female athletes/fighters exploit their "erotic capital" where possible for their own gain or even just financial survival, given that it perpetuates a situation that is disempowering for female fighters and women in general? The svelte, toned, hege-

monic feminine body at stake is very narrowly defined, as pertaining to women who are young, white, middle-class, cis-gendered, sexually attractive for heterosexual relationships and so on; and it's this very singularity that is said to contribute to women's oppression. Pirkko Markula and Eileen Kennedy (2011) write, "if only thin, toned and young women are considered attractive in a society where women come in a variety of different shapes, then most women are considered unattractive but nevertheless work continually to obtain the desired but unattainable body shape" (p. 2). This leads onto the second face of "fake female empowerment", which is selfishness and materialism, pursued at the expense of others . . .

Analysis: How beneficial is increasing your physical attractiveness through martial arts training?

As explained in the Introduction, this paper analyses each "face" of fake female empowerment against the four identified criteria, and gives a subjective numerical score for its perceived benefits. For physical beauty, the analysis is as follows:

- a) Impact on students' happiness and self-esteem - 3/5. A life-changing transformation in terms of physical beauty is not guaranteed, but training can certainly deliver a noticeable change in one's physical attractiveness, including via a confident demeanour, which would be expected to increase well-being.
- b) Financial benefits for clubs (Helping to attract and retain students) – 5/5. Whether it's ethical or not (a question not within the scope of this paper), tapping into customers' fears, vulnerabilities and desires is a recognised way to achieve healthy sales.
- c) Practical impact on students' ability to defend themselves from a physical attack - 0/5.
- d) Practical impact on student's sense of "empowerment" in other (non-physical) confrontation situations - 3/5.

If martial arts training improves someone's physical attractiveness, this can lead in turn to greater confidence and competence in everyday scenarios. As Hakim (2011) writes, for people judged as physically beautiful: "The world they experience is a warmer, more friendly, helpful, welcoming, benign and easy place to live than the world experienced by ugly people" (p. 114).

Conclusion

Beauty norms can be a double-edged sword for women, capable of bestowing power (albeit transitory) or disempowerment. Either way, they have no bearing on physical self-defence skills.

2.2 Face Two: Selfishness and materialism as empowerment

Linking back to the previous point, martial arts and self-defence are often sold to women primarily as "products" to improve their physical appearance in line with societal standards of attractiveness as discussed above. Indeed, the presence of consumerism in exercise, including martial arts training, is deep and pervasive. Elements of Ben Spatz's (2015) analysis of the commodification of yoga can easily be applied to the martial arts:

"Yoga teachers [...] tailor their technique to meet the needs of those who support their practices socially and financially [...]. This has given rise to the contemporary landscape of yoga practice, with its kaleidoscopic array of schools and styles, traditions and brands [...] Issues of branding

and commercialism, exoticism and appropriation, swirl in the contemporary landscape of yoga [...]. In this context, teachers [...] are under enormous pressure to define what they do in marketable terms.” (p. 81)

Women’s empowerment through martial arts is a lucrative market, supported by an array of products for purchase, such as the Bytomic Sparkle Ladies Boxing Gloves (*Sparkle while you box in these new style boxing gloves ...!*). But several martial arts instructors have told me of their discomfort at seeing other schools achieving commercial success by dishonestly marketing a watered-down “ladies only” form of the art as genuine self-defence; they deplore in general what Spatz (2015) identifies as the pressure to “tailor” the technique for commercial gain.

The original concept of “women’s empowerment” related to access to education, birth control and other critical topics. However, it’s now often associated with buying “stuff” (The Onion, 2003; Iqbal, 2015).

Freeman (2016) gives an excellent analysis of how the idea of “empowerment” has morphed into this rather selfish, materialistic concept, given its original project of providing autonomy and strength to marginalised people in the 1970s, particularly in relation to women and girls in third-world countries. Freeman charts the move in recent decades from the idea of a demographic gaining power for the good of the group to: “just one woman gaining power for the good of herself – a shift from the collective to the individual”.

Tolentino (2016) further explains how this excludes the women who can’t buy their way into this form of “empowerment”: “This version of empowerment can be actively disempowering: It’s a series of objects and experiences you can purchase while the conditions determining who can access and accumulate power stay the same. The ready participation of well-off women in this strategy also points to a deep truth about the word “empowerment”: that it has never been defined by the people who actually need it. People who talk empowerment are, by definition, already there.”

Part of the problem however, is that the mechanisms underlying this form of “fake empowerment” can be largely invisible and/or closely mimic “true” empowerment so as to appear indistinguishable. Kennedy and Markula (2011) argue that “media-saturated consumer culture forms the context of women’s involvement in exercise, and [...] it is impossible for women to escape its influence” (p. 15).

They cite Dworkin and Wachs (2009) as positing that while women’s fitness may appear empowering on the surface, it is actually sold by “modifying feminist ideas of liberation and resistance into so-called commodity feminism.

