

**LADIES IN ARMOUR: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF
EXPERIENCES OF HIGHLY SKILLED FINNISH FEMALE KENDO
ATHLETES**

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Master's Thesis in Sport
and Exercise Psychology
Spring 2013
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is a great pleasure to thank those who made this thesis possible. First of all, I am grateful to my thesis supervisors Dr. Maria Chasandra and Tommi Sipari who kept me on track and guided throughout the research process with their helpful advice. Huge thanks to Professor Taru Lintunen for overseeing the masters programme and the development of thesis. I also wish to express my deep gratitude to Dr. Marlen Harrison, who inspired me and encouraged to pursue my personal research interest.

I am particularly grateful to the participants of this study for their active collaboration. This project would not have been possible without them. I would like to offer special thanks to Heini Korhonen from the Finnish Kendo Association for mediating access to participants.

I would also like to thank my kendo teacher Jussi Jussila for valuable discussions about kendo, and to all my colleagues at the Ryûtôkai club for enabling my personal experience of kendo. Finally, thank you to all my friends and family for exchange of ideas and continuous support throughout this two-year process.

ABSTRACT

Rita Dekšnytė, 2013. Ladies in armour: A phenomenological investigation of experiences of highly skilled Finnish female kendo athletes. Master's Thesis in Sport and Exercise Psychology. Department of Sport Sciences, University of Jyväskylä. 97 p.

Women in sports have historically been marginalised. Feminist studies have revealed a struggle to balance athletic and feminine identities in “conventionally masculine” sports. However, there is a need to explore women’s experiences in a variety of sports. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used to explore the experiences of three highly skilled Finnish female athletes of Japanese kendo in order to better understand personal and social meanings of gender and sport. Participants were asked to write a personal story based on a prompt statement “A woman in kendo” and comment on other participant’s stories. The data was then interpreted and the following broad themes emerged: personal, socio-cultural, gender and sports framework. The findings reveal that personal motivations to practice kendo are related with the process of personal development and learning skills that can be transferred into other areas of life; perceptions of gender construction and gender differences vary among the participants; kendo sports framework is seen as facilitating non-gendered interactions through promotion of equality and respect; differences between Finnish and Japanese socio-cultural contexts become evident as participants discuss gendered cultural encounters. The findings can be relevant to those committed to creating bias-free sporting environment, assuring equal access and increasing participation in sports.

Keywords: women, gender, kendo, sport, personal experience, Finland

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1 INTRODUCTION

The practice of sport is a human right. Every individual must have the possibility of practising sport, without discrimination of any kind.
(International Olympic Committee, 2001)

The Olympic Charter above announces that sport is a human right of all individuals without distinction. However, sport still remains hostile to certain groups of people. Women have historically been marginalised in all areas of sport as it has been considered a masculine activity (Kay & Jeanes, 2008). Athleticism has been seen conflicting with femininity, and female athletes were expected to experience difficulties to balance the two (Royce, Gebelt & Duff, 2003). Although women have been actively entering sports, including those conventionally masculine, persistent gender stereotypes continue to influence their sport participation.

Several studies have paid specific attention to women's experiences in sports (Dorken and Giles, 2011; Knijnik, Horton & Cruz, 2010; Mennesson, 2000; Scraton, Fasting, Pfister & Bunuel, 1999). However, according to Kavoura, Ryba and Kokkonen (2012), psychological research on female athlete in martial arts has been limited, and still considering male athlete as a norm. Therefore, there is a need for scientific investigation in martial arts that would focus particularly on women's experiences. Consequently, this study will explore the experiences of highly skilled Finnish female kendo athletes.

1.1 Birth of the study

Author of this study Rita Dekšnytė herself is a female athlete with prior experience in a variety of sports: track and field, basketball, and football to name a few. Sport has played a significant role in her personal development, offering challenging but intrinsically rewarding experience. It has also inflicted her academic interest, and turned out to be a career choice as well.

As a female athlete, Rita has been naturally interested in experiences of other women in sports. While exploring prior research on women and sport Rita started noticing that these experiences are not always pleasant, and this is often due to gender issues. Simultaneously, of course, she was also reflecting on her own sporting experience, and discovered no significant negative experiences that would be triggered by a woman entering a supposedly masculine world of sport. It made Rita wonder why

so much attention is paid to gender and gender differences, and what factors stand between the positive and the negative experiences of women in sport.

More recently after starting the EMSEP programme in Jyväskylä, Finland, Rita began practicing kendo. It all happened by chance but very quickly kendo became a part of her life and a part of her identity. Kendo attracted Rita due to its deeper goals than just physical development, and due to the gender-neutral character of practice. Although still a beginner in kendo, Rita became curious about the experiences of other women in kendo, especially those women who have been practicing it a lot longer.

This way the idea to investigate the experiences of highly skilled women in kendo was born. Furthermore, the potential of doing it in Finland was also very tempting, since the Finnish socio-cultural context provided a quite different medium to that of Japan where kendo originated. The fact that Rita was familiar with the Finnish kendo context facilitated access to participants and so the project commenced. The purpose of this study is, therefore, to explore the experiences of three highly skilled Finnish female kendo athletes in order to better understand personal and social meanings of gender and sport.

1.2 Overview of theoretical and methodological approaches

The study adopts a hybrid feminist and queer socio-cultural theoretical framework to guide the investigation. Feminist part of this approach strives to give the women a chance to speak freely and have their voices heard, while queer part goes beyond the binary view to gender identities (men versus women), viewing identities as non-fixed constructs. Furthermore, socio-cultural sensitivity to both the Finnish context, native to participants, and the Japanese context, native to kendo, is sustained throughout the investigation. The investigation employs Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) to make sense of participants' lived experiences. It demonstrates a particular interest in detailed understanding of what the experiences are like for particular people.

1.3 Significance

The findings of the study contribute to better understanding of the processes of identity construction in sport, and the personal meanings attached to gender and sport. It also reveals how the sport context mediates the process of identity construction. Due to the open nature of inquiry, the findings reveal many new directions for future research. Furthermore, the study contributes to methodological debate by offering a hybrid

theoretical perspective that guides an open-ended inquiry. All in all, the study may be useful to all those committed to creating bias-free sporting environments, assuring equal access, and this way increasing participation in sports.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will situate the present study within the existing knowledge. Firstly, it will discuss the choice of a female athlete as a focus of investigation, elaborating on the issues of women's marginalisation in sports, women's struggle to balance athletic and feminine identities, and the different approaches to the study of gender identities. Secondly, it will discuss the two socio-cultural contexts that may be the mediators of women's experiences: that of Finland that is native to the participants, and that of Japan from where the sport under investigation has originated. Thirdly, the chapter will introduce kendo as a context of investigation, discussing the presence of Asian martial arts in the Western culture, kendo sports framework and philosophy, and limited existing knowledge about women in kendo. Finally, the theoretical framework of this study will be introduced.

2.1 Female athlete as a focus of investigation

2.1.1 Women's marginalisation in sports

Sport has traditionally been considered an inherently masculine domain (Kay & Jeanes, 2008; Koivula, 1995; Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar & Kauer, 2004; Schmalz & Kerstetter, 2006). There are, however, sports considered appropriate for women, such as gymnastics, ice-skating or dance. In fact, the study of Koivula (2001) has shown that people's perceptions of feminine sports are related to concepts of aesthetics, gracefulness and low-risk, while masculine sports are thought to be related with strength, danger and speed. In support, the findings of Klomsten, Marsh and Skaalvik (2005) suggest that adolescent boys valued the importance of strength, sports competence, and endurance, and therefore chose to participate in conventionally masculine sports; girls valued appearance, good looking face, and slender body, and chose to participate in conventionally feminine sports. It is evident that gendered expectations are imposed on people at a young age and influence their choices of physical activity. In fact, Hargreaves (1995) argues that girls have systematically been channelled out of sport or into sports not conflicting with dominant images of femininity. Furthermore, Dorken and Giles (2011) note that even by resisting discourses of conventional femininity and entering a conventionally masculine sport, a female does not get elevated to the status of a legitimate athlete in a legitimate sport. Instead, a new reality of women's football or women's hockey is constructed.

Women have been marginalised not only in sport participation but also in sport coaching (Reade, Rodgers & Norman, 2009), management and leadership of sport organisations (Pfister, & Radtke, 2009), sport journalism (Hardin & Shain, 2006), and even sport spectatorship (Pope, 2011). This results in lack of female role models in all areas of sport this way contributing to perpetuation of gender stereotypes and reinforcing the notion of sport as predominantly masculine domain. It is, therefore, important to understand the experiences of women in sports better to be able to effectively channel efforts into breaking the vicious circle of female marginalisation in sports.

2.1.2 Balancing between identities

Balancing athletic and feminine identities seems to be a challenge for women. The study of Krane et al. (2004) found that female athletes perceived their feminine and athletic identities as contrasting, since as athletes they have been considered different from ‘normal’ women. In explanation, Sage and Loudermilk argue that equating athletic achievement with a loss of femininity is “one of the oldest and most persistent folk myths” (1979, p. 89).

In some sports, athletic body is a must if one wants to advance and gain respect as an athlete. Sisjord and Kristiansen’s study with elite women wrestlers (2009) showed that senior athletes had accepted muscular body together with its social costs. The same study also revealed a paradox: women were expected “to train like a man” and still “behave feminine” (Sisjord and Kristiansen, 2009, p. 242). In support, Mennesson (2000) notes that women boxers occupied an ambivalent position, on one hand, challenging traditional gender order, on the other hand, still displaying traditional modes of femininity (having long hair, wearing mini-skirts, etc.). This is because “their decision to enter the boxing world was only socially acceptable (and thus viable for them) when it was accompanied by attitudes and behaviour that normalise such potentially deviant action” (Mennesson, 2000, p. 32). To sum up, Krane (2001) argues that many sportswomen try to emphasise feminine characteristics to avoid prejudice and discrimination, however, being perceived as too feminine in sports they run the risk to be sexualised and trivialised.

Drawing from the discussion of the previous paragraph, the idea of distinction between feminine and athletic identities becomes evident. Mennesson (2000) reports athlete’s experiences of alienation, or distancing from the feminine identity, while they

were in the boxing ring, while Sisjord & Kristiansen (2009) differentiate athletic body from the private body. Both studies show that some women may 'fight like a man' in the boxing ring or on the wrestling mat, but after practice or competition dress up and wear make up for the party. Strategic emphasis on the identities that are valued and de-emphasis of those that are not in any given social context can be viewed as a coping strategy when encountering stigma or stereotype (Shih, 2004). In support are the findings of Royce, Gebelt and Duff (2003) that reveal no gender role conflict in female athletes as they consider their feminine and athletic identities as distinctively different aspects of self.

To continue with the topic of stereotyping, not only do gendered stereotypes have detrimental effect on women's participation in sports but also may have a strong negative effect on female athlete's performance. Guillet, Sarrazin and Fontayne (2000) found that perception of handball being a masculine sport had strong effects on adolescent girls' involvement and perseverance in the sport. The study of Chalabaev, Sarrazin, Stone and Cury (2008) conducted with female footballers found that females' performance decreased significantly when stereotypes related to athletic ability and technical football ability were introduced. Although the literature has mainly focused on the phenomenon of stereotype threat, Shih (2004) suggests that overcoming stigma may be an energizing and empowering experience. In fact, Krane et al. (2004) reported female athletes being proud of their strong, developed bodies and expressing feelings of empowerment that had implications beyond the sport context.

Nevertheless, it is evident that female athletes do experience internal struggles when facing social pressure to conform to standards of hegemonic femininity, and at the same time having to balance their athleticism to meet the requirements of the hegemonically masculine sports context.

2.1.3 Feminist and queer approaches to gender identity

Numerous studies have explored the experiences of women in conventionally masculine sports: Mennesson (2000) has focused on boxing, Sisjord and Kristiansen (2009) on wrestling, Dorken and Giles (2011) on ice-hockey, Knijnik, Horton and Cruz (2010) on surfing, Roster (2007) on motorcycling, Scraton, Fasting, Pfister and Buel (1999) on football. In these studies women have been found to challenge traditional gender norms and reconstruct expectations of hegemonic femininity. However, these

studies situate their inquiry predominantly within the feminist theoretical framework running the risk of limiting themselves to a singular point of view.

Sport feminism has been predominantly concerned with exposing social injustice that women experience in the sport context and striving to correct this injustice (Hall, 1988; Travers, 2008). Feminism, however, has been criticised for adopting an overly binary perspective to gender evident in clear opposition between men and women, and masculine and feminine (Butler, 2007; Thorpe, 2008). In fact, Butler (2007) argues that the 'real' gender identity is an illusion. She suggests that all gender attributes as we perceive them result from repeated acts of performance. Butler's (2007) idea that gender is performative leads to the notion of multiple variations of identities. This idea is underlying in the queer theory that has emerged as a criticism to feminism. Queer theory suggests that identities are not fixed, but fluid and flexible, and therefore one should refrain from labelling people altogether (Gauntlett, 2008).

This study draws from both feminist and queer approaches and adopts the hybrid theoretical perspective that will be discussed in the Theoretical Framework section of this chapter. Feminist approach is evident in the fact that the study focuses on women's experiences from their perspective. However, the study focuses on 'a woman' as an abstract concept and refrains from guiding participants' responses to any direction. Such an open perspective is largely informed by queer theory (Gauntlett, 2008) and is meant to enable the participants to reflect on their own constructions of identity and related personal meanings.

2.2 Culture as a mediator of experiences

2.2.1 Finland and gender equality

The study of Hofstede (2001) compared different cultures and established that Finnish culture is low in terms of power distance. Such score suggests that it is a non-hierarchical culture valuing independence, equal rights, accessibility, and informal way of communication. Furthermore, Hofstede (2001) found that Finland is a very feminine society, meaning that dominating values are caring for others, quality of life, solidarity and equality, rather than masculine values of competition, achievement, success, and perfectionism.

Finland is famous around the world for its gender equality. In fact, it displays the overall highest gender equality index among the European Union member states (Plantenga, Remery, Figueiredo & Smith, 2009). Furthermore, in terms of gender

equality in sports, Finland is also one of the leading European Union member states, with more women than men involved in sports, and over 74% of overall population participating in sports (Van Tuyckom, Scheerder & Bracke, 2010). Holli, Magnusson and Rönblom (2006, p. 148) point out that a “passion for equality” is perceived to be a special feature of Nordic societies.

It is no surprise that gender equality has become a crucial part of the Finnish welfare state model. Finland was the first country where women gained full voting rights in 1906, while the first women’s sports club was founded there even earlier, in 1876, soon followed by the first women’s sports federation in 1896 (IWG on Women and Sport, 2013a). Schlosser (2001) argues that equality is not only an attitude but also a tradition. The study of narratives of successful Finnish women from different fields has revealed that equality pervading Finnish society was the background for the women’s stories of success and provided the basis for other themes, such as self-reliance and superior performance (Schlosser, 2001).

However, Holli et al. (2006) argue that there is a gap between rhetorics and practice of gender equality, in other words, that political goals do not always turn into societal reality. For example, Hartmann-Tews (2006) notes that despite Finland’s outstanding performance in terms of gender equality in sports participation, more attention should be paid to the intensity of participation, since boys and men tend to be more intensively involved in sport than girls and women. Finnish Ministry of Social affairs and Health (2006) concludes that equality has still not been fully achieved.

2.2.2 Japan and male hegemony

The previously discussed study of Hofstede (2001) that compared different cultures revealed that Japanese culture is medium in terms of power distance, meaning it is a mildly hierarchical culture. In fact, Hofstede (2001) argues that, contrary to popular belief, Japan is not as hierarchical as most other Asian cultures. Furthermore, Japan was found to be one of the most masculine societies in the world, driven by competition, achievement, success, and perfectionism in all areas of life (Hofstede, 2001). Moreover, Japan also appears to be the most uncertainty avoidant country in the world. Hofstede (2001) suggests that this is one of the reasons why changes are so difficult to realize in Japan.

Manzenreiter (2008) suggest that most accounts of the relationship of the sexes in Japan tend to attribute gender inequality to domination of Confucian values that

propose male predominance, separate domains of men and women, and clear-cut gendered standards for behaviour. However, Manzenreiter (2008) argues that such attribution is only partially true, and further highlights the role of Western style masculinity that was willingly accepted as a role model by the Japanese.

