



## PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH ON MARTIAL ARTISTS

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**Abstract:** In this article, we problematize Sports Psychology research on Martial Artists and offersome suggestions for advancing our knowledge in this area of research and practice. First, we review the previous research in the field. Then we introduce “cultural praxis” as a theoretical framework that will guide our analysis. Finally, we engage sociological studies of female fighters in conjunction with the adopted theoretical lens to outline the limitations of sport psychological research with regards to the experiences of women. It seems that the majority of the studies have used the male athlete as the norm, while research on the female athlete remains limited and focused on “differences”. Focusing persistently on gender differences, without drawing at all on gender theory reflects a gender bias, which seems to be engrained in sport psychology studies. Recent sociological studies have shed some light on the experiences of female martial artists, but have paid scant attention to the constantly changing locale in which female athletes operate. Here, we suggest “cultural praxis” as an intervention to gain insights into the behaviors, values, and emotions of the other sex athletes. Sports psychology is the study of how psychology influences sports, athletic performance, exercise and physical activity. Some sports psychologists work with professional athletes and coaches to improve performance and increase motivation. Other professionals utilize exercise and sports to enhance people’s lives and well-being throughout the entire lifespan. Sports psychology is a relatively young discipline within psychology. In 1920, Carl Diem founded the world’s first sports psychology laboratory at the Deutsche Sporthochschule in Berlin, Germany. In 1925, two more sports psychology labs were established – one by A.Z. Puni at the Institute of Physical Culture in Leningrad and the other by Coleman Griffith at the University of Illinois.

**Keywords:** Combat Sports, Martial Arts, Cultural praxis, Female athletes

### Introduction:

Gender Feminist researchers have argued that women’s Martial Arts, similar to women’s participation in other traditionally male sports, have not been taken seriously (Halbert, 1997), and have largely been hidden from history (Hargreaves, 1997). Although women have partaken in martial arts far longer than most people would ever suspect and female participation in combat sports has increased recently (Hargreaves, 1997; Macro, Viveiros, & Cipriano, 2009), research on this subject remains a relatively new field. While sport psychology research on Martial Arts has been reviewed in the past (see Fuller’s review, 1988; Martin, 2006, for a literature review on the psychological benefits of martial arts training; and Vertonghen & Theeboom, 2010, for a review on the psychological outcomes for youth of martial arts training), this paper is an attempt at an updated review of the existing research in the field, and an examination of the literature from the gender and cultural studies viewpoint. In this review, we use the terms combat sports and martial arts

interchangeably to refer to all combat systems. Furthermore, this paper aims at advancing the arguments for a contextualised approach in sport psychology made by critical scholars of sport (e.g., Krane & Baird, 2005; Ryba & Wright, 2005; Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009; Thorpe, 2009). Following these aims, first we review the extant sport psychology research on martial artists. Then we introduce “cultural praxis” as a theoretical framework that will guide our analysis. Finally, we draw on sociological studies of female fighters in conjunction with the adopted theoretical lens to offer a critical gender analysis.

### Methods:

We searched for relevant articles in the PsycInfo and SPORTDiscus with full text databases, using the key words of Martial Arts, Combat Sports, Karate, Judo, Jiu Jitsu, Boxing, Wrestling, Taekwondo, gender, and psychology that appear either in the title, abstract or among identified key words. For reasons of accessibility, we limited our review to English language research articles

published in international journals. We excluded nonscientific articles and research irrelevant to our topic, such as testing of athletes' physical fitness. Psychological research that used non-competitive forms of Martial Arts (e.g., Tai Chi, Aikido) was also excluded, as our focus is on athletes and not on recreational participants. However, we included studies that had a mixed sample of competitive and non-competitive martial artists. Sociological studies that emerged in our database search were included to critique the existing sport psychology research. There were 38 psychological and sociological, refereed journal articles, published between 1980 and 2010, that met the established criteria. Adopting a "presentist" viewpoint, which entails the reflection of past research through the lens of present-day knowledge (Kontos, 2010), our analysis of the identified studies was guided by the following questions: What research questions do sport psychologists tend to investigate while studying female vs. male martial artists? What theories inform their research on gender? How are gender differences explained? What are the implications of the extant psychological research for how female and male athletes are constituted?

### **Reviewing extant Sport Psychology**

research Sport psychology studies on competitive martial artists. In this section, we offer a brief summary of reviewed psychological research on men and women in combat sports. Based on the nature of the sample, we grouped the papers into two categories: 1) studies on competitive martial artists and 2) studies with mixed samples of competitive and non-competitive martial artists. In this overview, we maintain language used by the authors of the reviewed articles. The earliest published Sport Psychology Research on competitive athletes, generated by our database search, is a paper by d'Arripe-Longueville, Fournier and Dubois (1998) examining coaches' and athletes' perceptions concerning their effective interactions. In-depth interviews of male coaches and female athletes of the French judo national team revealed that the coaches used an