“Over time, individual involvement becomes self-improvement and the neoliberal marketplace becomes an imperative part of the construction of the healthy self. At the same time, blame for the negative aspects of consumer culture or social injustices found within social structures is systematically displaced.” (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009, cited in Kennedy and Markula, 2011, p. 4)

Martial arts can facilitate this “selfish” model of empowerment. Velija et al (2013, p. 524) found that female martial arts practitioners reported noticeable increases in their own personal sense

of power. However, “their experiences remain predominantly at the level of individual empowerment. Thus, the women do not problematise normative views of gendered embodiment which position women as weak and men as strong. Nor do the women in the study question the pressure on females’ bodies to be toned and feminine.”

Analysis: How beneficial is pursuing consumerism and selfishness through martial arts training?

- a) Impact on students' happiness and self-esteem - 3/5.
- b) Financial benefits for clubs (Helping to attract and retain students) - 5/5
- c) Practical impact on students' ability to defend themselves from a physical attack – 0/5.
- d) Practical impact on student's sense of "empowerment" in other (non-physical) confrontation situations - 3/5.

Conclusion

This face of FFE appears to threaten the assumed ethical ideals underpinning the martial arts, by putting pressure on schools to modify their technique in line with consumer demand, and enabling a self-centred focus in training. It also has no bearing whatsoever on one’s ability to fight. However, it is hugely pervasive, and presents many powerful marketing opportunities.

2.3 Face Three: Magical thinking as empowerment

Popular "Women's Empowerment" rhetoric often bears an underlying message that we are all already perfect, and that the key challenge is to understand and celebrate this, not to improve ourselves. Here's a typical example (Amara, 2016):

“There is no one like you. You are a beautiful star of a woman, exactly the way you are. I know, your head is saying but I am too fat, or too lazy or too stressed. Those are all thoughts. The reality is you are precious. You are growing, learning, expanding. And how you create your life is your art, and no one can do it like you. So claim your wild, quirky, creative self. No more comparison; nurture yourself as if you were your own best friend. Because that makes life so much more fun!”

These words run counter to the generally accepted spirit of martial arts training, which assumes that sustainable self-improvement is achieved by pushing beyond our own limits, and humbly seeking to improve our imperfect selves, rather than telling ourselves that we’re precious or perfect just as we are.

However, magical thinking does sometimes find a place in the martial arts. The following example comes from a book that is truly inspirational on many levels. Barbara Frentsos Butler (1924-2017) started Aikido at the age of 72, and gained her first black belt at the age of 75, and her second dan aged 76. Impressively, her book, *Aikido for Women* (2013) was published when she was still teaching, aged almost 90.

The troubling element of this book for me is summed up on the back cover: “Unbelievable! A petite, eighty plus-year old woman is able to control and throw large men. Aikido for Women spills the secret any woman, regardless of age and size, will find useful to protect and defend herself against various types of attacks.”

Frentsos Butler's trust in her invincible martial prowess is a cornerstone of the book. It is not possible to directly dispute this, in the absence of any factual evidence of her abilities. But looking at the facts - her advanced age, and her five-foot, 105-pound stature - Frentsos Butler's tales of big, strong men throwing fully committed, aggressive punches at her, only to find themselves helplessly overpowered and thrown to the ground, should probably not be accepted uncritically.

Dramatic irony is a literary device, whereby the audience has more information than one or more of the characters, and therefore understands the situation more clearly. It could be suggested that a form of dramatic irony is at play here, although the text is non-fiction. In other words, some experienced martial artists may read the male students in the book as kind, gentle practitioners who modify their Aikido to support the learning of a physically small and elderly student, against Frentsos Butler's own reading of them as a group who sincerely trying to attack her, only to find themselves repeatedly immobilised by her techniques.

In a similar vein, Frentsos Butler advises her female readers that defences such as "Go for the eyes" are dangerous, as they will "infuriate" the attacker. She advises readers instead to maintain a positive, loving and forgiving attitude towards the attacker, using subtle hip movements and "the unbendable arm" to ward off the attack and "throw him [sic] easily". This approach is unlikely to sound convincing to anyone who has actually experienced violence from a much bigger, stronger attacker; and many knowledgeable self-defence instructors might consider this advice positively dangerous.

The premise of the book is that women have a fundamental advantage over men in self-defence, which can be mobilised via the art of Aikido. Frentsos Butler has come to understand this "fact" because she has been repeatedly told it by dojo colleagues. "I am still told [that I have the advantage] today, no matter how old I get [...]. Yes, I definitely have an advantage" (Frentsos Butler, 2013, p. xxvii).

Again however, an alternative reading is possible, whereby her dojo colleagues are performing a kind, supportive and encouraging (but potentially misleading) role, both in their words, and in their execution of the role of uke.