According to Moehwald (2002), the change from traditional patriarchalist values to values of gender equality began in Japan after the Second World War and the progress is evident. Japan ranks 21st in the world in term of gender equality (UNDP, 2013). However, Chiavacci (2005) argues that attitudes to gender equality in Japan have two different sides. On one hand, equal income distribution is strongly supported in Japan, on the other hand, support for gender equality regarding family roles and the labour market is much weaker. Therefore, compared to other nations of advanced economies, Japan is often seen as unprogressive (Orlansky, 2007).

Manzenreiter (2008) talks about how sport reflects gender-specific role division in the Japanese society, suggesting that men play lead roles in the centre of attention, while women fulfil supporting roles in the backstage. Blackwood (2003, p. 22) discusses how these gender specific spheres are reinforced in school sports clubs in Japan, and suggests that gender separation of roles plays an “important role in reproducing and naturalising a masculinist gender ideology”. According to Nogawa and Maeda (1999), essentialised categories of gender and appropriate gender behaviour hamper women’s progress in Japan.

Nevertheless, Orlansky (2007) notes a paradox, that despite traditional gender roles being reinforced on Japanese women, they are extremely successful in international arena of sport. The Women's Football World Cup win in 2011 (Birmingham, 2011, July) is a powerful illustration of this.

2.3 Kendo as a context for investigation

2.3.1 Asian martial arts in the Western culture

From the early 1950s onward, many Asian martial arts (including kendo) found their way to the West (Theeboom & De Knop, 1999). Chan (2000) argues that, in case of Japan, martial arts represent the greatest export of Japan apart from electronics, cars and cuisine. According to Brown and Leledaki (2010, p. 124) martial arts and other Eastern movement forms “have been quietly spreading and transforming in Western cultures over the past few decades.”

Theeboom and De Knop (1999) explain the popularity of Eastern movement disciplines as a concern with defining values, meanings and goals, rising as a reaction to the confusion about values in the Western society. Eastern disciplines are viewed as a holistic approach to human development promoting unity of body and mind (Brown & Leledaki, 2010). However, Back and Kim (1984) were concerned about the course of development of Oriental martial arts in the West. They argued that martial arts were taught differently than in the East, replacing the strive for artistic excellence with the goal of winning a competition. In fact, Theeboom and De Knop (1999) notice variations in Asian martial arts practice in the West, differentiating three approaches to martial arts practice. Firstly, the traditional approach is a holistic approach where participants strive for the unity and coordination of the mental and spiritual with the physical elements. Secondly, the efficiency approach highlights the effectiveness and application of techniques in a fight, and is mainly practiced for self-defence. Thirdly, the sporting approach regards martial arts as sports where fighting skills are restricted by competition rules. Theeboom, De Knop, & Wylleman (1995) argue that although the traditional approach is the least popular in the West, it is valuable due to formal and spiritual elements which are rarely found in western sports. Furthermore, Theeboom et al. (1995) suggest that these traditional aspects in the Asian martial arts practice should be preserved in the West.

However, Theeboom and De Knop (1999) claim that due to distinct cultural differences western youngsters have difficulties to fully understand the underlying principles of a traditional approach to martial arts practice, and suggest the use of sporting approach when introducing martial arts in schools. In support, the study of Jones, Mackay and Peters (2006) has shown that high volume practitioners of martial arts in England placed more value on underpinning philosophy and appeared to fully immerse in the holistic appreciation of the martial art. It is therefore evident that level of appreciation of the philosophical basis of martial arts is relative to the amount of practice.

To conclude, martial arts are among the most popular extracurricular sports practiced by youth between 10 and 15 years (De Knop et al., 1996), and among most practiced sport activities in the club context in the European Union (van Bottenburg, Rijnen, & van Sterkenburg, 2005). Coming back to the Japanese martial arts, Chan (2000) argues that they are seen by their practitioners worldwide as “not merely emblematic of a culture, but derived directly from that culture’s history and spiritual

philosophy.” This suggests that in the West Japanese martial arts sustain the cultural flavour.

2.3.2 Kendo sports framework and philosophy

Kendo is a modern Japanese martial art of sword fighting based on the legacy of classical Japanese swordsmanship (Draeger, 1974). According to Draeger (1974) kendo is the most respected and popular of the modern budo disciplines. Budo literary means “martial ways” and is an umbrella term for many Japanese martial arts, including kendo, judo, aikido and karate-do (Theeboom & De Knop, 1999). In the name “kendo”, “ken” stands for “a sword” and “do” means “the way” (Kiyota, 2002). In a way, kendo is similar to other Japanese ‘ways’ such as shodo, or calligraphy, and sado, or tea ceremony, and this is due to its relation to Buddhism concepts (Wada, 2008). However, this will be discussed further in this section.

Modern kendo is different from the old swordsmanship as it has rules, and is sometimes described as sport kendo (Craig, 2004). The equipment used in kendo practice includes a shinai, a bamboo sword modelled after the Japanese sword, and bogu, protective armour, consisting of a helmet, chest and waist protectors, and gloves. According to Craig (2004), protective gear was developed to allow the students of kendo to spar at full power with few injuries. The object in kendo combat is to deliver a strike or thrust to prescribed target areas on the bogu: the head, the forearm, the torso or the throat (Kiyota, 2002). However, Kiyota (2002) suggests that the strikes are only counted if accompanied by speed, force, accuracy, physical coordination, concentration, and intention that is evident in the ki-ai, or the yell announcing the intended targets.

In fact, Theeboom and De Knop (1999, p. 148) argue that budo forms “put less emphasis on the outcome of fighting techniques and more on the experience during the activity”, this way striving for harmony between the physical and mental levels. In support, Kiyota (2002) highlights the mental aspect of kendo, suggesting that kendo practice is designed to cultivate alertness, speed of action, and direct cognition. In a kendo fight the opponents try to read each other’s intent to execute certain movements and react accordingly (Kiyota, 2002). A good moment to attack is when one notices the opponent’s weakness. Ozawa (1997, p. IX) calls it an “unguarded moment”, while Kiyota (2002, p. 17) uses the phrase “go-for-broke attack”. Clearly mental calm is required to notice these crucial moments. Therefore, it is important to come back to kendo relationship with Buddhism. Buddhist thought had significant influence on the

development of kendo (Kiyota, 2002). Mushin is an important term in kendo, referring to the state of mind “freed from ego-clouded vision that cannot be swayed by external distraction” (Kiyota, 2002, p. 4). Kiyota (2002) further argues that taming the ego is a key concern in kendo, since it prevents the mind from being distracted. For this purpose meditation is emphasized in kendo and briefly takes place before and after every practice. However, Kiyota (2002) argues that mushin is not an instant state of mind and can only be realized overtime through strenuous practice.

To continue with, part of the kendo discipline is the idea of following the superiors. Ozawa (1997) suggests that by respecting and seeking guidance from someone who is more experienced one will eventually be able to rise to their standard. Ozawa (1997) also highlights the importance of respect to opponents and fellow practitioners that is evident in the bow before and after every practice, and before and after every fight. In support, Kiyota (2002, p. 20) argues that humility and respect reflect a true kendo practitioner, because the opponent is “the means through which the practitioner realizes the true self.”

To summarise, kendo practice can be seen as a holistic approach to human development that, according to Theeboom and De Knop (1999), strives for unity and coordination between the mental and the physical. Furthermore, due to emphasis on strenuous practice, humility, and respect it has wider social implications.

2.3.3 Women in kendo

Martial arts, or combat sports, have traditionally been considered a masculine activity (Koivula, 1995), mainly due to perceived relationship with speed, strength and risk (Koivula, 2001). Nevertheless, many women have taken up martial arts, primarily for self-confidence and self-defence purposes (Guthrie, 1997; Hughes, 2002). Already in the late 90’s women’s participation in kendo in the United States exceeded the figure for men (Ozawa, 1997). According to Ozawa (1997) such popularity is difficult to explain, but the speculation is that kendo offers women something more than other martial arts.

Although martial arts are often practiced in a mixed gender setting, gendered interactions are not always avoided. The study of Guérandel and Mennesson (2007, p. 167) have studied gendered interactions in a mixed gender judo context and have revealed that in some situations “gender experience forces men to be moderate in their actions and protective of the women.” In other words, gender framework takes over the

judo framework. In case of kendo, however, the basis is not the physical strength but rather concentration (Kiyota, 2002), correct technique and proper mental attitude (Ozawa, 1997). This might be one of the reasons attracting women to kendo. Furthermore, although the most important kendo competitions have gender categories, in less important competitions men and women often compete against each other. In fact, even in the European Kendo Championship's junior category girls and boys between 15 and 18 years old competed together (European Kendo Federation, 2013).

In terms of research on women in martial arts, the findings of the literature review conducted by Kavoura, Ryba and Kokkonen (2012) reveal that the majority of psychological studies on martial arts have used the male athlete as the norm, while research on the female martial artist remains limited and focused on 'differences' from their male equivalent. Therefore, the need of studies in martial arts that use female athletes as a point of reference and focus on their experiences is evident.

2.4 Theoretical framework

Although the review of existing literature has established that concern with the experiences of women in sport is traditionally attributed to the feminist theoretical perspective that strives to demonstrate the often unjust treatment of women and defend their fundamental right to sports, the present study adopts a slightly different approach and uses a hybrid feminist and queer socio-cultural theoretical framework as a basis for inquiry.

On one hand, the author identifies with the feminist concern over women's marginalisation in sport and the seeking to "change and equalise the social relations within which women are oppressed and disadvantaged" (Scraton & Flintoff, 2002, p. 30). This is because the fact that women still occupy a marginal position in sports is clearly evident in existing literature. Furthermore, the existing psychological literature on female martial artists is particularly limited. Therefore, the feminist bit in the approach of this study is giving the women a chance to speak freely and have their voices heard. According to Sprague (2005, p. 163), taking marginalised voices seriously is "a pivotal first step toward countering the hegemonic filters in academic discourse."

On the other hand, feminism has been criticised for the binary perspective to gender, where the stiff categories (men and women, masculine and feminine) oppose each other (Butler, 2007; Thorpe, 2008). The implication of such a division is that feminist studies may unconsciously steer the findings to the same binary understandings

of gender. It is evident in the ways researchers design their interview schedules, including “gender issues” (Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2009, p. 235) or “gendered identities” (Scraton et al., 1999, p. 102) as a key topic.

In contrast, queer theory suggests that identities are not fixed, but fluid and flexible, and therefore one should refrain from labelling people altogether (Gauntlett, 2008). In support, Butler (2007) argues that the ‘real’ gender identity is an illusion. Therefore, drawing from queer theory, the present study adopts an open perspective to data collection, focusing on ‘a woman’ as an abstract concept that may or may not trigger participants’ thought development towards the traditional notions of gender. What is important here is to refrain from guiding participants’ responses to any direction and enable them to reflect on their own constructions of identity and related personal meanings.

Finally, since the construction of identities does not take place in isolation, but rather in a socio-cultural environment, the study demonstrates sensitivity to the socio-cultural context of the participants, as well as the socio-cultural context from which kendo originated and migrated to the Western societies. The socio-cultural bit completes the overall theoretical perspective of this study, a hybrid feminist and queer socio-cultural theoretical framework.

2.5 Summary of literature findings

To summarise, the literature review revealed the ways women have been marginalised in sports, and the ways they have been challenging hegemonic masculinity of sport and reconstructing expectations of hegemonic femininity. However, balancing athleticism and femininity with social expectations still remains difficult.

Although numerous studies have focused on women’s experiences in traditionally masculine sports, in the domain of martial arts psychological research on female athlete remains limited. This study will, therefore, focus on Finnish women practicing the Japanese sword art – kendo.

The socio-cultural contexts involved in the investigation were also discussed. Finnish culture was found to be driven by gender equality, while Japanese culture remains more traditional, with clear division of gender roles.

The hybrid theoretical framework guiding the study was introduced, explaining how feminist theory informs the interest in women’s experiences, how queer theory

suggests an open perspective to investigation, and how socio-cultural awareness and sensitivity is important in the process.

To conclude, the present study fills in the void in psychological research on female martial artists. It goes beyond the feminist theory in order to better understand personal meanings attached to gender. The study also considers the socio-cultural contexts involved in women's experiences. The purpose of the study is, therefore, to explore the experiences of highly-skilled Finnish female kendo practitioners.

3 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of three highly skilled Finnish female kendo athletes in order to better understand personal and social meanings of gender and sport. The study refrains from more specific research questions and strives to sustain an open perspective to inquiry in order to elicit those experiences that are personally most significant to participants.

4 METHODOLOGY

Driven by a research question that aims to explore and understand the experiences of women in kendo, a qualitative approach to investigation was chosen. This chapter will discuss the philosophical underpinnings of the methods chosen to explore the topic, introduce the research approach and procedures followed, discuss trustworthiness of qualitative research, ethical practices and the role of the researcher in the investigation.

4.1 Phenomenology as philosophy of inquiry

According to Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, p. 11), “phenomenology is a philosophical approach to the study of experience.” It aims to gain “deeper understanding of the nature of meanings of our everyday experiences” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 9). In other words, phenomenology asks the following question: “What is this or that kind of experience like?” Phenomenology can also be considered an umbrella term for a number of research approaches. Although there are some variations in different approaches, Langdrige (2007) argues that phenomenological focus on experience is central to all phenomenological approaches.

Historically, phenomenology originated out of interest in understanding specific aspects of our human experience of the world. The founder of phenomenology, Husserl, was concerned with capturing the essential and general structures of the phenomenon and describing it in its richness (Langdrige, 2007; Smith et al., 2009). This descriptive phenomenological effort continues to date. However, phenomenology has since then taken several turns. One of the most significant influences, according to Langdrige (2007), was existential turn lead by Heidegger, introducing deeper concern with the actual nature of existence, and individual meanings of experience. Another, the more recent influence was hermeneutic turn, stressing how all understanding involves interpretation (Van Manen, 1990; Langdrige, 2007), and moving away from the descriptive commitments towards “a more interpretative and worldly position” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 21). These influences have reshaped phenomenology and contributed to a diversity of phenomenological approaches available today.

Although phenomenological methods vary in different aspects (e.g. level of description and interpretation), their goal is to develop understanding focused on uniqueness of human experience. Van Manen (1990, p. 23) argues that since phenomenology asks meaning questions, they cannot be simply solved and closed

down, however, they can lead to better, deeper understanding, and, on the basis of this understanding, one “may be able to act more thoughtfully and more tactfully in certain situations.”

4.2 Research approach

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a qualitative approach to psychology concerned with the detailed investigation of human lived experiences (Smith et al., 2009). The defining features of IPA – hermeneutic phenomenological orientation and idiographic commitment – will be briefly discussed further.

To begin with, IPA is grounded in phenomenological philosophy as it strives to explore experience “in its own terms rather than according to predefined category systems” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 32). To continue with, IPA suggests that phenomenological inquiry is an interpretative process from the start, where the researcher plays a key role in understanding. Finally, contrary to descriptive phenomenology, IPA does not try to develop essential structures of experience, but rather is concerned with “particular experiences as experienced for particular people” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 16). This focus on the particular, or, in other words, the idiographic approach, produces rich and nuanced analysis of particular cases of experience, depicting the complexity of human psychology.

The phenomenological, hermeneutic and idiographic characteristics will become more evident in this paper as the study continues to strive to understand what experience of being a woman in kendo in Finland is like for a group of highly experienced participants.

4.3 Participants

In order to understand a particular phenomenon in a particular social and cultural context, a detailed account of individual experiences must be elicited from the participants who find a research question meaningful. Therefore, a small purposive and relatively homogenous sample of participants was chosen.

Participants (n=3) are highly-skilled Finnish female kendo practitioners ranging from 4th to 6th dan in proficiency level. Selection criteria were experience in kendo and confidence to write a text in English. Smith et al. (2009) supports three as a default size of sample for an IPA study, arguing that it allows detailed analysis of each case as well as enables the development of micro-analysis across cases.

