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Towards the “Undoing” of Gender in Mixed-Sex Martial Arts and Combat Sports

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Abstract: This paper addresses sex integration in martial arts and combat sports, discussing the implications of mixed-sex training for challenging orthodox Western constructions of gender. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 37 long-term martial arts practitioners from around the English East Midlands between 2007–2011, the paper argues that restrictive, essentialist and hierarchal conceptions of sex difference can be challenged through integrated training practices. The paper advocates the “undoing” of gender in this regard as helping to build a more progressive, inclusive and liberal form of physical culture, seen as a key potential of sex-integrated training. To that end, the paper makes a number of proposals for instructors and practitioners interested in developing such inclusive environments in their own clubs and training settings.

Keywords: Co-ed; combat sports; gender; integrated; martial arts; sex

1. Introduction

For many who practice martial arts and combat sports (MACS) [1] in contemporary Western societies, the presence of men and women in the same training spaces, or in joint classes, is not uncommon. Indeed, throughout my own experience in training at a variety of disciplines, sex integration in lessons has been the norm. Despite the general, historical tendency in Western societies for most sports and physical education practices to be either sex-segregated or heavily gendered [2] (*i.e.*, considered “masculine” or “feminine”, and thus thought only suitable for men or women respectively), the practice of many MACS routinely breaks this trend.

In this paper, I discuss the potential outcomes of integrated training, with a focus on how experiences of mixed-sex MACS can lead practitioners to challenge socially dominant ideas about “natural” sex differences, and the wider culture of “gender injustice” [3] which these ideas broadly support. I argue that, because of such possibilities, instructors and practitioners within mixed-sex clubs can help to tackle this sexism, and in so doing, I suggest a number of proposals for practical action which may enable this potential to be met. Before turning to this task, I begin by outlining the theoretical perspective I use to make sense of sex integration, and briefly discuss its application in other sports/physical activity settings.

2. Theoretical Perspective: “Doing” and “Undoing” Gender

Having become highly influential in various academic fields since its first publication in 1987, West and Zimmerman’s paper, “*Doing Gender*” [4], forwarded the theory that gender is something which people continually and actively accomplish through performance in social interactions, rather than a fixed set of attributes which are genetically determined or set during early childhood socialization. This theory suggests that people act in ways which conform to (or, in some cases, oppose) culturally acceptable types of masculinity and femininity; rather than “being” a certain gender, people “do” gender relative to these socially recognized ideals, as a way of establishing their social identities. In this regard, gender is constructed as a way of behaving which is based upon and communicates things about one’s sex, and may include such elements as ways of dressing, manners of speech, types of work, adherence to particular moral principles, and so on. According to West and Zimmerman [4] (p. 127), performing gender typically involves managing one’s behavior “in light of socially normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one’s sex category”; in other words, continual efforts to convince others (as well as oneself) that one is a “real” man or woman, relative to cultural stereotypes of what such a “real” man or woman should be like. Since these ideal types of behavior are very widely practiced by many members of society, and are often embodied or explained with reference to biology, they are often thought to derive from unchangeable, universal, “natural” differences between the sexes. Yet this “performative” model of gender suggests that many such differences are actually produced by significant, if not always consciously deliberate, efforts on the part of men and women, which only *appear* to be “natural” given their continual, repetitive character, and widespread acceptance across many different social contexts [5–7].

Within this perspective, the modes of gender commonly practiced, and thus widely recognized as important for “real” men and women to engage with/embody, are seen to support a hierarchy between the sexes which largely privileges men at the expense of women. For instance, so-called “men’s work” traditionally involves higher pay and greater cultural prestige than supposed “women’s work” [7,8]. Indeed, many traditional ideals of femininity, which women continue to be held accountable to in contemporary Western societies, often directly or indirectly emphasize physical or intellectual inferiority to, economic dependence upon, and sexual availability to men [8–11]. In this way, “feminine”, “real” women continue to be seen as, in Simone de Beauvoir’s famous words, “the second sex” [12], while men remain largely privileged thanks to the effects of both men’s and women’s “doing” of their supposedly “correct” gender. Feminist writers have therefore argued that the “doing” of gender in traditionally-defined ways has meant that individual people are often (unknowingly)

complicit in the on-going existence of sexual inequality [7,13]. And, inasmuch as gender continues to be constructed and performed in ways that confirm the essentialist logic of “natural” differences, this effectively insulates male privilege from political criticism, masking it behind a veneer of biological inevitability.