One of the most disturbing tenets of Frentsos Butler's (2013) argument for this is her essentialist deduction that women are superior to men in Aikido, based on her view that wars are typically started by men, while women are caregivers: "It is easier for her to accept the attacker, because she does not look on it as a way to prove that she is the stronger or the most powerful. Aikido gives her the methods to easily control the attacker without that competitive urge to win under any condition. Aikido is about relationships and the peaceful resolution of conflict." (p. xxix)

This rhetoric clearly has the potential to make female students feel incredibly "empowered". But if they try to apply it in a real life-or-death situation, that feeling of empowerment could well vanish in a moment, to be replaced by devastation.

M. J. Harday (n. d.) shares a personal story of having been seduced by fake empowerment in a “McDojo” (a slang term for a martial arts school that teaches poor quality technique, and focuses above all on generating income). (S)he explains how exciting it felt to be awarded a black belt after two years; and how proud the students all felt for having stuck with the training; “knowing” now that they could now defend themselves. The group carried on studying for their second and third dans, feeling their confidence grow all the time.

“I could have stayed on that happy little path for the rest of my life if not for what happened to someone else. [...] One of the men I started class with, one of the guys who blazed his way through to black belt in 2 years and stuck with it along with me was beaten up in a way I didn’t think anyone could survive. He was a mass of ripped flesh and broken bones and blood, and that was after a few days of healing. He lost the hearing in one ear and for a while they weren’t sure he was going to walk again. All because he was attacked, and he thought he knew how to defend himself.

He says now that he was confident until he was hit with the first punch. All that kata practice hadn’t taught him how to block effectively.

[...] This guy could have died. As it is he will have lasting effects of being beaten for the rest of his life. It was an eye opener for all of us, when we realized none of us had ever even taken a serious punch.”

This story could be said to represent the dark underside of “magical thinking” within the martial arts.

Analysis: How beneficial is “magical thinking” within the martial arts?

- a) Impact on students' happiness and self-esteem – 5/5, for someone who will never need to test their martial art. Frenstos Butler’s joy, confidence and genuine passion for Aikido shine out from every page. The score could be considerably less however, for someone who tries to use their training unsuccessfully, and discovers that it’s deficient.
- b) Financial benefits for clubs (Helping to attract and retain students) – 5/5. Frenstos Butler clearly enjoyed her training, and attended three times a week for many years. Online reviews of Barbara’s book are generally very positive, with comments such as, “I am beginning in Aikido [...] Very inspirational!” “Great book for women!
- c) Practical impact on students' ability to defend themselves from a physical attack - 0/5.
- d) Practical impact on student's sense of “empowerment” in other (non-physical) confrontation situations - 3/5

The question at stake here is not about whether martial arts training in itself can help practitioners deal with everyday conflict scenarios. It certainly can. Staying with the Aikido theme, Quentin Cooke’s anthology (2014) presents many true stories of Aikidoka using their training to stay calm and avert potentially dangerous situations, or “blend” with adverse events such as illness. The question here is whether *overestimating your physical self-defence skills* can help you

manage non-physical conflict. The answer is probably yes. Feeling physically confident and invincible probably does help you to approach life confidently, whether or not it's a true assessment.

Conclusion

Being allowed and encouraged to overestimate one's fighting ability can feel empowering, and add greatly to your self-esteem and quality of life, as long as the student does not encounter a violent situation where this ability will be tested.

2.4 Face Four: Ignoring the realities of violence as empowerment

Martial artists notoriously disagree about what's effective, but one area most serious practitioners agree on is that most "Ladies' self-defence" classes aren't particularly "empowering" or useful. Given that so few rapes or other physical assaults are perpetrated by strangers jumping out of nowhere in the street (the vast majority are carried out by partners, family members, or other people known to the victim) (Office for National Statistics, 2018), it's inexplicable how many courses focus on that scenario.

Even if the attack is from a random stranger, a fun, cursory introduction to a few techniques with untrained, non-resisting, typically female partners, is unlikely to be of much use in the event, perhaps months or years later. What's most worrying, is the false sense of empowerment and confidence these courses may instill, not least because the school's marketing may make unrealistic promises about the course's impact.

There is however a subset of classes that aims to address these shortcomings, broadly known as "feminist self-defence" or "empowerment self-defence". Thoughtful courses within this category seek to offer empowerment, through understanding and addressing the actual realities of the violence that women are more likely to face. One such instructor (Fabricius, 2018), explains:

"Not only do [our] courses educate women on the realities of violence against women, but they also provide information on the gender socialization process that women go through that make them vulnerable to violence in the first place. For example, women are raised to be feminine and demure in their actions, to not cause a scene, to be agreeable – all of these behaviours directly undercut their ability to effectively resist.