Initially, access to the potential participants was gained through the Finnish Kendo Association. A small pool of potential participants that met the criteria of experience and language were then contacted by email containing detailed explanation of the purpose of the study and the process of data collection, a request to participate and an informed consent form (see the initial email in Appendix A). From this pool three participants responded and, after filling in a consent form (see Appendix B), proceeded with the process.

4.4 Data collection

According to Langdrige (2007), a primary concern of phenomenological research in psychology is with first person accounts of life experiences. Furthermore, phenomenology is interested in those experiences that are significant for the participant. In other words, ‘experience of importance’ rather than ‘just experience’ (Smith et al., 2009). Since IPA requires rich data, Smith et al. (2009, p. 56) argue that to achieve this ‘richness’, participants should be granted “an opportunity to tell their stories, to speak freely and reflectively, and to develop their ideas and express their concerns.” Therefore, in order to elicit rich first person accounts of personally significant experiences the following methods were used.

Firstly, participants were asked to write a 1-2 page reflective text based on a prompt statement “A woman in kendo. Please reflect on your experience and write a story.” The briefness and openness of the prompt was, in fact, meant to elicit those experiences ‘of importance’. Since the participants were not guided in any way, it is likely that those thoughts and stories that first came into their mind were personally most significant ones. Furthermore, this approach to data collection draws from the field of narrative inquiry as it demonstrates interest in people’s stories told in their own words and manners, and the belief that knowledge is embedded in those stories (Smith & Sparks, 2010).

Secondly, after initial analysis of texts, participants were asked to answer some additional questions arising from their stories. These questions were open-ended and aimed at getting a deeper insight into certain experiences described in the story (e.g., “Can you reflect more on the experience of not knowing who your opponent is?”). The participants were also given an opportunity to add anything else that came into their mind after writing the initial story.

Thirdly, all participants' stories and answers to additional questions were placed in a password protected on-line environment (see a snapshot in Appendix C), access to which was only granted to participants. The participants were each assigned a story to read and comment on from their perspective (P1 comments P2, P2 comments P3, P3 comments P1). The cues for commenting were: "Is there anything you can relate to or is similar to your experience? Anything that is different to your experience? Anything you find particularly important or especially interesting? Any other thoughts or feelings that this story triggers?" This step of data collection was meant to elicit more data by triggering reflection on the thoughts expressed by fellow female kendo practitioners, as opposed to researcher guiding the process of data collection. Furthermore, it provided foundation for comparing and contrasting the cases.

All data was gathered through online communication, and asynchronous approach was used to allow the participants to write texts at their own time and space, taking time to reflect. In fact, James and Busher (2009, p. 48) argue that when participants are given time and space to talk about themselves at the speed convenient to them, they "take greater ownership of the construction of their narratives so they fit more closely with their own construction of reality." In other words, asynchronous communication is more effective for in-depth understanding of experiences and identities of participants.

4.5 Data analysis

Although IPA literature has not prescribed a single approach to data analysis, Smith et al. (2009) has suggested a set of common processes to guide the analysis: reading and re-reading, initial noting, developing emerging themes, searching for connections, moving to the next case, and looking for patterns across cases. Based on these suggestions analysis of data was conducted.

Firstly, the selected case was read carefully several times to get the full picture as well as look into certain details. During subsequent readings text was started to interpret more carefully and initial notes were made throughout the case to mark descriptive (e.g., "Story of negative experience"), linguistic (e.g., "'Be in a beehive' – powerful metaphor expressing negative attitude to assimilation") and conceptual (e.g., "Timeframe markers suggests the process of kendo development; has something changed?") comments. These comments were developing with every reading. Then, based on the interpretative comments, emergent themes (e.g., "cultural encounters") and

super-ordinate themes (e.g., “focusing on the socio-cultural”) were developed and relevant quotes categorised accordingly. Once every case was analysed independently, a cross-case analysis took place, where all cases were compared and contrasted. Finally, the themes of all three cases were combined together to reflect the overall findings of the study. The single-case theme trees as well as the overall theme tree will be further presented in the Findings chapter.

4.6 Role of the researcher

Traditionally phenomenologists have argued that the researchers must suspend or ‘bracket’ their knowledge and beliefs about the phenomenon they have selected to study, however, Van Manen (1990) argues that such approach is ineffective, and suggest instead making one’s understandings, assumptions, theories and biases explicit, trusting the reader to make appropriate decisions. The introduction part of this paper was meant to familiarise the reader to the researcher’s relationship with the topic and theoretical approach.

Although Smith et al. (2009) argue that the researchers must try to suspend their preconceptions when designing and conducting data collection for IPA study, when it comes to data analysis, they see researcher’s role as key to the process. In fact, they see the resulting analysis as a product of collaborative effort of both the participant and the researcher. In general, Smith et al. (2009) advocate for the centre-ground position, where the researcher is both emphatic and questioning. On one hand, the researcher adopts the ‘insider’s’ perspective attempting to understand what it is like to be in participant’s shoes. On the other hand, the research stands alongside the participant and looks at their experience from a different angle.

Based on these recommendations, a very open approach to data collection with minimal input from the researcher was chosen to avoid guiding the participants towards certain themes. When analysing, the researcher was asking questions and puzzling over the things the participants were saying. Furthermore, when moving analysis from case to case, researcher was trying to bracket the findings of the previous case as much as possible so as not to affect analysis of the next one. However, the insider’s status of the researcher helped in negotiating access to accounts of suitable participants. Moreover, the researcher’s own experience of practicing kendo in Finland contributed to more insightful interpretations of texts and therefore better understanding of experiences.

4.7 Validity and quality

As qualitative research cannot be evaluated according to the same criteria that are applied to quantitative research, Yardley (2000) suggests a range of criteria for assessing validity and quality of qualitative research specifically: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigor, transparency and coherence, impact and importance. The following section will explain how the present study has addressed these criteria.

The very choice of IPA as an approach demonstrates sensitivity to context since the idiographic orientation requires close engagement with participants who share particular lived experiences. Accessing such participants required sustained engagement and building rapport with key gate keepers. Another aspect demonstrating sensitivity to participants' needs is the choice of asynchronous mode of communication in data collection. Kivits (2005, p. 42) argues that in asynchronous communication it is the 'temporal dimension' of interaction that is important in developing relationships. Furthermore, as the data is probably the strongest context to consider sensitivity in, this study pays particular attention to providing considerable amount of verbatim extracts from participant's data to support the arguments and enable the reader to check the interpretations. Moreover, the use of literature to orient and position the study and the findings also demonstrates sensitivity to the scientific context.

Commitment and rigour is firstly evident in attentiveness and care contributed to data collection and analysis. Careful selection of sample to match the research question and to be reasonably homogenous demonstrates rigour. Furthermore, the three-step data collection process demonstrates personal commitment and investment of the researcher in eliciting rich data. Finally, commitment to interpretative and idiographic elements is evident in depth of analysis and attention to detail in every case.

The criteria of transparency and coherence are addressed by clearly describing the stages of the research process. The reader is provided a track of record of the research process: schedules for data collection, annotated transcripts, tables of emergent themes and relevant quotes. This allows the reader to trace back the process from data collection to the write-up of paper. Coherence is also evident in consistency with underlying principles of IPA, as close attention to detail in every case is in line with both idiographic and hermeneutic commitments.

Finally, according to Yardley (2000), a key test of validity of the study is its impact and importance. In other words, a question if the study tells the reader something interesting, important and useful. This study, therefore, clearly articulates the need for

such research in the literature review. Furthermore, it demonstrates effort to link the research findings to the existing knowledge, as well as discusses wider implications for practitioners.

5 FINDINGS

This chapter will present the findings of the analysis by discussing emergent themes that have been combined into the Table 1. The super-ordinate themes describe the wide areas that participants focused their stories on. In order to comply with the idiographic commitment of this study and reflect the nuances of each participant's experience, every case will be presented individually. Furthermore, the cases will then be compared and contrasted in the cross-case analysis. Real names of participants were changed to assure anonymity. Therefore, the chapter will present the cases of Eva, Laura and Silvia.

Table 1 *Master table of emerging themes*

Super-ordinate themes	Themes
Focusing on the personal	Motivations to do the sport Outcomes of the sport
Focusing on gender	Attitude to gender Gendered encounters Social-construction of gender Gender stereotypes
Focusing on sport	Equality Contrast with other sports Life-long learning Mental focus Women's role in Finnish kendo Respect
Focusing on the socio-cultural	Cultural encounters Differences between Japan and Finland 'Going native'

5.1 Eva's case

The themes emerging from Eva's case have been organised under the super-ordinate themes and can be found in Table 2. In terms of personal aspects, she discusses her motivations to do kendo and the outcomes of kendo practice. In her discussion of sports framework, she focuses on kendo orientation to equality and mental focus, as well as contrasts kendo to other sports. Her attitudes to gender and gendered encounters also become evident. Finally, she discusses her experience of cultural encounters in the section Focusing on the Socio-Cultural.

Table 2 *Emerging themes for Eva's case*

Super-ordinate themes	Themes	Representative quotes (Eva)
Focusing on the personal	Motivations to do the sport	<i>Being on your own</i> <i>Challenging myself</i>
	Outcomes of the sport	<i>Getting to know myself</i> <i>Has given me strength and durability</i> <i>Strengthened my self-esteem</i> <i>It's all the time within me</i>
Focusing on gender	Attitude to gender	<i>People are different no matter what sex they are</i> <i>We actually like talking about the "strong Nordic woman"</i>
	Gendered encounters	<i>Would have made me think about stopping</i>
Focusing on sport	Equality	<i>It doesn't make a difference if you're man or woman</i> <i>One doesn't see from the outfit any difference</i>
	Mental focus	<i>You're actually against yourself, your own mind</i>
	Contrast with other sports	<i>One can just focus on practicing kendo, nothing else</i>
Focusing on the socio-cultural	Cultural encounters	<i>I've always been a little insulted</i> <i>A bag of peanuts and not a word of thanks.</i> <i>Peanuts. Need I say more?</i>

5.1.1 Focusing on the personal

"Somehow it felt that after every practice I had won myself."

Eva begins her story by describing her early kendo experience and outlining her motivations to do the sport:

I started practicing kendo when I was sixteen years old. I found it interesting to practice as an individual because I had practiced only soccer and other group sports. It felt good to be sort of "on your own". Kendo gave some structure for my week schedule. And somehow it felt that after every practice I had won myself. Especially when there was some seminar with Japanese senseis. The excitement before challenging myself to have keiko [kendo practice] with sensei [teacher] is something that feels in the whole body and it's the hardest thing to keep the mind "zen" so that you won't freeze totally.

She highlights that her kendo experience started at the age of sixteen and goes on to discuss the reasons for starting and continuing the sport. She contrasts the individual kendo experience (being “on your own”) to her prior experience of team sports, suggesting that this newness and distinctiveness was what attracted her to kendo in the first place. Practicing kendo is also perceived to have helped manage the time, providing structure to her weekly schedule. These, however, seem to be the early reasons that attracted and motivated her to practice. A further motivation that kept her in kendo seems to be the potential for personal development. In the phrase, “after every practice I had won myself”, the process of personal development is evident: it happens gradually through practice, and it requires challenging and winning oneself. This quality of kendo, however, seems to have been realised by Eva through time. The use of “somehow” suggests uncertainty or even surprise and the fact that participant did not expect such experience when joining kendo. This process of personal development through challenging oneself seems to be a positive experience for Eva. She emotionally describes the situation of practicing kendo with a Japanese sensei, using the phrases “hardest thing” and “excitement... feels in the whole body” to indicate the difficulty of the challenge and the positive feelings related to overcoming it. As the key challenge, she refers to a mental aspect of kendo practice, or keeping the mind “zen”. This state that she names “zen” could be understood as a still, peaceful, yet aware state of mind. It is evident that Eva considers this mental aspect very important for kendo practice, as absence of it would lead to “freezing totally”. The latter state could be understood as being overwhelmed with thoughts and feelings and, therefore, performing poorly.

Later Eva elaborates on the process of personal development through kendo:

That time I started to practice, I was young and quite shy and it was also the time of getting to know myself. Like finding different feelings in me. I think that this is still some aspect why practicing feels good.

There are so many feelings going through body and mind when one is practicing. And that is the most challenging part – that you are actually challenging yourself – facing all the emotions, good and bad emotions. Also those emotions that you didn't really know you had in you. I think that I learn always something more of myself and I feel that it's important.

She suggests that at the time she started practicing kendo, she was young and shy. She refers to this period of time as “the time of getting to know myself”, in other words, the

time to explore and understand herself better. Eva sees kendo playing a crucial role in her personal development at this sensitive time. Kendo practice has enabled her to explore different feelings, face her emotions and learn to deal with them. The phrases, “so many feelings”, “all those emotions” and “the most challenging part”, suggest that this emotional experience is quite intense and challenging. As the most difficult aspect of this experience she names the fact that it is herself that she is challenging during practice when facing own emotions. Furthermore, it is clearly a wide range of emotions, both good and bad, that must be embraced, as well as those emotions that are newly discovered. It all makes it a very challenging experience, however, also a very rewarding one. In fact, the use of present simple tense, “I learn always something more”, suggests that this learning experience has continued ever since the start of participation in kendo and is planned to continue in the future as well. Experience of personal development through kendo is also related to positive feelings as participant states it “feels good”. Furthermore, the use of the phrase “still... feels good” reflects that this aspect of kendo has sustained her interest and motivation throughout the years. Finally, personal importance of learning through kendo is assured when Eva states, “I feel that it’s important.” The use of “I feel” instead of “I think” adds a more personal and a more emotional tone to the statement, in a way giving in more power.

Similarly, in the following quote Eva uses “I feel” to elaborate on personal gains or outcomes of kendo practice:

I feel that kendo has given me strength and some kind of durability in my daily life. All those times in the dojo [training place] have been good for me. All the possibilities to visit many countries to practice kendo and to be in the national team – all these things have strengthened my self-esteem.

She clearly states that practicing kendo has had a positive impact on her and uses a pronoun “all” often (referring to times, possibilities and things), which indicates the abundance of those positive experiences. She values the opportunity, provided by kendo, to be a part of a national team, visit many countries and practice there. Eva claims that kendo experience has enhanced her self-esteem, strength and toughness. Although it is not clear if she is referring to mental or physical strength and toughness, further quotes focusing on mental gains would support the former case. Nevertheless, these qualities are evident not only in kendo but also in Eva’s daily life situations.

The next passage of text discusses the mental aspect of kendo practice and its transferability to daily life:

All the people I've met in keiko [kendo practice] have given me the possibility to practice my mind so that I could focus just for the main thing, nothing else. Focus to see the other one's attacks and the times to react and the times to attack before the other one. To feel with the body, not mind. And this is of course something that is in me also in the daily life... I feel that it's all the time within me. It's there when I'm walking in the crowd, facing people there. It's in the way I face every day new people in my job, I never know what kind of people they are and so I have to find a way how to get in contact with them. I try to trust my instinct.

The opponents or practice partners in kendo are seen by Eva as enablers allowing her to practice her mental skills. The importance of focus “just for the main thing, nothing else” becomes evident, and it is later explained what this one point of focus is: it is the opponent as it is essential to notice the point of their attack and to react timely in order to attack first. She names this kind of reaction “to feel with the body, not the mind”, and this suggests that, in a way, it is an instinctive reaction. In fact, later in her text she calls it “practicing the instinct” and it will be discussed further in the section Focusing on Sport. As far as the personal matters are concerned, it is important to highlight Eva’s perception of transferability of these skills learnt in kendo to a life context. She suggests that this skill of instinctive perception and reaction is with her also in the daily life. The use of “of course” shows that this transferability of skills is perceived as natural and obvious, while the phrase “all the time with me” suggests potential for wide range of uses of these skills and the fact that the skills are at her disposal in any life situation. Eva further explains that these skills are evident in the situations when she has to interact with people, especially face new people. Uncertainty about the new people is always present and finding the way to interact with them is challenging. This is where the instincts trained through kendo come in useful helping to feel the other person and choose the appropriate way of interaction.

5.1.2 Focusing on sport

“It doesn't really matter with whom you are practicing, you always practice yourself and your own mind.”