However, scholars using the “doing gender” perspective also suggest that this arrangement might be challenged, because just as gender is “done” through people’s social performances, it can also be “undone” in similar ways [13,14]. Indeed, as West and Zimmerman [15] more recently clarified, “(if) the gender attributes deployed as a basis of maintaining men’s hegemony are social products, they are subject to social change (however challenging such change may be)” (p. 114). In this regard, certain social interactions can work to disrupt fundamental conceptions of sexual difference, re-shaping women’s and men’s on-going performances of gender in ways which might challenge sex inequalities. In her article entitled “*Undoing Gender*”, Deutsch [14] proposed this term be used specifically to refer to “social interactions that reduce gender difference” (p. 122), thus functioning as forms of resistance to sexual inequity; and, according to theorists such as Judith Butler [5], whose work echoes West and Zimmerman’s arguments within a poststructuralist frame, breaking from performances of “normal” gender is an important first step in accomplishing this. For Butler, non-conformist gender practices help to reveal that what might have previously been thought of as naturally fixed, immutable differences between men and women are actually more changeable and flexible than otherwise imagined:

The strange, the incoherent, that which falls “outside”, gives us a way of understanding the taken-for-granted world of sexual categorization as a constructed one, indeed, as one that might well be constructed differently [5] (p. 149).

As such, Risman [13] argues that gender can be seen to be undone “when the essentialism of binary distinctions between people based on sex category is challenged” (p. 83). Indeed, by recognizing that gender exists as a constructed (and thus, re-constructible/changeable) phenomenon, individual people may be more able to act in ways which challenge the assumption that strictly differentiated modes of masculinity and femininity are naturally appropriate ways for men and women to behave, and thus that the inequitable, sexist social arrangements built upon them are appropriate, biologically inevitable ways to live. For those interested in challenging the otherwise “naturalized” conditions of sexual inequality, finding ways to highlight sexual difference as something which is socially constructed via the doing of gender thereby becomes an important task.

Integrated Sport and the “Undoing” of Gender

Throughout much of the sociological literature on sport, physical education, and related activities, the presence of traditional, sexist ways of doing gender have been frequently and consistently highlighted [6,16–19], leading some scholars to conclude that “gender divisions and men’s superiority are more naturalized in sport than perhaps any other institution” in society [20] (p. 228). Yet, along with criticizing the largely sexist way in which many sporting practices are organized, feminist researchers have also suggested ways of changing them as a potential form of resistance against this inequality. Principally, this has involved advocating greater opportunities for women’s involvement in

sports as a key, progressive move in challenging stereotypes of women as “naturally” weak, frail, and non-competitive [21–25].

Recently, this line of argument has turned to the question of sex integration, as researchers have begun to explore the potential of integration in helping to challenge traditional, sexist ways of doing gender, and the culture of male privilege that these support [2,3,20,26]. Such work has identified integration as something of a “final frontier” in the move towards sex equality in/through sport, because the message historically embedded in various facets of gender-differentiated, sex-segregated sports cultures—that “men are strong” and “women are weak” [2,18,24]—can be profoundly challenged when women and men practice together or compete against one-another as equals in physical contests. Advocates of sex-integrated sports have thereby stressed that “playing with the boys should be an option, if not the norm, for all girls and women, if (women) are to become *what (they) ought to be*” [2] (p. 260, original emphasis). In this way, such scholars consider integrated sports activities to potentially contribute towards the “undoing” of gender [27]. By encouraging behaviors which directly refute ideas about supposedly natural sex differences, integrated sports provide the chance to physically perform in ways which differ markedly from stereotypical ideals of masculinity and femininity, and can lead practitioners to construct understandings of gender which stand outside of the normal, everyday interactions taken to support a broad culture of inequality between the sexes [7,14].

So far, a small number of empirical studies of integrated sport and related activities, including cheerleading [28], equestrianism [29], physical education [27], soccer [30], and softball [31,32], have identified both possibilities and problems in this regard. Within this small but growing body of research, sports practitioners are variously seen to challenge *and* reproduce sexist ways of doing gender. Research into MACS has also begun to pay attention to such issues, such as in Guérandel and Mennesson’s [33] study of practitioners’ interactions within mixed-sex judo training, Miller’s [34] account of young children’s wrestling experiences, and McNaughton’s [35] autoethnography on muay thai [36]. With the exception of these papers, the potential for sex integration in MACS to promote the “undoing” of gender hierarchies remains relatively under-researched at present and, moreover, no attempts have yet been made to formulate recommendations for practitioners interested in exploring this possibility within their own training [37]. Therefore, having accounted for some of the problematic elements of mixed-sex MACS elsewhere [38,39], in this article I discuss how experiences of integrated training can involve the “undoing” of gender, towards the tentative development of a set of such recommendations.