[...] Opening participants' eyes and minds to the way that our [...] society has taught them to behave is a crucial step in overcoming the reservations women often have toward using resistance (verbal or physical). I have witnessed this many times in my own classes and workshops. When teenage or adult women join a martial arts or self-defense class, they are reluctant to hit plush pads, to practice with intent, to be sure in their movements, or to even make noise. [...] Yet, when techniques are coupled with education, I see a transformation in these women. They are able to hit with intent and strength, they perform techniques, and they feel powerful.

This is clearly important work, but the issues at stake may run even deeper. Yap (2016) extends insights from Iris Marion Young's classic essay: "Throwing Like a Girl" to argue that norms of "proper" feminine comportment can interfere with women's ability to master self-defence or combat sports in two main ways, as many women are conditioned to internalise two distinct

forms of "I cannot do X" in relation to key abilities needed for the martial arts. The first of these is the ability to control one's own body. This is the issue noted by Fabricius above, whose students find it hard to hit the pads.

Yap (2016) explains that the second barrier is more often unseen by teachers and students. It's the internalised inability (both physical and psychological) to control another person's body. Athletic female martial artists can reach a good level of success in overcoming the first hurdle, and can be seen kicking and punching pads with immense power after a certain amount of training. However, many of these students don't then go on to overcome the second barrier. This is a key point. A student who has overcome barriers to hitting pads may feel extremely empowered, but without crossing the second barrier, their skills are redundant for self-defence.

Furthermore, there is also a third, fundamental barrier to successful self-defence, outside the scope of Yap's paper. That is, that even when male and female martial artists become comfortable with hitting and controlling other people's bodies, these skills are often rendered utterly unusable by the psycho-chemical stress (PCS) effects of real violence (Threadgill, n. d). Ex-door supervisor Matt Stait's memoir *Modern Samurai* (2017) illustrates this through the story of a former colleague, who enters security work with an impressive clutch of martial arts belts, trophies and medals. Stait explains the complex rules and rituals that would have framed the winning of these trophies, and then describes the encounter: "Now the guy at the front door wasn't interested in belts or medals, in fact was interested in nothing but beating Darren a new head.

Right now, Darren was sinking, you could see him withering under the scaffolder's aggression [Darren froze]; the cocktail of chemicals charged around his body and his brain unable to find any similarity in what was happening shut down. His perceived experience of violence could find nothing to cling onto. All that physical training lost in a moment. The scaffolder lunged forward sinking a headbutt into Darren's face, he then grabbed him by the shirt and hit him with four or five swinging punches as Darren fell to the floor and tried to curl up in a ball totally overwhelmed by the ferocity of the attack. By the time help arrived the scaffolder was stamping on his head while holding the railings to get more purchase, spittle flew from his mouth as he [swore] with every stamp. Darren was beaten, and the scaffolder didn't even bow." (Stait, 2017, p. 111-3)

The misconception that physical martial arts training without PCS conditioning is sufficient for effective self-defence is so pervasive as to be accepted as a general truism. It's clearly visible in the book *Aikido for Women*, as outlined in the section above on Magical Thinking. However, it can also appear in formal academic writings on the martial arts.

An example of this is the article, "Becoming Aware of Gendered Embodiment: Female Beginners Learning Aikido" (Lökman, 2011). Lökman's paper identifies herself as one of the beginners included in her ethnographic project. Like Butler, she is told by a high-rank male Aikidoka that women have an advantage over men: "Based on his experience, women are often good in Aikido because we tend to follow 'what comes naturally.' not like 'the men who are trying to show power because they can" (p. 274). In this way, Lökman reaches the "breakthrough realisation" of

her paper: that body power is not necessarily dependent on physical strength. Once this is understood, she writes,

“It was not even clear who was powerful, what type of body was dominant, or even what bodily skills would count [...]. Qualities, like being supple and having rhythm, granted a person a powerful body position regardless of the muscle strength or gender. This led to a complex hierarchy between the muscular bodies and the more supple bodies [...]. The exercise disrupted the commonsensical understanding of who has a powerful body.” (Lökmann, 2011, p. 274).

There is potentially some confusion here, which lies in the fact that Lökmann is taking the dojo's claims to be teaching her self-defence at face value. If Aikido is seen as a graceful form of mindful exercise, but not a martial art - which is a perfectly acceptable position - then it makes sense to present flexibility, grace and light movement as advantages. However, if Aikido is a form of self-defence against physical violence, it may not be correct to weight these factors on a par with size and muscular strength.

Lökmann (2011) herself alludes to this paradox in her own diary notes: “The option of being able to hurt another person is acknowledged by the men in the group. Even though Aikido is considered to be a non-violent martial art [...] “the teacher sometimes finishes a technique by saying ‘from here we could break his jaw or nose’ and threatening the opponent's face with his elbow or fist [...] In these situations I feel like an outsider, observer, since such performances are not done on me, nor am I expected to act in such way.” (p. 277)

I talked about dramatic irony above, and a similar process could apply here. Some experienced martial arts students or instructors might dispute Lökmann's claim that Aikido renders flexibility and grace equally as important as size, aggression and physical strength in self-defence, and instead read the situation as a group of female beginners experiencing a different form of “Aikido” to the experienced men. (There are no male beginners, or experienced female Aikidoka visible in her paper.)