In this section Eva focuses on the sports framework, discussing such themes as equality, the goals of practice and contrasting kendo to other sports. The following quote reflects her perceptions of equality in kendo:

I think that it's nice that there is the possibility to practice with no matter if the other people are old or young or if they speak the same language or not. It doesn't play any difference if you are tall or short or fat or slim. It doesn't make a difference if you're man or woman.

She expresses positive feelings about the fact that kendo provides the opportunity for everyone to practice together. She goes on to suggest a range of personal differences that do not matter in kendo practice using the pairs of contrasting adjectives: age (old or young), language (same or different), height (tall or short), body shape (fat or slim) and gender (man or woman). The use of contrasting adjectives, as opposed to just stating the category, gives more power to her argument. It is interesting that gender is mentioned last. It either reflects that gender difference comes last to participant's mind when thinking about personal differences, or, contrary, that it is left last to highlight the importance of the fact that gender too does not matter in kendo. Considering further interpretations in the section Focusing on Gender, it can be speculated that the former case is more likely.

She further discusses kendo equipment and its implications on equality:

Also the thing that makes every kendoka [kendo practitioner] the same is the equipment, which is just the same for everybody. One doesn't see from the outfit any difference if the practitioner has just started practicing kendo or if she/he has practiced for several years. You may notice it only after you see some movements and when you feel the other one practicing with you. That is also something interesting. To investigate the mind of your own if you have made some prejudice.

In the previous quote Eva has recognised a wide range of personal differences and argued that kendo acts as an equaliser not considering these differences important. In this quote she moves on from focusing on differences to focusing on similarity and suggests that kendo equipment plays an important role in equalising kendo participants. Comparing the two quotes, in the first one she recognised that people are different, while in this one she suggests that in kendo context they are equal, "the same", according to the requirements of the sport. This way the distinction of identities becomes evident: people outside kendo with all their differences and people in kendo,

kendo practitioners, being all equal. Nevertheless, to continue with equipment, she suggests that “one doesn’t see from the outfit” the difference in the opponent’s level of experience. In other words, the equipment and clothing used conceals or at least does not make obvious the skill level of participants. This is of course just a temporal concealment as the skill level soon becomes evident when practicing with the person. However, this aspect of non-obviousness prevents any kind of prejudice about the opponent or practice partner interfering with the practice. Eva values this opportunity to investigate own mind looking for prejudice. She further discusses this experience:

It is the feeling that you’re actually against yourself, your own mind and expectations. So it doesn’t really matter with whom you are practicing, you always practice yourself and your own mind. But of course it doesn’t feel like that every day and some days it’s nicer to practice with people that you know well and maybe you feel more relaxed because it’s something that you are familiar with. But to get to know my real reactions, how would I react in a real situation – I think it needs some practice with people that I don’t know so well and then I would react more with my instinct. It’s the instinct that we practice. And that’s interesting.

She describes this experience as being against herself, as opposed to against the opponent, and facing her own mind and expectations. So it is not about the actual differences of people she faces but about her perceptions of those people and related expectations of certain behaviours. Therefore, she claims that it does not matter who the opponent is because the focus is on training own mind. At least it seems to be an ideal way of practicing kendo. Eva hurries to explain that she does not always feel that opponent does not matter and sometimes prefers to practice with well know people in a familiar environment. However, she recognises that in order to understand and train her reactions in real situations, she must step out of the comfort zone and practice with all sorts of people, including those she is not very familiar with. As discussed in the previous section, she calls learning to react accordingly in any situation “practicing the instinct”. It is evident that she finds this a key aspect in kendo. In the second to last sentence she uses the phrase “we practice” and here “we” suggests her feeling a part of a whole kendo community and “practice” used in present simple tense suggests a common action taking place habitually. Both of these words reflect her perception that “practicing the instinct” is the common practice in kendo, in a way, one of the goals of

the practice. She ends her thought with a comment “this is interesting” which sounds as a bit vague evaluation of such an important aspect. It could be speculated that the adjective “interesting” was chosen as modest expression of opinion and may stand for a plethora of other adjectives, such as exciting, attractive, distinctive, and so on. However, this is not certain. What is certain is that this experience is considered positive by Eva.

In another quote Eva compares kendo with other sports:

When I started kendo we were not so many people practicing and all the championships were for everybody without any categories. My friend for example practiced judo and she had always problems with her weight to be “in the right category”. So I think I had the possibility to focus in the main thing – just to practice kendo and do my best. I think that in many other sports or budo there are many things that one doesn’t have to think when practicing kendo. I think for example many athletes have to work with publicity and media and of course with money things. Sponsors are interested in an athlete who is in the news and gives some publicity for the sponsor that way. Kendo doesn’t have these problems, there are some sponsors of course, but the media doesn’t really know kendo so well and so it is sort of free from all this. So again, one can just focus on practicing kendo, nothing else.

She suggests that when she began practicing kendo, the competitions were held for everyone without any categories. She probably highlights the timeframe here because, as participation in kendo grew, some categories were established (e.g. men/women, junior/senior). Still kendo remains quite uncategorised sport and this is evident in Eva’s example of her friends experience in judo. She sees the fact that judo has weight categories as unnecessary hassle, causing a lot of trouble to participant who has to squeeze herself in a certain framework. Contrary, she in kendo feels free from this and can focus her effort only on what is essential – the practice itself. Eva goes on to further contrast kendo with other sports and even other budo sports. As the key issue she sees commercialisation of sport including such things as publicity, media attention, sponsorship matters. In fact, she sees it as a problem distracting athletes from their main purpose, practicing the sport. In contrast, she sees kendo as not having “these problems”, free from external distractions, where one can focus on “practicing kendo, nothing else.” The absence of external pressures and distractions is attributed to the lack of media attention and, in general, is seen as a positive aspect. Furthermore, the feeling

that Eva does not want this situation in kendo to change is also evident in the way she values the opportunity to focus only on the practice.

5.1.3 Focusing on gender

“People are different no matter what sex they are.”

This section will focus on the notions of gender evident in Eva’s text. It is particularly important to note that, although the prompt statement for writing was “a woman in kendo”, there has been almost no mention of gender in her story up to the point when she was asked to comment on another participant’s story. Her reflections came from the perspective of “I” as a person, a human being, rather than a woman. The fact itself that she wrote such a story based on this statement suggests that she indeed identifies herself “a woman”, however, she simply does not feel anyhow different or special being a woman. Maybe she has no particular experiences related to gender, and maybe this is because the social environment does not raise any gender issues and does not make her feel any different. It seems that this feeling of being a human being equal to others is natural and obvious to Eva, in a way, ingrained in her mind and prior experiences. Only when reacting to other participant’s story, she becomes conscious about her views to gender and firmly states: “I don’t think that it is any difference being a woman or man in kendo. People are different no matter what sex they are.” There are two statements in this quote: one of them suggests that in kendo context gender is irrelevant, while another recognises that people are different anyway regardless of gender. Both of them are summarising Eva’s views to gender differences.

The following quote comes as a reaction to Laura’s story of the violent encounter with a man in kendo:

I guess I’m luckier in the sense that I don’t remember encountering actual violence during practice, which would have made me think about stopping kendo (although, I think I’ve started doing kendo a lot later than the narrator here, which is a factor). It’s important, that there have been enough stubborn women before me, who’ve lead the way and made it “normal” for women to be in the same position in the dojo as any man. Because, despite all our nice words about the equality of Finnish society, it is nowhere near finished.

Although in the original quote of Laura the focus was on the encounter with a man demonstrating hegemonic masculinity through violent actions, when reflecting on it Eva

only refers to violence and makes no mention of gender. This suggests that she does not relate violence to any gender. She, however, considers herself luckier than Laura not to have experienced violence in kendo and speculates that if she had, it might have encouraged her to quit kendo. She recognises that her kendo experience might be different from experience of the other participant due to difference in time they started practicing. It seems that she perceives that kendo has developed since the time of that violent encounter. Furthermore, she recognises and values the role of the “stubborn women” in development of kendo. The use of “enough” indicates that she sees it as a difficult process that required not just a few women but enough women to make it “normal” for women to be equal to men in kendo organisation and practice. In the last sentence Eva recognises the common understanding that Finnish society is very equal and denies it suggesting that this strive for equality is “nowhere near finished.” Moreover, the last sentence positions the process of feminisation of kendo within the Finnish socio-cultural context, suggesting that Eva values it as contributing to overall development of society.

In the next quote, that also is a reaction to other participant’s story, Eva expresses positive feelings about the women’s role in kendo society in Finland:

Our kendo society is built in a very “Finnish” way, where women carry a great deal of the burden of organizing. We actually like talking about the “strong Nordic woman” (even though that is an ideal, which sometimes gets us into trouble). We are proud of this strength that we seem to possess and especially, if strangers notice and wonder about it.

Her strong identification with the Finnish kendo society is evident as she uses the pronoun “our” referring to it. She suggests that this society is built in a “Finnish” way and further explains that this Finnishness means that women play an important role in kendo organisation. It is evident that she is both aware of the common beliefs about the Finnish society and also identifying with those beliefs. In fact, she admits being proud and liking to talk about the strength of Nordic women. She, however, does it on the behalf of “we”, which could be interpreted either as all the Finns or just as Finnish women. This is not very clear. Nevertheless, the pride in the strength of Finnish women is most strongly evident in situations encountering “strangers”, people from outside of the Finnish culture, the foreigners, as they probably get surprised and maybe even impressed.

5.1.4 Focusing on the socio-cultural

“That’s how it often seems to be: the women do all the work... and the senseis thank the men.”

In this section Eva discusses her experience of cultural encounters in kendo. The following quotes were also triggered by another participant’s story.

I guess I am myself one of these women, who’ve established themselves in the Finnish kendo organization. As such a person I must add though, that I’ve always been a little insulted, when I’ve gone through so much trouble arranging something like a kendo seminar and our Japanese guests shower their gratitude at the nearest guy they can find to thank and seem to overlook my efforts altogether. That’s how it often seems to be: The women do all the work as secretaries and treasurers and organisers and the senseis [teachers] thank the chairman (who is a man – evidently).

In this quote Participant one identifies herself as one of the women who play an important role in kendo organisation in Finland. It is evident that she did not just land the role but worked hard to “establish herself” in the organisation. The phrase “as such a person I must add” suggests that belonging to this group of people she feels a responsibility to express her thoughts on the matter. She describes the situation when she has put a lot of effort in planning and arranging some kendo gathering and the Japanese guests did not appreciate and overlook her effort. It does not seem that they were simply ungrateful, it actually seems they were very grateful as Eva uses a colourful expression “shower their gratitude”. However, they seem to have expressed their gratitude and appreciation to the wrong people. She uses a powerful expression “nearest guy they can find”, to indicate that appreciation was expressed on the basis of gender and regardless of the actual endeavour. She expresses her negative feelings about being treated this way stating that she felt “a little insulted”. Furthermore, it is important to note that such experience is not a single time occurrence, but has happened numerous times, as participant states “I’ve always been... insulted” when expressing her feelings and “often seems to be” when summarising the experience of cultural encounters. Her summary at the end of a quote is quite powerful as she names many roles in which women do a lot of work (secretary, treasurer and organiser) and repeats “and” before each of them for stronger impression of amount of work. As the credit goes to the chairman, the disappointment about the lack of appreciation for these roles

and women's effort is evident. The use of "evidently" suggests that according to Eva it is obvious that the chairman receives appreciation because he is a man.

In the next quote Eva narrates a similar story from the experience of her friend:

A friend told me a similar story. Some years ago she had a sensei [teacher] as a visitor in her home (she and her husband both do kendo). Her husband was on a business trip and she was left alone caring for the sensei. She worked her butt off for four days, waking at five a.m. to prepare him breakfast and going to bed at midnight. The last day of sensei's visit, her husband came home. To show his gratitude, the sensei gave her husband (who briefly met him and did one ji-geiko [free practice] together with sensei) a sword and some other nice presents. My friend got a bag of peanuts and not a word of thanks. Peanuts. Need I say more?

It seems that after discussing her own experience of cultural encounters Eva remained quite emotional about the topic and, therefore, decided to elaborate with another relevant story. The story itself is quite similar to the previous one: a woman working hard to accommodate the visiting Japanese sensei is not at all appreciated, while her husband, who was barely present at that time, receives gratitude and presents. It is, however, important how Eva chooses to tell this story. She uses a colourful expression "worked her butt off" to demonstrate the magnitude of effort her friend put in caring for sensei. She further explains what this effort entailed demonstrating the short period of time that remained for sleeping ("waking at five a.m. ... going to bed at midnight"). In contrast, the phrases "briefly met" and "did one ji-geiko" suggest the minimal sensei's interaction with her husband. Nevertheless, similarly to the previous story, all the credit went to the man while the woman received literally a bag of peanuts and "not a word of thanks." The bag of peanuts is seen as symbolic to the smallness of appreciation to the woman's effort. In fact, in slang "peanuts" refers to a very small and insignificant amount of something. It is likely that Eva consciously refers to this particular meaning of the word when she repeats the word "peanuts" to strengthen the impression of surprise and disappointment in such a gesture. Finally, she uses a rhetorical question to insinuate that such behaviour is wrong and invite the reader to consider the matter.

5.1.5 Summary

Eva's motivations to do kendo were first related to the fact that it's an individual sport. She soon discovered deeper meanings of practice and started seeing it as a process of personal development, where she could challenge herself and get to know herself better. She claims that kendo has given her strength and raised her self-esteem. Furthermore, she feels the presence of kendo experience in her daily life as the skills learnt in kendo can be used in life situations.

Eva talks about kendo as a gender-neutral sport, suggesting that focus on the mental practice, as well as equipment, that is the same for everyone, enable everyone to practice as equal. She contrasts kendo with other sports, arguing that kendo is free from such distracting aspects as media attention and sponsorship matters.

Her reflections come from a perspective of a person, rather than a woman, and the strong attitude that gender does not matter not only in kendo but in daily life too becomes evident.

However, Eva also discusses her negative experience of cultural encounters with Japanese men. She expresses disappointment and frustration in not being properly valued for her effort due to gender.

5.2 Laura's case

The themes emerging from Laura's case have been organised under the super-ordinate themes and can be found in Table 3. In terms of personal aspects, Laura discusses her motivations to do kendo and the outcomes of kendo practice. Under the theme Focusing on Gender, she discusses her experience of a violent gendered encounter, her attitudes to gender, the process of social construction of gender and gender stereotypes. When talking about the sport, Laura highlights women's role in development of Finnish kendo. Finally, she compares Finnish and Japanese cultures and discusses her experience of cultural encounters.

Table 3 *Emerging themes for Laura's case*

Super-ordinate themes	Themes	Representative quotes (Laura)
Focusing on the personal	Motivations to do the sport	<i>Atmosphere was totally different to many other sports Possibility to challenge myself and others. You can leave the outer world and all the expectations</i>
	Outcomes of the sport	<i>Practice itself has given me strength to go forward</i>
Focusing on gender	Attitude to gender	<i>I may be naive but I think that it's not a gender issue When different perceptions meet, you just notify the difference</i>
	Gendered encounters	<i>I was considering stopping kendo for good People were very young that time, they were ignorant</i>
	Social-construction of gender	<i>People vary due to different upbringing Maybe it comes from our parents?</i>
	Gender stereotypes	<i>World outside wants to make us believe We all should do our work for this to be changed</i>
Focusing on sport	Equality	<i>General feeling among Finnish kenshi is that kendo is for everyone</i>
	Women's role in Finish kendo	<i>There were difficult moments Women have become an essential part of Finnish kendo</i>
Focusing on the socio-cultural	Cultural encounters	<i>Had difficulties to get along with women Both sides should learn something like in keiko</i>
	Differences between Japan and Finland	<i>In Finland women are in leading positions It is clearly different from position of Japan</i>

5.2.1 Focusing on the personal

"You can leave the outer world and just focus on the main thing."

Laura discusses personal reasons for starting kendo, motivations to continue and outcomes achieved through practice. She chooses to begin the story with a chronological introduction of her early kendo experience.

The reason I started a kendo was a pure coincidence that beard many fruits. In the beginning I was just happy to do something different. The atmosphere was totally different to many other sports: an oriental martial art where man and women were training together. After the beginner's course, I got bogu [protective armour] and it opened to me

door what I really like the most in kendo: possibility to challenge myself and others.