3. Methods

My research into sex integration in MACS took place from 2007–2011, during which time I explored the experiences of men and women training together within various fighting disciplines. As well as working among members of my own martial arts club and reflecting on my personal experiences of training [38], I branched out to a number of other schools located in three cities in the East Midlands region of England, where I observed others’ training practices and conducted qualitative, semi-structured interviews with a total of 37 long-term practitioners [40] and instructors. Using a snowball sampling method [41], I recruited and interviewed martial artists practicing a range of styles, including Brazilian jiu-jitsu (BJJ), choi kwang do, judo, kickboxing, mixed martial arts

(MMA), muay thai, shotokan karate, and taekwondo. According to these interviewees, and based on observations made while visiting various training sites and clubs, the participation rates among men and women in their classes varied, with some having roughly even proportions, and others being largely (in the words of many interviewees) “male dominated”. While all clubs represented in this sample had both male and female members, exact numbers/sex ratios were not measured, owing to the reluctance of head instructors at some schools to share membership information, and the fact that my contact with many clubs was more often than not limited to specific interviewees who did not have this knowledge. However, despite membership differences, and stylistic and sub-cultural variations existing between the diverse arts and specific schools represented here, I found that a number of very similar experiences emerged from within them regarding the integration of men and women in training and competition, and therefore decided to present my findings as a general discussion of MACS, rather than focus on comparing specific styles/schools against one another.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary method of data collection for their ability to target specific information through a flexible, relatively open-ended conversational style, providing each interviewee with a degree of freedom to account for personally meaningful, unique experiences and perspectives, but without losing sight of the specific aims of the study [42]. Interviews were conducted at times and places chosen by the interviewees, often within or near to clubs/training centers, and were all recorded on a digital voice recorder. I then subsequently transcribed each interview verbatim, to enhance familiarization with the data [42]. These transcripts were then thematically coded, with initial, inductively-generated codes attached to findings throughout. Several overarching themes were then identified from these codes, and reviewed with respect to the theoretical considerations outlined above [43]. While a variety of themes concerned with how gender is “done” or “undone” during mixed-sex practice emerged from the analysis of these interviews [44], in this article I have prioritized those which I feel best illustrated the “undoing” of gender, and as such, the following sections are organized around a set of three recommendations for instructors and practitioners who are interested in accomplishing such ends within their clubs. Throughout the remainder of this paper, I present excerpts from my interviews to illustrate these points, while identifying each interviewee by a pseudonym which they were asked to nominate for themselves (to protect anonymity in line with the conditions of ethical clearance granted for the study), along with their ages and the MACS discipline(s) they were training in at the time of interview.

4. “Undoing” Gender in Integrated MACS

As stated at the outset, men and women sharing the same training spaces, or even taking the same classes, is not uncommon in contemporary MACS. That this is quite different to the sex-segregated training cultures of many (if not most) contemporary forms of sport/physical recreation, does not, however, guarantee that it represents a great step forward for sex equality—as authors such as Hills and Crosston [27], Dashper [29] and Henry and Comeaux [30] have identified with respect to sex integration in other activities. Rather, it is the ways in which gender is done/undone (and thus inequitable sex difference socially constructed/deconstructed) within these relatively integrated environments, which determines how well they can pose a challenge to traditional, sexist understandings of difference.

4.1. Issues of “Ownership”: Women Teaching Fighting Skills

Firstly, the degree to which women hold positions of seniority in clubs, either as respected, experienced “senior” members, or within a school’s formal, pedagogical structure (*i.e.*, instructors, assistant coaches, *etc.*), was typically felt to be of considerable importance by many interviewees, both male and female. This principally involved challenging stereotypes of MACS participation as a “manly”/masculine pastime, through both the visibility of women’s competence as tough, skilled martial artists, but also through the fact that women might take positions of authority within clubs which men (and other women) could come to respect.

Senior female martial artists were considered important in clubs because they serve as visible demonstrators of the potential of women’s abilities, which are otherwise obscured within naturalizing stereotypes exclusively linking contact-based sports and physical activities—and fighting disciplines in particular—with men and masculinity. Despite the rejection of the idea by all of my interviewees, it was widely acknowledged that many inexperienced, new members at their clubs would see MACS as “masculine” or “manly” practices. Often, they noted that this could particularly discourage newer female members, thanks to the fact that many clubs remained numerically “male dominated”, thus appearing to be more-or-less predominantly activities “for men”. Therefore, the high visibility of senior female members in such settings was thought to be important for the retention, and inspiration, of women who wanted to take up any given discipline:

I see it as my number-one role at the moment, inspiring the talented young girls who come to the club... And I think one of the best ways to do that is to show what I can do, and that usually means practice with the men, demonstrate to everyone that women can be just as good at jiu-jitsu. (Louise, 32, BJJ)

I think my driving force was having Evelyn join the club when I did, because she had done martial arts before and you could see like, the effort she puts in... that was a real benefit because with her and with the two main senior girls in the club, that sort of drove me to say, well yeah, why can’t we be just as good as the guys? (Michelle, 26, kung fu)

In addition to serving as role models for inexperienced (and often outnumbered) women, others recognized the importance of senior female martial artists in also helping men to move past stereotypical notions of martial artistry as a “masculine” pastime, and particularly in encouraging them to take their female training partners seriously:

Because women are doing (kickboxing) just as much as men these days, you know, getting quite good at it and all that, it makes you think that maybe... you know, you can’t say this is manly nowadays. (Claude, 26, kickboxing)