The phenomenon of two different lessons taking place on the same mat at the same time, based on binary gender distinctions, is something I've observed and explored previously (Morgan, 2016b). Differentiation in terms of training realism and outcomes isn't a bad thing in itself, although it shouldn't be automatically linked to gender. In some boxing gyms, some students learn to fight, while others productively engage in a circuit class with boxing elements. The two levels of training are obvious and transparent, are not gender-based, and there's no pretence that the second group is learning to fight.

However, the case I wrote about, involved a confusing form of “doublethink”, whereby the men knew that they were learning self-defence while the women weren't; but the women appeared not to realise this, and also believed they were learning self-defence. This case study would score highly, on the theme of “fake female empowerment”, as the women were incredibly proud of the fact they were learning to “fight” and definitely felt empowered as a result.

This is not to criticise Lökman in any way. Her paper is helpful and insightful, and has presumably been subject to appropriate peer review and other academic quality assurance. Rather, I highlight this point to show how much of a blind spot our lack of understanding of the realities of violence are, such that even a critical, scholarly article does not interrogate it.

Analysis: How beneficial is ignoring the realities of violence?

- a) Impact on students' happiness and self-esteem - 5/5 for someone who will never need to test their martial art. Lökman's paper shows a clear positive impact on the female beginners, who gained "an increased feeling of security outside the dojo" and there is no doubt that the experience of challenging ingrained gender restrictions on bodily movement was incredibly powerful and confidence-building for the women - this is the main focus of Lökman's paper, and she describes it in vivid detail. As with "Magical Thinking" however, this score could be considerably less for a student who tries to use their training unsuccessfully, and discovers that it's deficient.
- b) Financial benefits for clubs (Helping to attract and retain students) – 5/5. The sheer enjoyment and self-development of the female students is tangible in the paper, and makes the training appear attractive.
- c) Practical impact on students' ability to defend themselves from a physical attack - 0/5. This may seem harsh, given that the women studied had potentially started the journey to being able to physically dominate another person, and learned some genuine self-defence strategies such as avoidance and looking boldly at the attacker. However, the statement that this gave them a feeling of increased security, juxtaposed with Lökman's description of the women struggling to embody movements "that have the potential to hurt another body", and avoiding engagement with aggression at this stage of their training, implies that the learning may do more harm (in terms of giving false assurance) than good.
- d) Practical impact on student's sense of "empowerment" in other (non-physical) confrontation situations - 3/5 for someone who will never need to physically test their martial art. Notwithstanding the above critique of Lökman's article, the process of empowerment she describes for the female students is evident.

Conclusion

Ignoring the realities of violence is probably not a deliberate strategy in most cases, but evidence of a pervasive lacuna in our society. Following Bourdieu, Shilling (2012, p. 145) argues that the ability to perpetrate violence is a form of physical or social capital deemed as low value, due to its association with the working class, and the fact that it rarely has significant economic value. The irony here is that this ability to commit physical violence could overpower someone with the highest levels of economic, social or cultural capital, as defined by the dominant classes, even if this ultimately leads to punishment. It's therefore possible that a general blindness to, or denial of, the realities of violence, is grounded in this context. Whatever the reason for it, learning self-defence without an understanding of PCS is potentially dangerous and disempowering for persons of any gender.

2.5 Face Five: Enduring harmful pain, injury and abuse as empowerment

A distressing video circulated on Facebook recently. It showed a grown man training with a young girl. He hit her repeatedly in the face, and finally threw a flurry of punches at her body, while she bravely remained standing and appeared to be trying to endure and survive his abuse. Many comments on this post reflected with regret, that the student presumably thought she was "learning" something here and/or becoming stronger.

This mirrors a story that *Budō Inochi* reader Karen (not her real name) shared with me, and which I share here with her permission. Karen spent thirteen years training at a certain Karate dojo, alongside strong men, and in that time she became incredibly fearless and tough - or so she thought. The men trained hard, and she endured it all for the sake of learning her art. She sometimes went home with her forearms in such a mass of bruise that everyday actions like getting dressed felt miserable. She broke the side of her right hand at one point, and injured it over and over again, to the extent that she now has a permanent lump of bone under the skin, because they were taught to meet yokomen uchi (sideways strike) with a double block, and the blades of her hands were insufficient to stop the stronger attacks. Karen let her sensei verbally abuse her in the name of realism, and throw her to the mat with force constantly; she didn't complain; and her endurance felt empowering.