She narrates the story of starting kendo using several timeframe markers: “I started”, “in the beginning”, “after the”, “opened the door”. This way the process of development of experience becomes evident. She admits having started kendo by chance, meaning there was no pre-contemplation or prior reasons to be interested in this sport. As an early motivation to do kendo she quotes distinctiveness of the sport, focusing especially on the origins (“oriental”) and the fact that men and women practice together. The use of an adverb “totally” strengthens the impression of contrast to other sports. Completion of the beginner’s course and getting the armour is seen as a stepping stone to a further, promising kendo experience. The idiom “opened the door” suggests that from then on she was enabled to experience something new. This new experience is valued greatly by Laura for providing an opportunity for personal and social development.

Indeed, Laura later claims, “Kendo has been important to me, physically, mentally and socially in multiple aspects.” On another occasion, she says:

...it is same time easy and very difficult to reflect what is to be a woman in kendo. The things close to myself are very simple, from where I found enough time to practice, how to keep myself in good condition and healthy, how to find motivation to go on when I’m tired and so on.

This quote reflects that although the prompt statement for writing was “A woman in kendo”, the participant’s personal meanings of participation in kendo are not related to gender. Rather she reflects on it from a human perspective. This suggests that gender identity is only a part of personal identity. From this personal perspective Laura reveals “things close to herself”, in other words, personal meanings of participation. These are the things that kendo provides - opportunity to maintain physical fitness; or the things that kendo requires from the participants and this way teaches them - commitment to practice and time management, motivation and stamina. The latter aspects can be considered life skills and are transferable from sport to daily life situations.

The following quote also talks about the personal meanings:

I have enjoyed kendo just because at the dojo [practice place] it really doesn’t matter. You can leave the outer world and all the expectations of being some gender outside and just focus on the main thing: practicing – nothing else.

The participant seems to enjoy and value kendo for gender equality it provides. She sees kendo as an island of equality in the ocean of gendered expectations and social pressures. The distinction between the equality-filled kendo context and the outside world guided by gender norms is evident. Kendo practice provides Laura an opportunity to run away from the outside world, allowing to be herself and focus only on the practice.

Finally, when discussing the challenges she faced as a woman in kendo, such as negative attitudes towards women in early stages of the sport's development, Laura suggests: "I have liked kendo so much that the practice itself has given me strength to go forward." This reflects the outcome of kendo practice – development of mental toughness. This mental strength has helped Laura to overcome challenges and continue practicing kendo.

5.2.2 Focusing on gender

"I may be naive but I think that it's not a gender issue."

In this section the Laura's attitudes and experiences in relation to gender will be presented. Such as encounters with hegemonic masculinity in kendo, thoughts on gender construction and gender differences.

To begin with, Laura admits, "I seldom reflect what it is to be a woman in kendo, which pops out most usually in the situations where something negative occurs." It can be speculated that there is no need to think about gender in kendo under normal circumstances. However, negative occurrences may inflict thoughts about gender. Such a negative occurrence is described in the following quote:

The first time I thought what it is to be a woman in kendo was when I encountered in the match with a man who had overwhelming physical power and determined attitude to give a lesson to a "girl"... The match was long and painful. Physical pain connected with mental threat causes fear. Individuals with such attitude always exist, bruises heal and bad experiences are not only ones in kendo... That time the most shocking aspect was that no one did nothing or said anything to the guy of his behaviour. The rest of the guys just congratulated him of his success, while I was considering stopping kendo for good.

The quote discusses Laura's experience encountering hegemonically masculine behaviour in one of her first kendo competitions. She uses strong adjectives

“overwhelming” and “determined” to describe her male opponent’s physical power and attitude to women, and to highlight the intention to demonstrate this power and attitude in the competition. The idiom “give a lesson” suggests that Laura perceived her opponent’s behaviour as seeking to punish her for wrong behaviour, “restore the order” where masculinity dominates, and change her future behaviours to prevent a woman entering the male area again. The use of a word “girl” (referring to both a woman and a child) suggests that the opponent was perceived to underrate and not take her seriously, however, the fact that the word is in quotation marks may reflect her non-acceptance of such a role. This encounter was clearly a negative experience to Laura, causing both physical and mental pain. However, a more negative (than physical and mental struggle) aspect of this encounter she considers to be the fact that violence and demonstration of hegemonic masculinity was socially accepted by fellow kendo practitioners (“no one did... or said anything”), even more, it was celebrated as the winner was congratulated for success. In fact, she describes this experience as “the most shocking”. Not only is it a strong adjective demonstrating the strength of effect on Laura, but it also reflects the surprise about the endorsement of such behaviours. It can be speculated that such surprise results from the fact that Laura had different expectations of acceptable behaviours in kendo, especially having in mind respect to the opponent that kendo advocates. The negative experience was so strong that Laura even contemplated quitting kendo practice. Despite the negative experiences, Laura remains positive, arguing that “bruises heal”, in other words, she sees uncomfortable experiences as temporary. Furthermore, she does not attribute the violent encounter to gender, suggesting that violent and rude individuals exist regardless of the social context.

The next quote elaborates on the perceived reasons and the outcomes of this negative encounter:

Most of the people were very young that time, they were ignorant and only thinking themselves. Since then a lot has happened. Today such a match would have been stopped and general feeling among Finnish kenshi [kendo practitioners] is that kendo is for everyone. I learned my lesson; even today I try to avoid violent persons: both men and woman.

Here Laura attributes the incident to the ignorance of people which is perceived to be related to the fact that kendo was in early stages of development in Finland. She uses timeframe markers – “at that time”, “since then”, “today” – to indicate the process of the sport’s development. The contrast between the time the incident happened and today

is evident and the two timeframes are linked with a phrase “a lot has happened”, suggesting that kendo has come a long way since then. Laura expresses certainty that today such an incident would not be tolerated by kendo society and claims that Finnish kendo culture promotes equality and inclusion. After all, the negative encounter is seen as a learning process leading to a better understanding of people and adapting behaviours accordingly. Again Laura does not focus on gender when talking about avoidance of violent people, explicitly explaining that she avoids both men and women.

Laura expresses the thought that people vary due to different upbringing and their perceptions of gender are adapted accordingly from their surroundings. She sees this process as natural and uses the following strategy to deal with people with contrasting attitudes: “Simply when different perceptions meet, you just notify the difference.” The use of words “simply” and “just” suggests that for participant it is easy and natural to react in such a way. Although a very tolerant and non-confrontational way of handling the differences, it is a very personal approach that may not be adopted by others. Instead of simply accepting different attitudes, other people may attempt to change them according to their liking. Indeed, such an encounter between the Laura, who believed kendo is suitable for women, and a man, who believed kendo is a masculine area, was discussed previously.

When reacting to Silvia’s story, Laura expresses different attitudes to gender and related stereotypes. In fact, she expresses surprise of the contrast of experiences: “This story is almost totally different from my experiences.” When Silvia suggests that in her experience women tend to care more about trivial things, while men are focused on doing what they enjoy, Laura disagrees and goes on to discuss how gendered behaviours are socially constructed:

I may be naive but I think that it’s not a gender issue... This is something that comes from the culture of the sports or whatever hobby you do – it is like how parents teach their children how this world works. Maybe it comes from our parents? If I think of sports like soccer or ice-hockey where the parents are shouting on the side of the field or ice rink “kill them” and it is considered to be very masculine to shout and to be aggressive. These kind of comments comes from the coaches too. And that is too much for a child I think. What kind of people are these parents and coaches raising??

Before expressing her view that certain values and behaviours of people are not a gender issue, Laura rushes to suggest that such position may be the result of her idealistic beliefs (“I may be naïve”), this way demonstrating awareness that her views may be contrasting with common views of society. She then goes on to discuss how, in her perception, notions of gender are constructed in sports. The culture of a sport or a hobby is seen as having significant effect on people’s values and behaviours. This culture, in turn, is seen as nurtured and transmitted to children by significant others – parents and coaches. Laura uses an example of soccer and ice-hockey to illustrate the process of masculinity construction, by creating a picturesque description of parents and coaches reinforcing hegemonically masculine behaviours on a sideline. A rhetorical question at the end, “What kind of people are these parents and coaches raising??”, suggests disapproval of such behaviours of significant others. The two question marks strengthen the impression and reveal frustration. It is however unclear whether the frustration is with the process of reinforcement of gendered values in sport or the values itself. Nevertheless, Laura argues that such behaviours of significant others put too much pressure on children, not allowing them to be themselves and simply enjoy the game.

Laura’s views to gender are evident on numerous occasions in the text. On another occasion she states again: “I still think that the gender is not an issue in any way. I want to be so naïve and believe that it’s not any issue to behave in any special way.” This statement is different from the previous one in several ways. The expression “I still think” reflects a repetition of Laura’s contra-argument to those with different views and the fact that she remains loyal to her position. The theme of being naïve repeats again together with the statement of attitudes. However, this time she says “I want to be so naïve”, suggesting that she consciously chooses to hold on to this approach no matter what the others think. The reasons for such commitment to own views may be underlying in the following quote:

I think that the world outside wants to make us believe that we are somehow different if we are men or women. But we are still all the same. Especially some religious people still think that man should be the leader and woman’s place is somehow under him. And these people are both men and women.

She perceives that some parts of society have a hidden agenda for sustaining patriarchal system and “traditional” gender roles. She particularly relates such views to the role of

religion. However, her disagreement is evident as contra-argument begins with a strong “but”. She then states, “we are still all the same”, implying that, despite the gender roles enforced on us, human beings essentially have similar qualities. She herself is not judging people by gender and that is evident in the last sentence.

On another occasion, when reacting to Silvia’s comment that, in her experience, women tend to be “extremely skilled at psychological warfare”, Laura discusses gender stereotypes and their social construction:

I think that this is the stereotype that people want to keep up. I think it’s the same thing that we think every Finnish people are shy and not so talkative. Does this come from our teachers? Does all these thoughts come from our fathers and mothers? I don’t know but somehow these beliefs are still alive and there are only a few people who want to change them. I think that we all should do our work for this to be changed. If we want any change...

She expresses the opinion that such views are driven by stereotypes. She illustrates her point by comparing such gender stereotype with another commonly known national stereotype (all Finnish people are shy and quiet). This way she intends to show that stereotypes are mere generalisations of values and behaviours of a group of people and may not be true in case of particular individuals. In other words, not everyone conforms to a given stereotype. Further Laura speculates about the process of stereotype construction, again accentuating the role of significant others (parents and teachers). The fact she uses rhetorical questions suggests uncertainty of the process of stereotype construction and later the phrase “I don’t know” confirms it. Furthermore, rhetorical questions in a way invite the reader to investigate the topic and possibly change the situation. Although the explanation of gender stereotyping is not totally clear for Laura, she states the fact that the issue does exist. She again speculates that the beliefs are rife because some people want to keep them, maybe for them it is easier to orientate in the world guided by stereotypes. The regret that “only a few” people want to change the situation and the notion that without enough effort nothing will change are evident. However, Laura is also aware that everyone plays a role in the social change (“we all should do our work”). The use of “we” suggests that she herself feels as a part of society responsible for influencing the change. Considering the previously discussed views of Laura that gender is not an issue, she is already working towards it by personally not judging people by gender. The phrase, “we all should do our work”, acts

as an invitation to people to join her and be the catalyst for change. The last sentence with suspension points allows the reader to think about it, consider if they are happy with a current situation. Furthermore, it has emotional weight, speaking straight to the reader that without his effort there will not be a change, and possibly attempting to awaken their conscience.

5.2.3 Focusing on sport

“There have always been several reasons to be proud to be a Finnish kendo woman.”

A strong theme in Laura’s text is the development of Finnish kendo and the role of women in this process. In the following quote she summarises the role of women in Finnish kendo and her positive feelings about it:

There have always been several reasons to be proud to be a Finnish kendo woman. We have several strong women in Finland with good and honest kendo; throughout the years women’s national team has been responsible of several medals in international level. The strong women have opened the path and women have become an essential part of Finnish kendo.

The phrases “there have always been” and “throughout the years” suggest that women’s role in Finnish kendo is continuous and persistent. The participant clearly relates her identity to the group of strong Finnish kendo women, and this is evident in the pride she has for the achievements of the group and the use of the pronoun “we”. She values women’s input for the quality and honesty of their kendo and good representation of the country at international level. She sees the strong women’s effort as an “ice-breaker” that has “opened the path” for other women in kendo. This effort is perceived to be significant as women are now seen inseparable from kendo, almost a defining feature of Finnish kendo culture.

However, it has not always been like this as women did not play a significant role in the early stages of the development of Finnish kendo, they had to fight and gradually establish their position. As discussed in the previous section, the incident encountering hegemonically masculine behaviours was the reflection of prematurity of kendo culture in Finland. Laura further discusses the development of kendo in terms of gender equality:

In the early stages of kendo in Finland, before any women’s success in competitions there were difficult moments when I felt that nothing is

enough to be respected and only thing that mattered was to be in men's team. ... When active women started to practice harder and demand some attention for national team practices, we were just looked eyes open, not respected, barely noted. It made you feel little and not wanted. "Boys" attitude started to turn, but there were moments when you saw the disappointment from certain persons about the fact that women's kendo come into their world. ...Then it was needed to be really stubborn in order to go on. In my opinion all Finnish kendo women who had continued active practice for many years share property.

She uses timeframe markers, "in the early stages", "when", "then", to indicate the process of development. It is evident that early stages of the process were marked with disappointment that, despite the effort, women were still lacking respect. Although putting a lot of effort into practice with a view to representing the country well, women only caused surprise. They were still lacking respect, attention and support. Laura expresses her feelings about being treated this way, suggesting she felt "little and not wanted". "Little" can be interpreted as not taken seriously, unvalued, or valued less than men, while "not wanted" suggests the feeling of being in the wrong place where one is an odd one and not welcome. It seems that success in competitions was the factor that helped the women to become noticed. However, even when the change was inflicted, challenges continued as some people still had negative attitudes to women in kendo. Laura calls these attitudes "boys' attitudes", this suggests that they originated from the masculine part of kendo community and were probably based on the idea of dominant masculinity. Sustaining positions in a hostile environment and changing the attitudes towards women in kendo required a great deal of stubbornness. In fact, Laura perceives that all Finnish women, who continued kendo practice throughout the years, share the same property. The question is, however, whether stubbornness was an innate quality of these women or rather it was the mental strength gained through kendo practice. In other words, did kendo attract the more stubborn women in the first place, or the practice made them stronger. The quote discussed earlier, "I have liked kendo so much that the practice itself has given me strength to go forward", supports the idea that kendo practice has contributed to the development of such personal qualities as mental toughness.

5.2.4 Focusing on the socio-cultural

“From my point of view to cultural encounters both sides should learn something like in keiko.”

In this section the focus is on the socio-cultural context of kendo practice. Laura compares the Finnish and Japanese cultures and discusses her experience of cultural encounters in relation to gender. She argues that Finland is “a relatively advanced country, what comes to equality between men and women” and goes on to compare the Finnish and Japanese contexts:

Finnish kendo society is quite different from the kendo society of Japan; especially activity of women makes a huge difference. In Finland women are in leading positions in national federation and as a presidents of kendo clubs, that wouldn't happen in Japan ... It is clearly different from position of Japan: where women are seldom in the inner circle of kendo organization.

Laura compares the Finnish and Japanese kendo societies and reveals the contrast. The phrases “quite different” and “clearly different” suggest that this contrast is significant. Furthermore, she relates this difference strongly to the differences in women’s activity in kendo organisations, using the words “especially” and “huge difference” to indicate the strength of effect. It is women’s presence in the management and leadership positions of kendo organisations that contrasts so much with the Japanese kendo culture. In fact, “that wouldn’t happen in Japan” suggests the strong perception of Japan as a patriarchal society. In a way, women are seen to be an important part of uniqueness of Finnish kendo culture.

These socio-cultural difference, however, cause some inconvenience when the two cultures encounter. Laura discusses her experience with cultural encounters:

When Japanese men come to Finland without any former experience of kendo outside of Japan, they are sometime bit puzzled. Some of them accept and adopt into a situation some just can't understand and learn ... For me it hasn't been a big problem. There had been a few Japanese men who had difficulties to get along with women, but from my point of view to cultural encounters both sides should learn something like in keiko [kendo practice].