When (men) actually see what I can do, it’s amazing the amount of, like how people’s perceptions change, and then all of a sudden they will listen to you... One week they’re not interested and then they’ve seen you do something awesome and they want to listen. (Helen, 29, kickboxing)

Secondly, the significance of female instructors is important to grasp here, as while most MACS participants were thought to quickly reject the view that fighting arts were “not for girls” after

experiencing integrated training, accepting female instructors was, particularly among men, often a different matter. While contemporary gender ideals seem flexible enough to permit women's entry into cultural spaces otherwise typically considered "masculine", allowing them to assume positions of authority over men within those spaces is often a more difficult proposition for some to accept. Just as this is the case with regard to "the glass ceiling" in many business contexts, so too is it typical in sports activities, and is reported to be something of a problem for female sports coaches [45,46]. This was indicated by many of the women I interviewed who had worked as instructors:

I do really enjoy teaching people, so long as they want to be taught... Sometimes there are people who don't really listen... like some big guy who doesn't think he needs to be taught to fight by a girl. (Sara, 23, MMA/kickboxing)

The boys are much less receptive, especially when I'm criticizing their sparring, I find that a lot. I find it quite frustrating that they don't listen to my advice... It's like they're hearing it from a girl, a girl criticizing their fighting, and they're not interested in listening to that. (Beth, 24, kung fu)

However, for some of the men I interviewed, female instructors were not always considered a problem. Typically among these men, early or on-going experiences of being coached by women had significantly helped to shape their perspectives in ways that, unlike some others, made them more open and receptive towards female instructors:

I don't seem to remember (learning from a woman) crossing my mind as being an issue. When I was younger the club I trained at had a female instructor so maybe that helped to make me see that anyone can do this, get to that level. (David, 23, kung fu/jiu-jitsu)

This suggests that the visibility of women within the teaching structures of clubs might be particularly important for shaping young men's (as well as young women's) understandings of gender appropriateness in MACS, and that long-term exposure to talented female instructors eventually makes women teaching men to fight appear "normal".

In making sense of this problem, the root belief that fighting is a "masculine" activity, and therefore men are the best people from whom to learn how to fight, was thought to be central to some men's reluctance to listen to or learn from female instructors; the doing of gender according to such logic would deny individual women the ability to teach, and foreclose on the symbolic value of female authority figures within this cultural sphere. While many experienced practitioners of MACS are quick to argue that their practices are not simply "ways of fighting", physically overcoming a resisting opponent (which, philosophical/ethical debates momentarily set aside, is what fighting typically involves) nevertheless remains central to the practice of all competitive or self-defense-oriented disciplines. As such, if the social interactions in integrated MACS always involve women learning from men but never vice-versa, then it is difficult to suggest that gender is being "undone"; the exclusive link between fighting, men and naturalized masculinity—an important element of sexist conceptions of male superiority [47,48]—is at least partially preserved. On the other hand, when women in mixed environments take instructing positions, demonstrate techniques, critique others' sparring, *etc.*, this implicit "ownership" of MACS by men is challenged; such practices foreground (some) women's superiority as fighters/martial artists to (at least some) men [49]. Instructor-student

relationships formed on this basis therefore effectively invite the “undoing” of gender, as male students concede to female instructors’ authority over a personally and symbolically empowering practice—fighting—which is often otherwise thought of as the exclusive preserve of men.

Therefore, my first recommendation for instructors interested in MACS as a way to “undo” gender would be to *look for ways in which to highlight the abilities of “senior” female practitioners whenever possible, particularly doing so in ways which are visible among younger members of clubs*. This might include asking for female volunteers to help demonstrate techniques, or making good use of suitably qualified female instructors, for instance. By refusing to place only men at the pedagogical center of training spaces, this helps to challenge the notion of MACS as “manly” activities, but can also lead practitioners to adopt more inclusive and open attitudes towards practicing with and learning from a wider variety of training partners and instructors.

4.2. “Fellow Martial Artists”: Sex Becoming Incidental

While mixed-sex classes are common across many MACS disciplines (the majority of my interviewees had never trained in sex-exclusive clubs, for instance), integrated training in these environments often involves moments of segregation, either deliberately instigated by instructors or informally arising out of gendered interactions between practitioners. Often criticized by those in my study as an inappropriate way to train, these typically involve instructors using different exercises or practices for male and female students, and/or the reluctance of some men to engage with female partners in sparring/rolling [50], or other practices involving physical contact [39].