On one level, this account appears indistinguishable from the archetypal story of any fierce fighter's early training journey. There is certainly a time and a place for hard, even brutal training on such a journey. But like all the faces of "fake empowerment" in this paper, the external phenomena of "fake" and "true" empowerment can resemble each other closely. For Karen, the abuse ultimately became too much to take; she left the club and joined another dojo. She started training, proud of her ability to take hard falls and endure pain. However, her ability to apply the techniques was poor. The sensei said to her eventually: *You've not learned a martial art. You've only learned how to get beaten up.*

Karen realised that he was right. She had literally been trained to endure hard treatment without complaint or resistance, and interpret it as toughness. More worryingly, she had no ability whatsoever to defend herself from a real attack. If anything, her body was now conditioned to accept abuse; and far from achieving the fabled mind-body connection of the martial arts, her mind had learned to disassociate from whatever was happening to her body on the physical plane.

Meanwhile, another *Budō Inochi* reader, Rowan, who suffered horrific domestic violence in childhood, and now uses physical force in his day job, explains to me that his early experiences of physical and mental abuse arguably gave him a "superpower" in the martial arts, including competitions.

"I was so used to getting hit, that sparring in the gym didn't faze me at all. In fact I'd think: Wow, this is cool, they're wearing gloves; and their level of aggression is tame compared to what I've faced before! I could see that others were scared of getting hit, and realised that I had an advantage over them. Then of course in my

job, I've always been constantly subject to people trying to hurt me, and again it represents superb psychological training and desensitization.”

I ask Karen if she can relate to Rowan's narrative. She replies:

“No; not at all. My experiences definitely hurt me psychologically, and made me generally more fearful in the long run. But the weird thing is, my sensei framed it in exactly the same terms that you're saying Rowan used. He used to say: the reason we do this to you is to make you strong. A mugger isn't going to walk up to you politely and say, "Excuse me, please may I have your handbag?" We need to desensitise you to abuse and violence.”

The difference between these two vignettes is in the context, and the different outcomes for these two students. As we explore the matter, Karen adds:

“I felt so strong at that time. There was something so good about being accepted as "one of the boys" by this tough group of men, and being able to stand my ground.”

It's stories like this that make me sometimes feel uneasy when I see people (of any gender) showing off their bruises on Facebook or IRL to show how "hard" they are. Of course we can't really know what's in someone's mind, and whether these bruises represent joyful empowerment, or damaging, denied abuse.

On the topic of enduring pain, another related area is overtraining. I wrote an article (Morgan, 2016a) about how I once injured my knee so badly that I followed medical advice not to train at all for a month or so. I was amazed by the peer pressure I got from my dojo colleagues at that time, who didn't really seem to get it. Indeed, it felt like my choice to follow professional advice not to train for a few weeks was seen as a bit self-indulgent and over the top.

A 2014 study by Safe Kids concluded that young sportspeople both male and female were affected by this kind of culture. It found that 42% of the 1,000 young people surveyed had downplayed or hidden injuries so that they could keep playing. 53% of 1,000 coaches said they'd felt pressure to put injured players back in the game. Myriam Miedzian (2002, p. 201) sees this process begin in childhood, and associated with pressure on boys to be "macho". She deplores the practice of teaching boys who do sport to endure pain and play with it without complaining:

“When a high school football player [...] plays with injuries that if aggravated could lead to permanent damage, he is learning much more than to withstand pain. He is learning to sacrifice his body unnecessarily and to hide all feelings of fear and vulnerability, however warranted they may be. He is also being taught to sacrifice the bodies of others. For if he is willing to risk serious injury to himself, then why shouldn't he be willing to risk injuring others seriously? If he is not allowed to feel sympathy for himself when he is injured or justifiably frightened, why should he feel empathy for anyone else?”

When boys have to hide all feelings of fear and vulnerability in order to be accepted as “real men,” they are learning to take unnecessary risks that will endanger their and others’ health and lives.”

Analysis: What are the benefits of enduring and even celebrating harmful pain, injury or abuse?

- a) Impact on students’ happiness and self-esteem – 1/5. Feeling pride in our ability to endure can feel good, but this can be outweighed by the misery of long-term physical injury and/or emotional abuse.
- b) Financial benefits for clubs (Helping to attract and retain students) – 1/5. The mystique of extreme “hard training” is sometimes idealised, but studies have shown that the actual numbers of people who want to train in this way is much lower than we are led to believe. It’s possible however that a disproportionate number of this group may be attracted to martial arts training. However, encouraging injury and overtraining is an unsustainable long-term business model for a dojo or gym.
- c) Practical impact on students’ ability to defend themselves from a physical attack - 0/5. “Hard” training is essential for learning to fight, but by definition, this is a type of hard training that doesn’t help to achieve that end.
- d) Practical impact on student’s sense of “empowerment” in other (non-physical) confrontation situations - 1/5

Conclusion

The martial arts can have an air of romantic mystery, and within that context it can be easy to be seduced into celebrating harm. However, if this isn’t part of a structured, caring journey to growth, it has little value and can be harmful.