She describes the situation of Japanese men entering the Finnish kendo context and this change of socio-cultural context making them puzzled. The use of “come” makes it

clear that such situation is not a single occurrence, but occurs occasionally. It is evident that the participant feels that any kind of prior experience of kendo outside Japan would have had effect on their attitudes, in a way, would have prepared them for the Finnish kendo experience. Laura notes that some of those men accept the cultural differences and adapt, however, others are resistant and cannot understand and learn. Further she emphasises that this difficulty of the Japanese men to accept a new culture is mostly related with interacting with women, probably because women's roles in Finland and Japan are so different. She, however, handles such encounters calmly not seeing it as any problem. Instead, she sees it as a learning process, where both sides can learn something, and suggests this being an extension of learning in kendo. It can be speculated, that it is such values as appreciating differences and respecting each other that are suggested to be transferred from kendo context to social situations.

Laura further elaborates on how she handles personal differences:

I think that I am who I am and I don't have to be something else. And the people that I confront are what they are and they can't be something else. They don't have to be something else. The main thing is that we can practice together and there is only the shinai [bamboo sword] and the mind what is speaking... Of course I feel sometimes that some people underestimate me or I somehow feel that they wouldn't want to practice with me or whatever. But I try to put that thought aside because even feeling that thought will affect my way of practicing.

She clearly accepts the fact that people are different and cannot or should not be forced to change. It is also evident that this acceptance of differences is perceived as a two way process where ideally both sides accept each other (“I am what I am”, “They are what they are”). However, there is a slight difference in wording of the second part of a sentence in each case. When talking about other people, she says “can't be something else”, this suggests a strong fact that people cannot change their personality, the fact that maybe has been tested by experience. However, when talking about herself, she says “don't have to be something else”, and here some kind of resistance is evident, as if she would be forced to change, yet strongly feeling that she has the right to be herself. This suggests that there may be differences in the way people accept each others' uniqueness. Although Laura clearly accepts, respects and values diversity, her main focus (“the main thing”) is on the fact that, despite the differences, people can practice kendo together. The phrase “there is only the shinai and the mind what is speaking” suggests that kendo

itself does not care much about the socio-cultural aspects, but all focus is on the practice itself, especially on the mental aspect. This way kendo sports framework dominates and overwrites the socio-cultural issues. The needs of the sport or, more specifically, the fact that still mind is the basis for good kendo, help deal with socio-cultural challenges, such as people's negative attitudes and behaviours. This is evident in Laura's effort to put all distracting thoughts aside in favour of a good kendo practice.

5.2.5 Summary

Laura's motivations to do kendo were at first related to distinctiveness of the sport, both its oriental nature and gender equality. She further discovered deeper meanings of practice related with challenging herself and developing personally. She also values kendo for the opportunity to leave outside world with all gendered expectations. Laura claims that the practice has given her strength to overcome difficulties.

She discusses her experience of a violent gendered encounter in early stages of kendo development in Finland. Nevertheless, her attitude to gender remains neutral as she believes gender is not an issue in any way. She also discusses the process of social construction of gender and the role of significant others in this process. Laura notices stagnancy and reinforcement of gender stereotypes, arguing that everyone plays a role in changing them.

Laura notices a strong and continuous role of women in development of Finnish kendo. She discussed the process as challenging and takes pride in being one of those stubborn women.

Furthermore, she contrasts Finnish and Japanese cultures in terms of women's role in kendo organisation. Finally, she discusses the cultural encounters between the two cultures, arguing that it is a learning experience for both sides and an exercise in accepting people's differences.

5.3 Silvia's case

The themes emerging from Silvia's case have been organised under the super-ordinate themes and can be found in Table 4. In terms of personal aspects, Silvia talks about her motivations to do kendo and the outcomes of kendo practice. In the section Focusing on Gender, she expresses her attitude to gender and gender differences, discusses gender stereotypes and the process of social construction of gender. When talking about the sports framework, she discusses the ways kendo promotes equality,

respect and life-long learning, and contrasts kendo to other sports. Finally, she offers her perceptions of differences between the Japanese and Finnish cultures, discusses her experience of cultural encounters and expresses her attitude to ‘going native’ in kendo.

Table 4 *Emerging themes for Silvia’s case*

Super-ordinate themes	Themes	Representative quotes (Silvia)
Focusing on the personal	Motivation to do the sport	<i>Doing something completely different</i>
	Outcomes of the sport	<i>Kendo is a tool to understand myself</i> <i>Accept myself the way I am</i> <i>Still in the process of learning</i>
Focusing on gender	Attitudes to gender	<i>What always bothered me deeply... is the other women</i> <i>I’ve always admired the male way of handling</i> <i>Being a rarity – a woman kendoka – I’ve enjoyed special attention</i>
	Social construction of gender	<i>It’s my surroundings and the feedback I’ve been given</i>
Focusing on sport	Gender stereotypes	<i>Girls are expected to look pretty and guys are expected to be strong</i> <i>I’ve always disregarded such advice</i>
	Equality	<i>We all train together despite age, gender or level</i>
	Respect	<i>Respecting your opponent, no matter what</i>
	Contrast with other sports	<i>It’s all about bloody competition, results and sponsorship money</i>
	Life-long learning	<i>A sport, which you can do all your life</i>
Focusing on the socio-cultural	‘Going native’	<i>One does not need to "go native" to learn how to do kendo</i>
	Differences between Japanese and Finish culture	<i>For the Japanese "it’s important not to stand out</i> <i>Simply accept each other in all our individualism (Finland)</i>
	Cultural encounters	<i>I offend the Japanese idea of conformism greatly</i> <i>I’ve never taken that personally myself</i> <i>I like to challenge them...change the way they think</i>

5.3.1 Focusing on the personal

“It has made it easier for me to actually accept myself the way I am.”

Silvia begins her story by introducing her personal perspective to the topic investigated and by reasoning about her motivations to do kendo:

Being a woman in kendo – and a caucasian woman at that – is being the exception, a minority within a minority. This is the first thing that comes to mind, when reflecting on my standpoint as a kendoka. This is also probably the thing that originally appealed to me the most: doing something completely different that nobody else is doing where I come from and really standing out of the crowd.

It seems that her first reaction to the prompt statement “A woman in kendo” was eagerness to clarify that her reflection comes from the perspective of a minority. It is evident that representing a minority is important part of Silvia’s identity. She relates the minority experience not only to being a woman in kendo, but also to her ethnic background. These two aspects are described as being “a minority within a minority”, in other words, being unique in a given social context. This uniqueness is perceived to be quite significant as participant uses the phrases “completely different” and “really standing out” to describe it. Furthermore, the uniqueness of identity is evident from the two perspectives: firstly, being different in the social context she comes from because of participation in kendo, secondly, being different in kendo because of her gender and ethnic background. Nevertheless, being different is perceived positively by Silvia and is even named a reason for interest in kendo.

She further goes on to discuss the experience of personal development through kendo:

When I first started kendo, I was a teenager and very unsure of myself. One of the most important experiences I’ve had through kendo is this experience of being the “white negroe” – if such a colourful expression is permitted. It has made it easier for me to actually accept myself the way I am and to ignore the ignorance of other people and just focus on the necessary. Sure, there are tons of other things I’ve learned on the side and tons of things I am still in the process of learning, but this is the most important lesson for me, as a woman and as a kendoka [kendo practitioner].

The timeframe of the process of personal development becomes evident as Silvia talks about her transformation from an uncertain teenager to a self-aware and more confident person. Firstly (“when I first started kendo”), there was the experience of uncertainty about oneself, then there was the experience of learning through kendo, at the end of which Silvia had accepted herself, finally, the phrase “still in the process” suggests that

the learning process has continued to date and is also expected to continue in the future. It is evident that the learning outcomes were vast as Silvia uses the phrase “tons of things.” However, such a vague description suggests that she chooses not to elaborate on those outcomes, and instead focuses on the personally most important one. She chooses a colourful expression “white negroe” to describe the experience of being different. There is a sense that this experience was not very pleasant at that time, and was related to being odd, not fitting in. However, it seems that through kendo Silvia learnt to appreciate and accept her uniqueness. Kendo practice has turned her attention to the necessary and away from the external distractions, such as opinions of other people. Clearly this experience is very important to Silvia as she calls it “the most important lesson.”

Furthermore, when reacting to Eva’s story, Silvia summarises her view to kendo experience as a learning process, stating the following: “kendo is a tool to understand myself, how I learn, how I react to different people, different situations and how I handle pressure.” This way she highlights overall importance of kendo experience in her life.

5.3.2 Focusing on gender

“Being a rarity – a woman kendoka – I’ve enjoyed special attention from my male peers.”

In this section Silvia talks about gender differences and the process of social construction of gender. The following quote discusses her perceptions of femininity and feminine sports:

I’ve never been very interested in sports or past times, which are traditionally considered feminine. Sure, dancing looks fun enough and sure, I took riding lessons as a child. But what always bothered me deeply about these more “feminine” sports is the other women. It’s not just a stereotype, that whenever women come together in large groups which contain no or very few male individuals, the atmosphere starts going bad. Women do engage in senseless cat fights over futile things and are extremely skilled at psychological warfare and shutting people out socially. That is often more cruel than it would be to just punch somebody in the face. Mentally inflicted wounds are often deeper and harder to cure than physical ones.

She begins with discussing her previous sport experiences. It is evident that participant has in her life tried sports that are perceived to be feminine; however, it is also clear that she did not find them very exciting. The phrase “I’ve never been very interested” suggests the long-term indifference to sports considered feminine, while “fun enough” describes her attitude to some of them. It may be interpreted that the latter phrase means the participant does not dislike those sports, but does not get a lot of satisfaction from them either. It is also evident that Silvia is aware of the common division of sports into masculine and feminine, and accepts the fact that such division exists. However, she herself seems to try to distance from it. This is evident in the fact that she writes the word “feminine” in quotation marks as if it was not her words, not her categorisation, and she intends not to be associated with it. Furthermore, the phrase “traditionally considered” also suggests that it is not her who considers it, but rather the society in general. This also refers to social construction of gender and the perception that gender roles have been ingrained in society through time. She further explains the reasons for her neutral attitude towards sports considered feminine, and it becomes clear it is not the problem of sports itself but rather the social environment of those sport, in other words, the fact that other participants are women. Silvia seems to be strongly affected by the mostly feminine environment as she admits being “deeply bothered” by it. This experience is clearly negative and unpleasant for her. She uses very rich language to describe what she perceives to be feminine behaviours. The word “catfights” is used to refer to conflicts between women in a bitter way. She characterises these conflicts as “senseless” and “futile” to highlight their pointlessness. She uses a strong adverb “extremely” to strengthen the impression of women’s skills or abilities of what she calls “psychological warfare”. “Warfare” is a powerful metaphor referring to psychological techniques used in conflicts. Comparing feminine conflicts to war, Silvia implies their vast negative consequences on human beings as well as prolonged nature. The use of such a rich language suggests that Participant was emotional about these issues and wanted to give the reader a stronger impression of this experience. She further suggests that such behaviours are crueller than physical violence and refers to “mental wounds”, or psychological suffering, that is stronger and harder to overcome than physical suffering. It is clear that she is talking about her personal experience as certainty and emotion in her statements is strong. Although it may be argued that this Silvia’s story about femininity is a generalisation based on stereotypical beliefs, she hurries to claim

that “it’s not just a stereotype”. It means she is aware of such stereotypes, and in her case these stereotypes have been confirmed by experience.

After expressing negative attitude to femininity Silvia continues by introducing the fact that she grew up with an older brother and no sister and was always “a bit of a tomboy” in her habits. The fact that she calls herself a “tomboy” reflects her awareness of not fitting in the traditional perception of feminine behaviours. She further discusses her opinion about masculinity and masculine behaviours.

I’ve always admired the male way of handling things without too much fuss, and less talk and especially less emotional outbursts. Men are in general more straightforward and honest in their ways... I don’t believe that such honesty is an innate quality of men – just like being irrational, bad at maths or outright hysterical isn’t a natural born quality of any woman – but simply a result of upbringing. Be it as it may, I’d rather surround myself with people, who do not fret over their external appearance or other trivial things and who are just content with doing what they love most. For some reason, these people are often men. I’ve found many such people among fellow kendokas [kendo practitioners] and they have become dear friends to me.

The phrase “I’ve always admired” suggests the long-term fondness of masculine behaviours, or what she calls “the male way of handling things.” She further characterises it as exhibiting less talk, fuss and emotional outbursts, and being more straightforward and honest. The use of “less” and “more” suggests that it is a comparison, and although the quote does not specify what the masculine behaviours are being compared with, it is clearly the previously discussed feminine behaviours. In fact, the quote as a whole contrasts the quote discussed previously. While in the previous quote negative feelings about feminine behaviours were expressed, this quote reflects positive feelings about masculine behaviours. Again she demonstrates her awareness of common gender stereotypes, such as “women are bad at maths, irrational and hysterical”, and argues that, in her opinion, neither these, nor her described masculine qualities are innate to either men or women, but rather “a result of upbringing”. In other words, gender related behaviours are socially learnt through time and experience. However, she demonstrates further disinterest in the process of construction of behaviours stating “be it as it may” and focusing on the end result of it – personal qualities of people that she wants to be surrounded by. Her experience again confirms

the gender stereotypes, as these people often turn out to be men. She does not further speculate why this is the case and simply states “for some reason”. On one hand, she herself reinforces common gender stereotypes by generalising the masculine and feminine behaviours. On the other hand, she criticises the process of construction of stereotypes, claiming that gender behaviours are not innate, but rather imposed by society. All in all, Silvia appreciates the fact that kendo allows her to interact with people of similar qualities to her and build strong social relationships.

She further suggests the following: “Being a rarity – a woman kendoka – I’ve enjoyed special attention from my male peers practically all the time I’ve been doing the sport. I’d be lying through my teeth, if I didn’t say I’ve enjoyed it.” Clearly in kendo context she sees herself as distinctive (“a rarity”) due to gender. This distinctiveness seems to be attracting a lot of attention of male kendo practitioners that Silvia enjoys immensely. Although from the previous discussions it is clear that Silvia is not in favour of traditional feminine behaviours, she still relates her identity strongly to femininity and takes pride in being a woman. It can be speculated that she represents different, “alternative” to traditionally feminine, qualities and creates her own version of femininity.

Silvia continues with expressing her observations about participation rates in different sport. She notices that in Finland participation in sports disciplines is divided by gender, for example many more girls participate in such activities as dancing and horseback riding, while boys are more often attracted to such sports as football or ice hockey. She perceives that this difference in participation is relative to opportunities offered for boys and girls, while the opportunities are influenced by gendered social expectations (“girls are expected to look pretty and guys are expected to be strong and athletic”).

Silvia also discusses her experience of learning the gender both in sports and other contexts of life:

It’s my surroundings and the feedback I’ve been given over the years, that makes me suppose, that there exists some kind of division into “male” and “female” sports. I’ve been told that it’s not feminine to do sports, that are loud or sweaty and that any sport, which includes physical combat in any form or where you actually build muscle tissue, is “not feminine”. I’m glad to see more and more women not giving a damn about such divisions, though. But still, even during my time I’ve

had many teachers, adults and so forth tell me what kind of books to read (e.g. “science fiction is not for girls”, said my Finnish teacher once), what music to listen to, how to express myself etc. in order to “be a proper woman”. I’ve always disregarded such advice, but the notion of gender and what is appropriate especially for the female gender sits very deeply in us. It doesn’t stop with sports.

She highlights the role of the social environment (“my surroundings”) in attempting to shape her understanding of gender. It is evident this has been a continuous process as she uses the phrase “over the years” to indicate the timeframe. When talking about division of masculine and feminine sport, she again seems to try to distance herself from the matter, as if it is not her division, but something imposed by society externally. This is evident in the phrase “makes me suppose.” This is further supported when she explains how gendered beliefs are constructed: it is done through the process of feedback from other people (“I’ve been told”). She further provides examples of what kind of beliefs have been attempted to instil in her: that sports that are loud, sweaty, build muscles and contain physical contact are not feminine, and that science fiction is not for girls. The fact that she writes “not feminine” in quotation marks also reflects her intention to distance herself from this statement, and even suggests disagreement. In fact, her disagreement becomes evident as she sates “I’ve always disregarded such advice” and expresses her gladness about the fact that more women also do not mind the gendered expectations. However, both of these positive statements are followed with a “but” and a disappointment in continuous reinforcement of gender stereotypes. It becomes clear, that although some women, including Silvia, are challenging traditional gender norms, they are still very much alive and difficult to transform (“sits very deeply in us”). She notes that gendered expectations govern many areas of life not only sport, and highlights the role of significant others (teachers, other adults) in perpetuating these beliefs. Furthermore, it is evident that it must have taken a great deal of strength to repeatedly disregard the beliefs imposed by more experienced adults.