Reported by many interviewees, the use of differentiated exercise programs for male and female practitioners was often discussed as an “outdated” practice, which had “no place” in any contemporary fitness program, least of all in martial arts. Here, “girl press-ups” (push-ups) were mentioned by several, where women were advised to place their knees on the ground when performing the classic callisthenic exercise. The message contained within the moniker “girl” is simple enough—since less bodyweight is lifted in this adapted movement, less strength is required, inferring that girls/women are inevitably weaker and less capable than boys/men [2,22]. With regard to this specific example as well as others, many women were openly critical of being held to lower standards than men, while some noted the potentially harmful consequences of encouraging women to expect less of themselves:

We do those “girl press-ups” and to be honest I really don’t like that, when the other instructors say “girls, do it on your knees”. I mean they can if they want but I always do the full ones, I don’t want half-training, you know? ...We (shouldn’t) make things different and make it look like women need to do a softer or weaker thing because that would really go against a lot of what kung fu is about. (Evelyn, 25, kung fu)

I think some of the girls do that, you know, if the coach isn’t pushing them to do (full exercises) because they’re girls, they’ll slack off because they can get away with it... And then they wonder why they lose (in competitions)! (Marie, 30, kickboxing)

By doing gender in ways which visibly and openly emphasize men’s supposedly inevitable strength advantages within mixed groups, integrated training can actually help to reinforce sexist notions of male superiority by providing less demanding training and encouraging lower aspirations for women.

This fosters acceptance of the idea that *all* women are *always* less capable than *all* men; a notion that not only glosses over the vast differences in ability between individuals, but is also strongly at odds with the feminist value of women's participation in MACS for self-defense [47,51–53].

However, differentiated exercise programs were considered far less of a problem by most of my interviewees than another issue emerging out of integrated training settings. While all partnered MACS practice involves a degree of restraint in both training and competitive fighting, particularly when one is working with a new or inexperienced partner, which is most often judged relative to weight/strength/conditioning differences, the tendency for men to *excessively* restrain themselves when practicing with (or competing against) women was reported as a common problem across a wide range of MACS disciplines. Typically understood as an effect of men's sense of chivalry, the reluctance or refusal to train "properly" with female partners for fear of hurting them was, for many, a deeply ingrained, sometimes viscerally-felt problem:

I feel really uncomfortable that I could hurt a woman in that way, even if she's asking me to do it I feel really uncomfortable, you know, physically uncomfortable with doing that.
(Steve, 30, karate/kung fu)

Despite such men's best intentions in not wanting to cause harm, their reluctance to apply the same degree of force as with male partners nevertheless became profoundly frustrating for some women. Interpreted as patronizing and harmful to their sense of belonging within clubs, most importantly this was seen to impede the progressive development of their combative abilities and thereby undermine their participation in MACS:

I get so annoyed when it gets to the point where they just won't spar with me properly, it's really annoying because they don't think I'm strong enough just because I'm a girl... I know they are looking out for me but how am I ever going to defend myself if I don't get good sparring? (Keeley, 26, kickboxing)

I need to get used to being hit, and especially for my first fight, you know, you gotta get used to getting hit, you can't block or avoid every punch that comes your way, you gotta take it and move on... you get that false sense of security and you believe you're doing better than you are. (Helen, 29, kickboxing)

In this latter regard, men's excessive "holding back" was a particular problem for women who either wanted to compete at tournaments, or were training to develop "realistic" self-defense skills, becoming especially so when they were one of only a small number of women within their clubs. In such instances, sparring/rolling or otherwise practicing with male partners was a practical necessity, given that female partners of adequate ability were either unavailable, or in a different weight class. Because of the general under-representation of women in competitive participation, some had even competed against men at tournaments, and told stories of how such experiences were fraught with gendered anxiety:

(The grappling tournament organizer) waited for (the male under-65kg competitors) to walk out and then he said... "does anybody wanna fight this girl? She's 58 kilos, been fighting for this amount of time", which nobody else gets, you know, nobody else gets a

history of what their opponents have done, stuff like that. So one guy from my gym said yeah, but everybody else said no, they all stood there, heads down, didn't wanna look me in the eye... Not all competitions are like that, but some of them are a bit like, stuck in the past. (Rachel, 22, BJJ/MMA)

While mixed-sex competitive engagements remained rare enough to have only been experienced by a few of my interviewees, problems of a similar nature in training were far more commonplace and persistent. However, some interviewees also told how they had overcome such difficulties, enabling them to practice at the same level of intensity with both women and men. In this regard, the degree of familiarity that practitioners had with *physically engaging* with a variety of partners was seen to be crucial. While visible demonstrations of the abilities of women helped overcome the supposedly masculine image of MACS, both men and women recognized that the deeply-held anxiety that some men felt toward "hitting women" had to be overcome principally through *physical* lessons, hard-learned on the mat:

I remember when I first got beaten (in sparring) by a girl, she knocked me out I guess, elbowed me in the head. And that was a bit of a moment when I thought well, I should definitely take (women) more seriously and not feel weird about (hitting them) when they can hit like that! (Simon, 27, karate)

If they've seriously got a problem that they don't wanna hurt me then well that's their problem and not mine, I'm still gonna go at them... I've been kicked in the head and punched and stuff, like anyone. I think they see that they can do it to me after I do it to them a few times! (Evelyn, 25, kung fu)