2.6 Face Six: Assuming a “Victim identity” as empowerment

One really distressing red flag I wrote about in the original article on fake female empowerment, was that within minutes of sitting down together in the bar, Katie had launched into telling me her traumatic life history, in full earshot of her dojo brothers. This felt like a very well-rehearsed conversation, and only added to her appearance of complete defencelessness.

I was appalled to see how easily Katie shared this deeply intimate information about herself in a public place, to myself as a complete stranger, while her sensei and fellow students calmly listened, and even chipped in – they’d clearly heard this narrative many times before. To me, this implied that she was being allowed and encouraged to construct an identity within her school based on being a “victim”. This is a seductive role, which can certainly feel “empowering”. Rory Miller (2008) writes:

“There is great power in the victim identity. Instructors and other students go out of their way to be accommodating and gentle. The survivor can often get out of any drill or derail the whole class by admitting her discomfort. [...] The benefits of victim status must be given up to outgrow the victim status [...]. This is hard but critical.

The subtle power in the victim status [...] is power for people who have been made to feel powerless and it can be addictive.” (p. 165-166)

Unfortunately, Katie may find it hard to break out of that role now; as her seniors, juniors, peers and even friends of the club all know her story, and have roundly defined her as a “victim”. She may not realise that the corollary of this is that her actual position within the school is very likely one of powerlessness and being viewed as weak. A student like Katie may also be at risk of harm, if she continues to reinforce and openly broadcast her vulnerability to others in this way. Serial killer and rapist Ted Bundy is said to have claimed that “he could tell a victim by the way she walked down the street, the tilt of her head, the manner in which she carried herself, etc.” Research by Book, Costello & Camilleri (2013) built on previous research showing that victims display characteristic body language, and found that psychopathic offenders tended to use gait as an indicator of a potential victim’s vulnerability (both male and female).

Book et al. (2013) also cite research positing that “identification of oneself as a victim is more influential on body language than is an actual history of victimization.” Therefore, a training environment that encourages assumption of a personal “victim identity” may exacerbate the risk of harm. However, there is a powerful precedent for someone like Katie to proclaim her victimhood as an asset. Frank Furedi argues in “Therapy Culture” (2004) that Western society has become characterised by “a new emotional culture”, whereby “vulnerability is presented as the defining feature of people’s psychology”. He argues that the public sharing of our own vulnerability and broadly-defined “trauma” is highly valorised in Western society, and seen as a sign of emotional intelligence and maturity. Indeed, an unwillingness to share grief and other emotions in public is often labelled as pathological.

The uncritical acceptance of this belief can be seen for example in the movie “Hancock” (2008), which shows the lead character forced to participate in a therapy group while he is in prison. At each session, he refuses to say anything, and appears uncomfortable with the situation. The movie shows him finally opening up to the group, and receiving warm approbation and applause from his peers. This scene is positioned as a watershed moment in Hancock’s rehabilitation, from being a vilified outsider into an accepted member of society.

However, Furedi (2004) enumerates several substantial costs to this celebration of victim status. These costs include a renunciation of self-determination; a belief that we can’t cope with common, routine life events without therapy, self-help books and so on; a fatalistic world view; and simply feeling “powerless and ill”. Furthermore, our increased acceptance or even expectation of widespread mental illness has led to “the extension of the experiences that now warrant exemptions from normal standard of accountability [...]. People who are sick cannot be expected to exercise critical judgment or to accept moral responsibility for their action” (p. 97). In other words, we are increasingly reluctant to hold ourselves and others accountable for our actions.

Vulnerability per se is not disempowering. There is a wealth of contemporary writing on the value of authentic vulnerability in business, leadership, personal relationships and so on (See for example Brown, 2015). As with all the faces of “fake empowerment” in this article, the

expression of vulnerability becomes "fake empowerment" when it is ultimately disempowering for the subject.

Popular blogger Rene Wade (n. d.) makes a helpful distinction between "Low Value" and "High Value" vulnerability. She defines the difference as being whether one uses vulnerability to "take" value (to seek attention, validation or approval from others, or use it to manipulate others in some way), or to "give" value (by connecting emotionally with another person).

The reason I cited Katie's story as an example of fake empowerment, was because her training was reinforcing her embeddness in a harmful "victim culture" (Miller), "emotional culture" (Furedi) or "Low Value Vulnerability" (Wade) - yet she sincerely believed (and was encouraged by her dojo to believe) that this training had rendered her an invincible "killing machine". The incongruence between her aggressive verbal claims about her martial prowess (she confided in me: "I hope no one ever attacks me; but not because I'm scared of getting attacked. I'm just so scared of what I might do to them"), and the extreme lack of confidence displayed by her body language, lack of power on the mat, and other vulnerable behaviours, felt truly disturbing.

Analysis: How beneficial is a "Victim Identity" in the dojo?