Finally, when commenting on Eva’s story, Silvia summarises her view to gender, suggesting that she understands equality through differences, and, therefore, gender differences as well as other differences must be considered when practicing kendo in order to effectively pursue physical and mental growth.

5.3.3 Focusing on sport

“Other sports disciplines... They have nothing to do with fair play, equality or respect.”

Another important theme emerges when Silvia discusses kendo sports framework and compares it to other sports. She discusses such aspects as equality, respect and lifelong learning.

What makes kendo different from many other combat sports is actually the equality (even if it sometimes only runs skin deep) among the kendokas [kendo practitioners]. We all train together despite age, gender or level. Equality and respect towards your peers is something that is inscribed into this sport – something that should also be inscribed into a bunch of other sports too, but which is not seen as much in practice. Sure, there is a lot of talk about fair play in European sports disciplines, but I personally think it’s an ideal, which is often left unachieved.

When talking about kendo Silvia immediately highlights its distinctiveness from other sports, and this suggests that this is why she values the sport. The main aspect differentiating kendo from other sports, according to her, is equality. This equality is evident in the fact that kendo participants practice together despite gender, age or skill level. Even though she admits this equality sometimes “runs only skin deep”, or, in other words, is not always fully achieved, she still sees it as an ideal that guides all kendo practitioners. It can be argued that kendo sports framework suggests and expects equality, but it is left for participants to implement it. Silvia sees equality and respect as the basis of kendo, the key characteristics, something inscribed into the sport and unchangeable. Furthermore, she believes that these values should be fundamental to other sports as well. However, she notes that this “ideal” is often left unachieved in other European sports. It is evident that she sees kendo as implementing those values that other sports do not manage to implement.

In terms of equality, Silvia concludes: “Kendo is the same for everyone, and a good kendoka can have a sensible training with any other kendoka.” This quote implies that ability to appreciate every practice partner is a sign of experience and again suggests that equality is an ideal in kendo. She further compares kendo to other European disciplines in terms of equality and suggests the following: “Children are divided into training groups according to age and gender from very early on even within the same sports discipline. They train their discipline in very homogenous groups and

this does not leave very much room for a notion of equality to even evolve.” Clearly she believes that division by gender and age prevents sports participants from developing the notion of equality. According to Silvia, only by noticing and accepting the differences can children learn about equality and this is not possible in homogenous groups.

She continues by discussing another key aspect of kendo – respect to fellow practitioners:

The other ideal of kendo, which I was getting at is the ideal towards respecting your opponent, no matter what. You do not simply bow before and after a match, because it’s an empty ritual. You bow out of respect. Even if you lose, you bow to your opponent for teaching you an important lesson in losing. If you win, you do not throw your shinai [bamboo sword] around and make cart wheels, you contain yourself and thank the other one for a good match. This is something that has always appealed to me in kendo which I have never found in any European sport I’ve tried.

Similarly to the previously discussed equality, she also sees respect as an ideal of kendo, or the key principle, that she values greatly. This respect seems to be unconditional as participant states “respect... no matter what.” She further elaborates that it means both when winning and losing. Losing is seen not as a disappointment but as a learning opportunity, while winning requires containment and emotional control. It is evident that in both cases the opponent is perceived as enabler, who enables one to learn and reach their potential. She uses a picturesque description “you do not throw your shinai around and make cart wheels” to refer to behaviours that are not acceptable in kendo as a celebration of victory. As this clearly refers to the ways athletes in other sports celebrate their victories, this way she again contrasts kendo to other sports, suggesting that other sports are lacking respect to opponent.

Silvia also contrasts kendo to other martial arts:

I’ve heard much worse stories about especially the weaponless disciplines, where women are made to feel unwelcome at the dojo [practice place] and where it’s not possible even to have men and women practice together. Sometimes this is due to practical reasons – other times it’s just a question of attitude.

The big contrast between kendo and other martial arts disciplines is evident, as participant claims the latter to generate “much worse stories.” Clearly this awareness comes not from personal experience but possibly from acquaintances, who have actually experienced it. A relief can be sensed in the quote about the fact that Silvia is not participating in those disciplines. The problem she sees is lack of equality that stems from two sources: one is the practical reasons, another is attitude issues. It can be speculated that practical reasons may be related to sports framework, for example, emphasis on physicality and strength, while attitude issues that make women “feel unwelcome” may be related to gender stereotypes.

In the next quote Silvia concludes her discussion about the differences between the sports:

I've spent enough time through kendo sitting in meetings of the Finnish sports federation, listening to speeches made by representatives of other sports disciplines: They have nothing to do with fair play, equality or respect or doing something for the joy of doing something. It's all about bloody competition, results and sponsorship money from a very early age on... We Europeans seem to be very goal-oriented, whereas oriental thought stresses the process itself – not just in sports, in other fields of life, too. And that, I think, leads to another kind of mental growth than simply striving for the gold medal all the time.

She begins her argument by assuring the reader that she has enough experience to be able to state the fact that other sports do not promote fair play, equality, respect and enjoyment. In fact, she states they “have nothing to do with” the latter values. It is evident that she perceives a strong detachment of sports from these values. In contrast, she perceives a strong attachment to (“It’s all about”) fierce competitiveness, results and sponsorship money. In other words, European sports seem to be outcome-oriented, rather than focusing on the process. She further attributes this to cultural differences, suggesting that Europeans tend to be goal-oriented not only in sports but also in life, while Asians are more process-oriented. Clearly she values the latter approach more as it leads to personal development (“another kind of mental growth”) rather than simply a strive for extrinsic rewards. Although it is not evident in the quote, kendo represents these Eastern values.

Finally, Silvia highlights the life-long nature of learning in kendo, suggesting that “kendo is also a sport, which you can do all your life.” She also asks a rhetorical

question, “Have you even heard of a female gymnast or figure skater, who continues her sport after her teens?” This way she again highlights the contrast between kendo and other, traditionally feminine sports, and invites the reader to think about the topic.

5.3.4 Focusing on the socio-cultural

“I like to challenge them, maybe even change the way they think about things.”

In this section Silvia’s quotes related to socio-cultural context of kendo will be discussed. She will talk about the cultural differences between Japan and Finland and her experience of gendered cultural encounters in kendo.

Silvia admits that she has never practiced kendo for longer periods in Asia and sees this fact as responsible for her views to kendo. She demonstrates awareness that kendo practitioners in Japan “tend to be more on the traditional and introvert side”, and hence perceives kendo practice there as “trying to blend in”. However, she argues that she is not interested in having this experience. Further Silvia expresses her belief that one does not need to “go native” to learn how to do kendo. She states the following: “I’ve lived long enough in different countries with different sorts of people to know, that I have the freedom to make selections and do things my way – that there is no one perfect way of completing things.” In this quote she attributes her open-minded attitude towards diversity of behaviours to her international experience. It seems that she perceives such attitudes being developed inevitably as one gains experience of living in different countries and interacting with different people. This is evident in the phrase “I’ve lived long enough... to know”. It is implied that this freedom to make own decisions about behaviours and actions also applies to kendo. This way Silvia suggests there is no single way of doing kendo and that every participant finds his/her own way.

After expressing her own views to cultural aspects of kendo, Silvia further introduces the contrasting beliefs of other people and speculates about the reasons of such beliefs:

This might actually shock some people, for there are many who have more rigid views towards kendo. Many of my fellow kendoka [kendo practitioners] seem to be wanting to become more Japanese than the Japanese themselves and want to do things exactly the Japanese way – which is often a very rigid and complicated one. I see this as a result of their ulterior motives for becoming interested in Japanese culture and kendo as a discipline in the first place. They’ve fallen in love with a

place and the idea of japaneseness. They can have it their way, but I've originally started doing kendo in order to feel better about myself and I'm determined to stay on that path.

She perceives that her views to kendo may be unusual and even shocking to some kendo colleagues in Finland because many of them have more “rigid” views. She further explains that this rigidity means striving to do things exactly the Japanese way. Silvia names such views as “wanting to become more Japanese than the Japanese themselves” and it becomes clear she sees it as overdoing it, overcomplicating things. She then offers her explanation to such attitudes, suggesting that this is due to “ulterior motives” of becoming interested in kendo. She sees these people as being more interested in the culture of Japan (“japaneseness”) rather than the sport itself, and taking up kendo because it is a big part of that culture. The split between the national culture and the sports culture becomes evident. While kendo is seen as part of Japanese culture it is as well perceived as able to function independently outside of it. Silvia expresses her personal motive of participation that is related with personal development rather than the cultural aspect of kendo. Clearly she is primarily attracted by the sport itself, rather than its Japanese nature. She seems to be loyal to her views and “determined to stay on that path”, however, she is also accepting other people’s views, suggesting that “they can have it their way.”

When discussing her perceptions of cultural differences between Japan and Finland, Silvia offers her observation that for the Japanese “it’s important not to stand out, but to blend in perfectly”. She contrasts it with the Finnish approach to “simply accept each other in all our individualism.” She attributes this difference to the fact that in Finland there are not so many kendo practitioners, therefore, Finnish kendo “cannot afford to discriminate.” Silvia further discusses national differences offering the observation that Japanese people are “still not very accustomed to anyone, who doesn’t look Asian”. She attributes it to social conditions: “If you live in a crowded country with 127 million people, who share the same traits with you, it’s easy to forget that there are billions of people, who do not look like you.” She further reasons that in Europe kendo appeals to more educated and open-minded people. As kendo is not a mainstream sport in Europe, it can be speculated that people who start kendo have more profound motivations. She suggests that this directly affects how people treat others. Silvia concludes that, in her experience, “nice, open-minded and tolerant kendokas outnumber the few rotten apples, which you can find everywhere.”

Another important theme in Silvia's story is cultural encounters in kendo. She talks a lot about her experience facing the Japanese kendo practitioners, both men and women. She describes the discomfort experienced when interacting with them, and perceives it to arise from the fact that "someone coming from outside, from a strange country" tends to "deeply disturb the hierarchical balance." She suggests that the elderly Japanese senseis sometimes see a white woman in the dojo as a "difficult issue to deal with", while Japanese women are not sure anymore about their place in the hierarchy. The following quote best reflects Silvia's attitude to such encounters:

As the white woman I offend the Japanese idea of conformism greatly. Not only am I a lot weaker and less skilled than many fellow Japanese kendokas [kendo practitioners]: I will always be of the wrong age, of the wrong size and looks for my gender, of the wrong colour, of the wrong nationality. I will always stand out and break their formation, no matter what I do. In some perverse way, I actually enjoy this. It would be the death of me to be like everyone else – a bee in a beehive. I do not want to become like "them" (whatever that even means), but I like to challenge them, maybe even change the way they think about things. One of our Japanese senseis [teachers] once commented that coming to Finland to do kendo was the most eye-opening thing he'd ever done up to then. To see people doing the same thing with a completely different approach was something unheard of to him, but apparently in a good way.

She uses a strong phrase "offend... greatly" to describe the perceived effect of the white woman's presence in the Japanese kendo context. It is clear that she perceives this encounter not only as challenging their traditional norms but also as causing negative feelings. She further describes her perception of being different by highlighting a number of criteria according to which she does not fit in that context. Repetition of "wrong" before each category (age, size, looks, colour, and nationality) strengthens the impression of difference. It is evident that she sees herself standing out of the homogenous balanced context. Furthermore, the phrase "always... no matter what I do" suggests that she perceives this standing out as inevitable. It can be speculated that it is inevitable because it is more related with who the person is, rather what the person does. While behaviours can be changed and adapted, personal characteristics cannot be altered. To continue with, there is a clear distinction between "me" and "them".

Although Silvia admits uncertainty about what does the category “them” entail, her wish to be different from them is very strong. She is proud of her uniqueness and enjoys the experience of standing out. The use of a metaphor “bee in a beehive” reflects her reluctance to adapting and assimilating into the given social context. Similarly, the phrase “death of me” suggests that Silvia perceives assimilation as the loss of individuality and as a very negative thing. After expressing her disinterest in blending into the given social context, she claims to enjoy challenging it. She seems to adopt the role of a challenger and attitude changer not only for her own benefit in the particular situation but for wider social interest in general (“change the way they think about things”). In fact, she even suggests some evidence that her role has been conducted effectively by introducing a case of an “eye-opening” experience of one Japanese sensei. Although it is not directly expressed what “doing the same thing with a completely different approach” refers to, it can be argued that it refers to both the style of kendo practice and gender relations within the practice. Reflecting on this successful case in changing attitudes in a way supports Silvia’s chosen path and encourages her to continue.

In terms of reactions to unpleasant cultural encounters, Silvia claims the following: “I’ve never taken that personally myself, since the senseis along with their opinions are a result of a certain upbringing and a culture, which dates back to another time. I cannot change that, nor do I even try.” She suggests not taking it personally and attributes sensei’s opinions to different culture and upbringing. Furthermore, she perceives that these opinions have formed a long time ago, are stable and unchangeable. It is interesting that here she claims not even trying to change those opinions, while in the previously discussed quote she claimed to enjoy challenging and changing attitudes. It can be argued that Silvia is not fully aware of her role in this process, that simply by being herself and acting the way she does she is, in fact, changing those opinions.

However, although generally stating that she does not take senseis’ behaviour personally, on another occasion Silvia suggests:

I see it as a difficulty, if a sensei [teacher] is clearly more interested in teaching my male kendo friends than me. It’s not just once, that the men’s national team has gotten so many good pieces of advice on how to improve their kendo and all the advice given to the women’s team is this: “lose some weight. You are fat.” Or “when are you having kids?” (Which means: When are you stopping kendo?)

Here she clearly sees a problem in interaction when it comes to the key point – teaching and learning kendo. She perceives lack of fairness in treatment when more professional attention is given to men practitioners, despite the fact that women are also competing at a high level. She contrasts sensei's attention given to men with that given to women, suggesting that advice to men focuses on improving kendo, while advice to women goes only as far as “traditionally feminine” concerns of body and family. This unfairness is seen as a repetitive problem (“it’s not just once”) and Silvia clearly expresses disappointment in that.

Further in her story, however, Silvia notices she has mostly discussed negative experiences and rushes to correct the situation, suggesting: “I’ve also encountered so many wonderful and nice people and senseis, who give good advice and really care about anyone wanting to learn kendo.” Here the criteria for “goodness” of people are again advice and support in kendo, except that this time it is provided for “anyone wanting to learn kendo”, meaning based on interest and regardless of gender. Although acknowledging positive experiences of cultural encounters, Silvia suggests: “The irony is, that at the end of the day, you forget the good things and it’s the a-holes of the world, that stick with you.” The regret is evident about the fact that negative experiences are stronger and last longer than positive ones.

The following quote in a way concludes Silvia’s experience of cultural encounters:

I’m pretty good at telling, when people are annoyed with me... I shrug and simply give them the finger, mentally. That’s quite easy for me, since I don’t live in Japan and I do not need to face that kind of behaviour daily. If my fellow kendoka [kendo practitioners] in Finland started putting me down for my gender however, I’d certainly raise some hell. Luckily, I don’t need to.

When in a challenging interpersonal situation, Silvia does not expose her feelings to the opposing party, she rather focuses inwards. “Giving the finger mentally” is a gesture not meaning to offend or symbolising disrespect, but rather demonstrating not caring about the situation, disengaging from it. This way she lets go of the unpleasant emotions. She sees it as an easy process because she is aware of the temporality of this experience. Unpleasant experiences are occurring when entering a different culture, therefore, Silvia bears with it knowing it will not happen in her own culture. However, if unpleasant gendered interactions would happen in Finland, she would not live with it and would

“certainly raise some hell” in order to change the situation. A relief that there is no need for such drastic actions is evident.