In this regard, and while still recognizing that differences in size, strength and experience between individual training partners needed to be accounted for, many interviewees described how, following these first-hand experiences, they had gradually come to ignore sex as a factor when engaging in sparring, rolling, or related practices:

Once I trained with my instructor's wife, and she used to be a British champion, she could punch me all over the ring, and I was fine with that. And we were joking because she'd been sparring one of the (best male) fighters in the gym and he knocked her clean out, and it's like, that could've happened to a guy, could've happened to a girl, there's a kind of acceptance, you know, "fuck it, it happens". (Ed, 29, muay thai)

I (no longer) see it as hitting a girl, you see it as hitting another martial artist... I knew about the capabilities of the people I was sparring with because I'd felt them first-hand... (This experience) forces you to look at women differently. (Jack, 34, kung fu)

Therefore, finding ways in which to encourage men to overcome their aversion to "hitting women" is considered important in the development of training environments which help talented female martial artists to improve their abilities, especially so in the absence of suitable female training partners or competitive opponents. Similar to how women's subjectivity can be altered through the physicality of MACS training [47,54], this changing of men's minds was thought to principally occur

following first-hand, physical experience of the abilities of women who, given the chance, were able to demonstrate the potential toughness and strength which any martial artist might possess.

The belief in innate/inevitable, “natural” female weakness relative to male strength can be seen to underlie the forms of segregation emerging within integrated training settings. Putting these beliefs into practice—for instance when instructors ask women to do lighter forms of exercise, or men withhold from sparring at a required intensity with female partners—represents what West and Zimmerman [4] refer to as the need to remain accountable to codes of propriety surrounding dominant modes of gender. Such behavior actually helps to reinforce these ideas and, extrapolated over time, writes this gender logic into the bodies of practitioners. These then exert a naturalizing effect, working as a self-fulfilling prophecy as gender is done in ways that encourage men to become stronger, tougher and better at fighting, but leave women behind or, worse, encourage the development of a “false sense of security”, which undermines the purpose of training for either competition or self-defense. But when sex is not considered a decisive factor in the kinds of training one will do, and instructors/training partners make such decisions based on more directly relevant criteria (weight, strength, experience, *etc.*), mixed-sex training environments can actually bring to light the otherwise hidden potentials for similarity between men and women—not to mention being generally beneficial for the development of female fighters in otherwise “male-dominated” clubs. Furthermore, they can lead to practitioners doing away with sex as a primary means of identification, as the shared identity of “martial artist” replaces “man” or “woman” within training encounters. As Bryson [21] states, such “challenges to the construction of women... as inferior are vital for women’s sense of their own power as well as necessary to alter men’s perception” (p. 182); the physicality of MACS becomes one such moment of challenge, potentially leading to the “undoing” of gender within integrated settings.

To that end, my second recommendation is for *instructors and practitioners to encourage integration in training as much as possible, including the more physically intense, partnered activities, such as sparring*. This does not necessarily involve insisting on pairing men with women, nor does it mean that other (physical) differences between individual practitioners ought to be ignored for the sake of integration—height, weight, strength, conditioning, and experience remain crucial determining factors for the sake of safe and effective practice, and should not be overlooked. Rather, it means that sex by itself ought to be seen as an incidental characteristic, and not taken as the basis for deciding the format of training practices.

4.3. “Case-By-Case”: Caution, Sensitivity, and Pacing Change

Despite how they may seem to (some) seasoned martial artists, it remains important to recognize that integrated training practices nevertheless stand outside of the everyday experiences and expectations of many others, possibly to the point of being unseemly or off-putting. Particularly, the prospect of integrated sparring may appear especially unsettling for many novices in MACS, who may not be predisposed towards challenging traditional forms of gender propriety, nor the notions of “natural” sex difference built upon them as discussed above.

Many of my interviewees shared this recognition. They told how male MACS novices may experience considerable awkwardness with having women as training partners, while for female novices, being asked to practice fighting techniques with men, or even share the same training spaces,

may at first appear intimidating. This meant that prompting newer practitioners to accept integration as “normal” needed to be carefully approached, and in this regard, it was seen to echo the gradual advancement of MACS training more generally. For example, full- or semi-contact sparring is rarely thrust upon newcomers prior to technique drilling or lighter forms of partnered work, as instructors ensure their students do not try to “run before they can walk”. Particularly for inexperienced women, gradually developing combative dispositions, as well as sex integration, needed to be carefully balanced with the needs of “not putting off” these newcomers:

One of the big difficulties I find (now) is that I don't want the (inexperienced) girls to get turned off by the aggression that I show them. But at the same time I want them to do the same sort of aggression, so it's quite difficult to see that and get it right... Every time I punch them in the face I'll be like, “is that ok? Is that alright?” I need to make sure of that. (Sylvia, 19, MMA/muay thai)

We have to think about scaring women away so (instructors) keep (certain drills) separate to begin with, it makes sense to (women) like that... They'd pair up with other girls first, just to get used to getting hit, that sort of thing. (Claude, 26, kickboxing)

Ultimately, while many more experienced, senior female martial artists (and particularly those who fought competitively) were keen to train at higher intensities with male partners, these were not seen to represent all women training in MACS. Developing ever-higher levels of combative ability was not the object of training for all women in their clubs—nor, indeed, for all men—such that resolving issues of integration and segregation for the sake of competitive preparation (as outlined above) did not carry the same importance for everyone. Furthermore, although many of the women and men I spoke to felt positive about changes in their gendered performances in training, and concurrently their renewed perceptions of sex difference, it was clear that not all people were willing to accept such things.