- a) Impact on students' happiness and self-esteem – 1/5. There can be a certain pleasure in receiving intensive attention and care. However, being exempted from the self-discipline elements of martial arts training risks missing out on a powerful source of personal well-being, and healing where relevant.
- b) Financial benefits for clubs (Helping to attract and retain students) – 5/5. If we accept Furedi's analysis, our emotional culture is embedded in the powerful economic imperatives of capitalism. One manifestation of this is a rapid growth in what he calls "the professionalism of everyday life", whereby people compensate for the breakdown of traditional social support structures by paying others to support them deal with relationships, home and work problems, grief, self-improvement and so on (p. 85). An unscrupulous martial arts instructor would easily be able to exploit this contemporary need. This is obviously not to say that all instructors who support "vulnerable" students are unscrupulous, or that martial arts training can't be hugely beneficial for students suffering from trauma or other deep vulnerability.
- c) Practical impact on students' ability to defend themselves from a physical attack - 0/5. As with several other of these faces of "fake empowerment", assuming a "victim identity" may in fact exacerbate vulnerability in an attack situation.
- d) Practical impact on student's sense of "empowerment" in other (non-physical) confrontation situations – 0/5. Relying on the power of the "victim Identity" only works when the people you interact choose to play that game along with you, and treat you with the desired kindness; not all people will do this.

Conclusion

Promoting and even celebrating one's own status as a victim is arguably the polar opposite of what martial arts training ideally sets out to achieve; a disciplined accountable, empowered individual with the agency to protect themselves.

However, it is a popular stance to take in current society, and a club that encourages this narrative may be more attractive to some students than one which attempts to enforce "accountability" in a way perceived as too harsh.

3 Conclusion

The total scores of the MCDA are as follows:

	a. Impact on students' happiness and self-esteem	b. Financial benefits for clubs (Helping to attract and retain students)	c. Practical impact on students' ability to defend themselves from a physical attack	d. Practical impact on student's ability to deal with non-physical conflict
1.Beauty/fitness as empowerment	3	5	0	3
2.Selfishness/materialism as empowerment	3	5	0	3
3.Magical thinking as empowerment	5	5	0	3
4.Ignoring the realities of violence as empowerment	5	5	0	3
5.Enduring pain and abuse as empowerment	1	1	0	1
6.The "Victim Identity" as empowerment	1	5	0	0
TOTAL	18	26	0	13

As noted in the Introduction, a formal MCDA would have weighted each criteria (the four headings (a)-(d) running across the top of the table) for importance, and used this weighting to calculate a total score for each of the options (here presented as six "faces" of fake female empowerment. However, the message of this paper is that the weighting of these actually is the central question at stake, to determine whether "fake female empowerment" (as illustrated through these six "faces") is a positive or negative thing.

The scoring shows that for a dojo or gym owner who prioritises financial profit for the dojo, fake female empowerment could be seen as highly desirable, due to its ability to attract and retain a steady stream of students. This is not to say that maximising profit is a bad thing, although the

topic makes some martial arts instructors uneasy. My friend Jamie (a full-time instructor) explains:

“I basically have three tiers of students. The largest group is those who just want to do it for fun and general fitness. My ladies only classes definitely fall into this category. They're not especially committed, and they can be quite transient, but most of my income is from this group.

The second tier is those students who have a specific goal in mind. They may want to get a black belt, or lose a considerable amount of weight, or have some other self-development goal in mind. This group is smaller than the first tier - they're more interesting to teach, but my real passion is in teaching the third tier. This is the small number of students who are insanely committed and hard-working, and want to learn the complete art - all the physical skills, the mental side and so on. It's a lifestyle for them. But I can only teach these students because the first and second tiers keep my doors open. So I wouldn't belittle them at all.

What I would say though, is that I'm totally upfront with my 'tier one' students. I tell them that they're basically attending a fitness class, with elements of kick boxing, but that they're absolutely not learning self-defence. What makes me angry, is these classes that pretend they're teaching people how to defend themselves, when they absolutely know that it's a lie.

So I do care about getting income, obviously. But I don't think that capitalising on what you're calling "fake female empowerment" should ever play a part in that; it's despicable and makes me furious.”

Equally, if you believe that teaching women to defend themselves physically is the most important issue at stake here, you would see no value in "fake female empowerment" at all; indeed you would deplore it as Jamie does. However, it's not black and white. As we've already seen, many people don't want to learn to fight or defend themselves; and that's fine. It only stops being fine when the boundaries are blurred, and students believe they're learning these skills when they're not.

I believe that there are two possible directions to take here. Either openly teach and practise your art as being not martial, and focus on its other benefits; or teach/study something that's martially effective, maintaining high standards, realistic expectations and an understanding of limits. But I would urge against "mixing and matching" elements from the two approaches, as this can be dangerous, unfair and ultimately irresponsible.

Whether you're a student, a teacher, or both, I hope this has given you some ideas to reflect on and critique what "empowerment" looks like within your own school; and consider the part you might play in ensuring that you and your dojo colleagues have access to the most "real" version possible...

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