authoritarian interaction style. Coaches perceived strategies such as provoking athletes verbally, displaying indifference, entering into direct conflict, and showing preferences as effective, and believed that pushing athletes to their limits make them mentally tougher. In their interactions with the coaches, female athletes (who could not question the coaches' authority) implemented strategies of showing diplomacy, achieving exceptional performance, soliciting coaches directly, diversifying information sources, and bypassing conventional rules. Examining the psychological impact of a one-week period of deprivation from training at brown and black belt levels in Shotokan karate, Szabo and Parkin (2001) found that advanced athletes experienced a severe mood disturbance during the one week of abstinence from training, irrespective of the individual's sex. Szabo and Parkin speculated that this 'surprising' finding might be due to the fact that the female athletes performed martial arts at an advanced level, and therefore developed particular traits or characteristics fostered by values and training practices at black belt level in martial arts. Research of Hanin and colleagues stemmed from the Individual Zones of Optimal Functioning (IZOF) model and focused on the emotions of highly-skilled karateka (Robazza, Bortoli, & Hanin, 2004; Ruiz & Hanin, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c). Robazza and colleagues (2004) investigated the effectiveness of individual-oriented predictions of performance in Italian athletes. Specifically, the authors examined the practical utility of the in/out-of-zone notion as applied to the idiosyncratic intensity and content of emotions, bodily symptoms, and task-specific qualities in predicting performance assessed by individualised emotional profiles. Results showed that the emotions and bodily responses of the athletes differed between successful and average performances. Ruiz and Hanin (2004a, 2004b, 2004c) extended the research on performance and athletes' subjective emotional experiences. Investigating the utility of integrating metaphor self-generation method and individualized emotion profiling in the

description of performance states in elite Spanish karateka, Ruiz and Hanin (2004a) concluded that the content of metaphors that the athletes used to describe their emotional states was different prior to, during, and after performances as well as across best and worst competition. High action readiness was manifested in best performance situations, while low action readiness was reflected in worst performance situations. A follow-up further revealed that the original metaphors were retained, indicating that athletes' perception of performance situation remains stable over time. Athletes experienced anger more frequently after worst performances, although anger symptoms were present in both best and worst performances. The words that the athletes used to describe their anger states, as well as the intensity of anger in best and worst performances, varied considerably for each individual, indicating the highly idiosyncratic nature of anger descriptors and intensity, and the need for individualized measures and interventions (Ruiz & Hanin, 2004b). Ruiz and Hanin (2004c) further found that karate athletes' optimal states were characterized by both pleasant and unpleasant emotions, and were perceived as temporary and dynamic. This finding, according to the authors, indicates the need for self-regulation to maintain these states. Findings also revealed that athletes did use different strategies to produce these states, such as relaxation techniques and visualization. Several scholars have focused on achievement goal orientations and motivational processes of martial art athletes. Gernigon, d'Arripe-Longueville, Delignières, and Ninot (2004) explored how states of involvement toward mastery, performance approach, and performance avoidance goals were interrelated and activated during a practice of judo combat. In other words, authors explored whether athletes can experience more than one state (task and ego involvement) at a given moment. A judo training session was video recorded and the study was based on the combat between two male, national level judo athletes. The judo athletes were asked to watch the video and

indicate their moment-to-moment levels of involvement toward each goal. Goal involvement states were subject to fast variations that could result in frequent changes in the dominant goal focus. The authors further concluded that states of mastery, performance approach, and performance avoidance involvement can be interrelated in all kinds of patterns. In another study, Mrockowska's (2009) comparison of the perceptions of competence and aspirations between female and male fencers revealed that "women's perceptions of the high chance of sporting success was a much rarer phenomenon than in the case of men" (Mrockowska, 2009, p. 232). More than half of the female athletes estimated their chances of sporting success as average,

**Concluding remarks** In a recent anthology entitled "The Cultural Turn in Sport Psychology", Ryba and Wright (2010) posed the following question for reflection: are female athletes essentially different from male athletes, or are they socially constituted as different, and hence exhibit different behavioral and emotional responses? Indeed, as Gill and Kamphoff (2010) concluded, it is "how people think males and females differ [that] is more important than how they actually differ" (p. 64). The findings of our review illustrate that there is a need for further research focused on contextualized understanding of the experience of women martial artists, since few psychological studies have been conducted, and those few have neglected to examine the female athlete thoroughly. In addition, our review revealed that the use of "gender" in mainstream sport psychology scholarship has not changed over the time, even though scholars from cultural or/and feminist backgrounds have called persistently for a revision and expansion of the sport psychological knowledge base. While there are many ways to do psychological research on gender, in this article we have suggested "cultural praxis" as a suitable discursive framework for gaining insights into the experiences of women martial artists. Sport psychology as cultural praxis is capable of providing multilevel understandings of female

subjectivity because it considers the broader cultural, social, and historical contexts in which female athletes live and construct their behaviors in sport. We contend that within the cultural praxis framework that locates psychological research in the glo-cal matrix of a sporting culture, additional insights into articulated psychic realities of female fighters may be attained. In conclusion, we aim to encourage scholars in the field of sport psychology to embrace gender and culture as integral components in their research. Re-formulating psychological questions through the lens of culturally constituted psyche is not merely a theoretical exercise. Psychological research that neglects psychic realities of human beings, predicated on the sociocultural context, is prone to misleading interpretations and explanations of scientific results. The risk of feeding misrepresentations into popular consciousness becomes higher at a time when most academics have added a task of translating research findings for public consumption to their job descriptions. Thus, without a critical analysis of social norms and cultural meanings underpinning psychological processes and behavioral manifestations of female martial artists, there is a danger of perpetuating gender myths and even triggering moral hysteria. As researchers, we are responsible for exposing the ways in which gender oppression manifests itself in everyday practices to instigate the progressive social change in martial arts cultures.

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