Indeed, despite my own and others' advocacy of the physical equality implied within integrated training [2,35], it would be unfair to suggest that this stands as a universally-shared, positive outcome to which all men and women *should* aspire. For instance, some interviewees told how training with particular others, specifically those who held religious convictions concerning either different social roles for men and women, or the sexual propriety of male-female touch, remained uncomfortable with integrated training:

There's an ethnic issue as well there, I find. When we have Muslim men in (training), they won't even acknowledge me and they won't listen to anything that I tell them. (Helen, 29, kickboxing)

When you're teaching technique you sometimes might touch and move people's limbs or their body, and it's just something I've been very mindful of with some of the women who we have, and like, the religious ones especially, because they probably don't want me to directly touch them... People have boundaries that you might not have or agree with but you still need to respect those boundaries as a coach. (Paul, 29, kung fu)

Similar hesitance to touch women's bodies was also noted by a small number of interviewees, with respect to the possibility that some women, particularly those seeking self-defense instruction, may

have experienced sexual abuse or other violence, making male-to-female touch in particular a difficult issue. As such, the importance of being cautious with practices that might be troubling for specific members of their clubs was often highlighted. In this regard, what was often advised was to take a calculated measure of sex segregation, gradually leading more experienced practitioners towards integrated practices. Remaining sensitive to each person's specific feelings and needs, whilst developing trust with particular training partners through an individual, "case-by-case" approach, was taken as the most productive way to ease practitioners into more fully integrated training:

You go on a case-by-case basis, there are those tough girls who you know can take (integrated sparring), but if it's the first time you're always very much, like a little bit more wary... It's difficult to say how it works, it's different between people, it's best to do it case-by-case. (John, 27, taekwondo)

Making sense of this process, while gender theorists [4,5] have convincingly argued that social sex categories are constructed via people's performances of gender, this is not to say that such categories are eminently re-workable or easily abandoned. Being so widely enacted, with meanings and ideological underpinnings ingrained through a lifetime of acceptance and practice, such naturalized arrangements can be very difficult to simply walk away from, or "undo". A personally-felt sense of identification with culturally normative images of masculinity or femininity, coupled with being held socially accountable to moral imperatives to behave in "appropriate" ways towards members of the opposite sex, can make the thought of complete physical equality between men and women in a sparring match, among other things, seem unacceptable. Furthermore, and as highlighted by previous research, sex integration may be particularly intimidating or otherwise problematic for many women interested in learning self-defense [47,55], particularly at the start of their training careers. Thus, the aforementioned strategies for "undoing gender" through integrated MACS are hardly a straightforward proposition for some, and, depending on the various ideals and dispositions developed within people's different life experiences, this may be considerably more difficult for some individuals to accept or accomplish than for others.

My third recommendation, therefore, is that *instructors and practitioners ought to be careful not to always insist upon integration, just as they do nevertheless encourage such practice among those who are not fundamentally opposed to it*. This should principally involve taking a measured and cautious approach to developing greater integration, remaining aware of the sensitivities and anxieties that such training can generate for various different individuals in their clubs. Because of the highly specific nature of different individuals' personal, cultural, and ethnic or religious backgrounds, this complicates proposals for universal "best practices", necessitating that instructors and practitioners remain sensitive to the likely needs of their students/peers, and adjust their pedagogical approaches accordingly.

5. Concluding Thoughts

Based on the accounts of my interviewees, those who stand to benefit most from increasingly sex-integrated practice in MACS are women who wish to achieve ever-higher levels of martial capability. This may involve serious, lifelong commitment to developing combat skills purely for their own sake; wanting to feel more secure or powerful through their self-defense preparedness; or aspiring

towards a successful competitive career. But such women following these paths typically find themselves lacking sufficiently talented female training partners and competitive opportunities, given the general over-representation of men at such levels in most clubs and disciplines. Therefore, integrated training (and even competition) often becomes necessary, and so practitioners and instructors invested in this type of training would likely do well to seek ways to encourage integrated practices, perhaps in the ways in which I have suggested [56].

However, the positive outcomes of integrated training, I believe, go beyond simply the development of particular practitioners' performance levels. As argued above, activities which promote the "undoing" of gender—that is, those which encourage men and women to identify and behave in ways which challenge sexist understandings of difference—are considered by feminist scholars to be highly useful in undermining gender injustice more broadly. Although such a process is rarely accomplished without difficulty, and in practice may be fraught with contradictory impulses that operate to reassert gender at the same moment as challenge it [39], I nevertheless contend that MACS represent one such site at which this potential may be at least partially realized. Following their experiences of integrated training, many men and women in my study claimed to reject typical gender ideals, and the sexual hierarchy arising from them:

Being a real man? That means nothing to me, absolutely nothing... (A real woman?), it's the same again, nothing. I couldn't separate them out because they're the same as much as they are different. You don't need to be either to be good at kickboxing, to be a martial artist. (Amir, 43, kickboxing)

I see myself doing something for women, instead of just obeying a stereotype... I think it's feminism, you know, pursuing something for ourselves and showing that normal everyday women are capable of doing something which a lot of people say we're not. I think it's a good thing what we're doing. (Rachel, 22, BJJ/MMA)

For those who have experienced this type of training, which stands as a more or less radical departure from everyday gendered normality, a lasting impression can be made, which impacts upon understandings and lived realities beyond the direct context of the training hall. It is my contention that, without losing sight of the moderation and caution needed to effectively do so, martial artists interested in gender justice—along with other, likeminded sports practitioners—would do well to promote these and similar practices among those with whom they train or teach.

However, it remains important to recognize the limitations of this study, for while the recommendations developed throughout this paper's discussion are derived from systematically gathered empirical data, the methodology underpinning this process was by no means comprehensive or exhaustive. With a relatively small sample of participants drawn from a geographically limited population, and with the highly interpretive, qualitative analysis conducted by a single researcher, the findings here must be seen as a partial and biased view on what is certainly a broad and complex phenomenon. As such, further research efforts are needed to confirm (or refute) the findings presented here via investigations of similar sporting milieu, and as more attention is turned to sex integration in such environments, clearer, better-grounded recommendations for "undoing" gender within them are likely to emerge, finding applicability across a wider variety of contexts. By way of one possible example, a pertinent area within which to expand this analysis, which is only briefly touched upon in

this paper, would be to more thoroughly interrogate the ways in which participants' differing cultural, ethnic or religious backgrounds mediate experiences of sex integration and the doing/undoing of gender in sport in general, or MACS in particular. Efforts in this direction will help to clarify the utility of the claims made in this paper, and shine further light on the usefulness of integrated sporting activities for challenging naturalized sexual hierarchies in their various manifestations across diverse societies.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References and Notes

1. The distinction between “martial arts” (e.g., kung fu) and “combat sports” (e.g., kickboxing) is, in many regards, an important one to recognize. However, given that this is not the topic of my current investigation, and that the themes discussed in my research were identified by practitioners across a diversity of disciplines, I discuss these types of activities under the same umbrella term here.
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training, nor the possibilities this presents for the “undoing” of gender. See Abramson and Modzelewski [57] and Spencer [58] on MMA; Lafferty and McKay [59] and Paradis [60] on boxing; Lökman [61] on aikido; and Sisjord and Kristiansen [62] on wrestling.

37. It is worth noting that other theoretical approaches to gender and its subversion share much in common with that outlined above, and have also seen utility in sociological research on sport and physical culture. Perhaps most notably is that of Pierre Bourdieu [63], succinctly analyzed in relation to sport by Brown [64]. Bourdieu’s broader theoretical frame has recently been employed widely in scholarly work on MACS, such as in Sánchez García and Spencer’s [65] recent text, *Fighting Scholars*; indeed, my own contribution to this particular volume [38] attempted to unite conceptual material from Bourdieu’s theorizing with Butler’s performative model—in similar ways as outlined by Brown [64]. However, I draw primarily on the “doing gender” framework, as developed by West and Zimmerman [4,15], for the remainder of this paper. This choice owes partly to the more accessible language employed by scholars within this tradition, and the intended audience of a paper built around recommendations for practitioners. While the linguistic complexity surrounding concepts developed by Bourdieu (and, indeed, Butler) do not make them definitively inaccessible beyond academia, the “doing gender” approach is, I believe, more applicable for this task. Perhaps there is a debate to be had around this point, but for lack of space this cannot be successfully accomplished here.
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41. “Snowball”, or chain-referral sampling, refers to the technique of beginning one’s investigation with a relatively small group of participants, who are then each asked to refer the researcher on to other candidates, who are asked the same, and so on. This purposive, non-probability sampling method can be criticized for inviting selection bias as participants select/deselect others on the basis of their own criteria, but nevertheless allows for recruitment from among large social networks which might not have otherwise been visible or accessible to researchers [43]. In this present study, snowball sampling allowed my analysis to extend beyond a focus on one particular MACS school/style, leading to research findings wherein patterns of experience were noted across a range of ostensibly different MACS settings.
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