5.3.5 Summary

Silvia’s motivations to do kendo were first related to distinctiveness of kendo from other sports and the uniqueness it contributes to her identity. She sees kendo as a tool in personal development, enabling her to understand herself better, and especially values kendo experience for enabling her to accept herself the way she was.

In terms of gender, Silvia expresses her negative attitude to values and behaviours of women in general and expresses fondness of male way of masculine behaviours and values in general. However, she strongly relates her identity to femininity and takes pride in her distinctiveness among male kendoka. She also discusses how gender is socially constructed through feedback of significant others. Furthermore, she talks about gender stereotypes in sport and other areas, arguing that she has always opposed it.

When discussing the sports framework, Silvia values greatly the equality in terms of age, gender or skill level and respect to opponent that kendo promotes. She contrasts kendo with other sports that do not manage to implement these fundamental values. She highlights that kendo is more process rather than outcome oriented and suggests that this process is a life-long learning.

In terms of the socio-cultural context, Silvia discusses the differences between the conformist Japanese culture and the open-minded Finnish culture. In the situation of cultural encounters she sees herself as challenging and reconstructing the thinking of the Japanese men. Finally, she separates kendo culture from the national culture arguing that one does not need to ‘go native’ to learn kendo.

5.4 Cross-case analysis

This section will compare and contrast the three cases in order to reflect an overall picture of experiences of this group of participants. It will follow the structure of the overall theme table (see Table 1 for a summary).

To begin with the personal aspects, the participants originally started kendo for different reasons, some by a coincidence, some attracted by its oriental nature and some because it was something different from what they have done previously. With time they have discovered deeper meanings of kendo practice. Generally kendo is seen as a tool for personal development. Participants have reported valuing kendo for the

opportunity to challenge themselves and others, to learn new things about themselves, and learn to accept themselves in their individuality. Furthermore, apart from these gains, participants reported gaining strength, self-esteem and developing instincts, the skills and qualities that they transfer from kendo context and use in daily life situations when interacting with people. Moreover, this process of personal development is seen as still in progress and due to the nature of the sport is perceived to have potential to be a life-long experience.

To continue with gender, participants report very dissimilar experiences and attitudes. Eva expresses a very neutral attitude to gender differences almost not referring to gender at all in her story and arguing that people are different no matter what sex they are. Similarly, Laura also expresses strong personal opinion that gender is not an issue, however, in her case awareness that such a view is opposing the dominant views is evident. Contrary, Silvia expresses the view that gender differences matter and that only through noticing and accepting the differences can equality be achieved. She also strongly relates her identity to the feminine identity, taking pride in her distinctiveness in kendo context. Similarly, Laura relates her identity to the ‘strong women’ who contributed significantly to kendo development in Finland and takes pride in that.

Laura is the only one who discussed a violent encounter with hegemonic masculinity in kendo that almost made her stop kendo. She, however, does not attribute it solely to gender, but more to the fact that kendo was then in early stages of development and people were simply ignorant of the values of sport. Eva reflects on Laura’s experience and also notes that the incident must have happened earlier, as since she started kendo the attitude to women has been positive. In general, participants see kendo society in Finland as open to everyone regardless of gender, age or skill level.

Laura and Silvia both reflect on gender stereotypes and the process of social construction of gender. They demonstrate awareness that traditional gender norms and related stereotypes are still very deeply ingrained in people’s minds. They see society reinforcing these beliefs on girls through feedback of significant others (parents, teachers, coaches). Furthermore, they argue that, despite the popular belief, the situation is still like this in Finland. Both Laura and Silvia act as role models challenging gender stereotypes, Silvia by consciously disregarding the social pressure and pursuing her path, Laura simply by being and working hard in kendo. It can be argued that Eva also unconsciously acts as a role model by promoting her gender-neutral perspective through her behaviours.

When it comes to sport, all participants agree that kendo framework promotes equality, as people can practice together regardless of gender, age, height, weight or skill level. Eva further elaborates that the reasons lie in the uniformity of equipment and the fact that kendo focuses on the mental aspect rather than physical. Silvia further discusses another key value of kendo – respect to opponent no matter what. This is also interrelated with equality. Both Eva and Silvia contrast kendo with other sports, arguing that other sports have to deal with media attention, sponsorship issues, are very competitive and results oriented. They see kendo as free from all this and offering an opportunity to focus only on what is important – the practice itself. Silvia is particularly concerned with values of equality and respect not being successfully implemented in other sports.

Laura, however, does not discuss the latter issues in-depth as it seems that for her it is self-explanatory. No wonder, since she has played a significant role in shaping Finnish kendo culture. It seems that Laura represents the generation of women who opened up the way for other women in kendo. She argues that all these women share the same property, stubbornness, since there have been many challenges in the process. Although Laura is the one who talks the most about the role of women in Finnish kendo society, both Eva and Silvia agree that the defining feature of Finnish kendo is women's involvement in its organisation. Furthermore, it is evident that Eva and Silvia also strongly relate their identities to the 'strong women' who actively participate in organisation of kendo.

In terms of the socio-cultural context, Laura and Silvia both discuss the differences between the Japanese and Finnish contexts. Laura perceives that the main difference is women's involvement in organisation of kendo that in Japan is non-existent, while in Finland is a key feature of kendo society. Silvia reflects more on cultural differences, highlighting the conformist and hierarchical nature of the Japanese culture and open-minded and tolerant Finnish culture. Furthermore, Silvia distinguishes between Japanese culture and kendo culture, arguing that one does not need to 'go native' to learn kendo.

All participants talk about the situations when these different cultures clash within the kendo context. These cultural encounters in all cases are related to gender. Participants talk about Japanese senseis having difficulties in accepting a white woman in the dojo, and about the situations when women are not being valued for their hard work simply due to gender. Although participants express disappointment in such

treatment, the fact they have gone so far in kendo suggests they have not given up. In fact, Laura and Silvia see cultural encounters as a learning experience for both parties, teaching accepting people the way they are. Furthermore, Silvia takes pleasure in challenging and transforming the ways people think.

To conclude, participants unanimously see kendo experience as a process of personal development and kendo as a context promoting equality. Although participants' attitudes to gender and gender differences vary, they have had similar experiences of gendered cultural encounters. Participants attribute these experiences to cultural differences between Finland and Japan and do not allow it to discourage them from kendo.

6 DISCUSSION

This chapter will discuss the findings of the present study in the light of existing literature. Implications for practitioners will be highlighted and directions for future research indicated. Finally, limitations of the study will be discussed.

6.1 Kendo experience as a process of personal development

The findings suggest that the participants perceived kendo experience as a process of personal development. They reported that kendo practice has increased their awareness of own emotions, enabled them to accept own uniqueness, developed mental toughness, and increased self-esteem. Furthermore, this experience is also evident in their daily life situations, suggesting the transferability of skills from sport to life setting. In fact, life skills development through sport is a widely discussed topic.

Danish, Taylor, Hodge and Heke (2004) define life skills as “those skills that enable individuals to succeed in the different environments in which they live.” Already since antiquity the value of sport as a vehicle for personal development has been recognised, as it is evident in the Plato’s (1920, p. 46) quote: ‘The moral value of exercises and sports far outweigh the physical value’. Modern researchers and practitioners agree that sport is a great context for teaching and learning life skills (Danish, 2002; Gould & Carson, 2008). However, Papacharisis, Goudas, Danish and Theodorakis (2005) argue that sport itself does not contribute to positive development, and that it is the experience of sport that may facilitate learning of life skills. The question rises what kind of sport experience actually facilitates the development of life skills? Unfortunately, research findings in this area are inconsistent (Papacharisis et al., 2005). Nevertheless, some authors argue that, in order to contribute to positive personal development, life skills must be “specifically targeted and taught in environments that are conducive for doing so” (Papacharisis et al., 2005, p. 63).

It is clear from the findings that kendo experience has indeed contributed to participants’ personal development. It can be argued that there was something in kendo context that facilitated this result. From the previous discussion it becomes clear that intention to develop life skills is key to this process. Indeed, kendo seems to have this intention from the very beginning, as the Concept of Kendo suggests the following:

The purpose of practicing Kendo is: to mold the mind and body, to cultivate a vigorous spirit, and through correct and rigid training, to strive for improvement in the art of Kendo, to hold in esteem human

courtesy and honor, to associate with others with sincerity, and to forever pursue the cultivation of oneself. This will make one be able: to love his/her country and society, to contribute to the development of culture and to promote peace and prosperity among all peoples (All Japan Kendo Federation, 1975).

It is evident that kendo promotes a holistic perspective to personal development advocating for growth and development of both body and mind. It encourages vigorous spirit, commitment to practice, respect to fellow humans and sincere interactions with others. Furthermore, it promotes all these values with wider social goals in mind: contribution to society, development of culture, promotion of peace and prosperity in general. This underlying philosophy is what distinguishes kendo from many other sports. Even though some sports may advocate for the same values, not many of them have such a formalised and written philosophy guiding the practice. This is an important issue for other sports to consider, since existence of a formalised philosophy that goes beyond the rules and regulations has the potential to facilitate the development of life skills through sport.

Another aspect related to the topic of personal development that requires more discussions is life-long learning through sports. The participants highlighted that their learning through kendo is still in progress and that kendo is a sport one can do all their life. They also contrasted kendo with sports traditionally considered feminine, such as gymnastics or ice-skating, arguing that athlete's career in these sports ends very early. Indeed, kendo is one of a few sports where participants can practice and compete all their life. All Japan Kendo Federation (2007) highlights this as one of the ideals of kendo, suggesting that kendo is a "way of life". Life-long practice is possible in kendo due to the fact that the basis is not physical strength, which would naturally fade with age, but correct technique and proper mental attitude (Ozawa, 1997). Unfortunately, most research on life skills development through sport has focused on youth as a target group (Danish et al., 2004; Gould & Carson, 2008; Hellison, 2003; Papacharisis et al., 2005), leaving adults' personal development in sport under-researched. This study reveals a lot of potential for both research and practice, suggesting that, given appropriate conditions, personal development through sport is happening in adults as well. Furthermore, the study provides a glimpse of what kind of conditions facilitate life-long learning, as it discusses in-depth the features of kendo – mental focus, respect and equality.

To continue with, although it is clear that the participants value greatly the opportunity for personal development that kendo provides, some of them have reported challenges in this process, such as negative attitudes of men in early stages of kendo development in Finland or gendered cultural encounters with Japanese senseis. Despite this, all these women stayed in kendo throughout the years and further developed their skills. Naturally the question rises what kept these women in kendo? One of the participants clearly states that the practice itself has given her strength and helped to overcome the challenges, and this supports the previously discussed life skills perspective. All participants agree that kendo requires focusing only on the main thing, which is the practice, this way taking their attention away from all the negative and disturbing matters. Another participant values the process orientation of kendo, arguing that all other sports are too outcome oriented. Similar findings are discussed by Goncalves, Carvalho and Light (2011) who investigated the experiences of young women growing up and staying with the sport in Portugal. Goncalves et al. (2011) revealed that the most crucial factor in keeping women in sport was mastery-oriented environment. Another important factor was the meaningful nature of sport that contributed to women making it part of their lives. Personal meanings of sport in the study of Goncalves et al. (2011) were not related to social recognition, health benefits, good looking, or even competitive success, but rather with intrinsic rewards. This is also the case in the present study, as participants value the aspect of personal development mostly. Furthermore, Goncalves et al. (2011) also revealed that women felt autonomous control over their decision to participate (as opposed to sport being imposed on them) and therefore committed to the sport. This may also be one of the factors of participants' commitment to kendo in the present study, since all of them chose this path voluntarily. This topic opens up perspectives for further qualitative investigation of the reasons why women stay or drop out of sports, encouraging paying special attention to personal meanings of sport participation.

6.2 Personal and social meanings of gender

The participants discussed how gender has been imposed on them throughout their life through the process of feedback from other people. This feedback has repeatedly suggested what is and what is not an appropriate behaviour for a girl and a woman. This reflects the process of social construction of gender. Although there has

been a fierce debate over the nature of sex and gender, and the relationship between the two, Lorber and Farrell (1991) argue that neither sex nor gender are pure categories. Lorber (1993, p. 569) suggests that, although male and female bodies differ physiologically in many ways, they are “completely transformed by social practices to fit into the salient categories of a society.” Therefore, what we call “a man” or “a woman” is not innate but socially constructed.

The fact that certain values and behaviours are imposed on participants externally does not lead to them accepting and internalising it. In fact, effort to distance themselves from traditional gender division, criticise and challenge it is evident. Participants’ views to gender and gender differences represent a range of opinions: a very internalised belief that gender does not differentiate people; a conscious choice to believe that gender is not an issue, yet awareness that society thinks differently; and a conscious belief that gender differences do matter. Such a diversity of views suggests that people are attaching personal meanings to gender and leading their lives according to those meanings. These findings can demonstrate more insights in the light of the thoughts of Judith Butler. Butler (2007, p.175) criticises feminism for the binary view to gender identity that takes “true sex” and “discreet gender” as a point of reference. In fact, she argues that there exists no solid, universal gender and that all gender is scripted, rehearsed, and performed. According to Butler (2007) gender is performed through repeated acts that constitute the illusion of the stable gender identity. Furthermore, she argues that gender is a norm that can never be fully internalised. Considering the findings of the present study, it can be argued that the participants do not fully internalise the gendered expectations imposed by society, but rather create their own versions of gender, resulting in multiple femininities, or, to avoid the binary language criticised by Butler (2007), simply multiple personal identities. The personal meanings attached to gender are extremely important as they, and not the gender itself, guide people’s behaviours. It is important to consider that when pursuing personal development through sports.

Furthermore, Butler (2007) encourages people to “trouble” the stagnant categories of gender through performance. Participants of this study can be, in fact, seen as doing it. The facts that they stayed in kendo for so long reflects that they have remained loyal to their chosen path and beliefs regardless of social pressures. They continue demonstrating through their behaviours that there are varieties of perceptions of what it is to be a woman. For example, a woman who is proud of her distinctiveness

and is ready to challenge everyone who does not respect that; or a woman who thinks that gender does not make people different and acts according to her beliefs. Performing gender in different ways contributes to a multitude of personal differences. Consequently, existence of differences encourages people to be more tolerant and accepting.

Coming back to the previously discussed topic of social construction of gender, it is important to highlight the role of significant others in this process. Andersen and Cole (1990, p. 358) define significant others as “any people who have been important and influential in the individual’s life”. They argue that significant others can powerfully influence social perceptions due to the subjective significance they represent to the particular person. In fact, the participants suggested that parents, teachers and coaches generally are active agents in construction of gendered beliefs in children’s and young people’s minds. These knowledgeable and experienced adults intuitively seem to be in a position to affect young people’s lives and wellbeing. However, some participants reported disregarding gendered expectations communicated by teachers. Although it may be argued that these people were after all not as significant to participants, another interpretation is that this significance is evident in the fact that participants resisted to the influence of these people and chose their own path. The mere fact that without being prompted the participants reflected on the role of these people in construction of gender supports the latter interpretation. Although the role of significant others emerges as a factor in the studies on withdrawal from sports (Rottensteiner, Laakso, Pihlaja & Konttinen, 2013), motivations to coach (Lorimer & Holland-Smith, 2012) or motivational patterns of youth athletes (Chan, Lonsdale, & Fung, 2012), there is a scarcity of research that would focus primarily on the role of significant others in perceptions of gender in sports contexts.

6.3 Kendo as a gender-neutral sports context

In this study kendo has emerged as a gender-neutral sports context. One of the participants described this experience as leaving the outside world with all gendered expectations. Furthermore, the participants suggested that neither gender, nor age, size, weight or skill level prevents different people from practicing kendo together. It was claimed that such equality is a key defining feature of kendo. Naturally the question rises what makes this sport so open for diversity of participants, and the answers should

be looked for in the sports framework. In this discussion the sports framework will be defined as goals, rules and norms of the sport, including the underlying philosophy.

As Ozawa (1997) has suggested, the basis of kendo is not physical strength, but correct technique and proper mental attitude. European Kendo Federation (2009) further explains the goal of kendo:

In kendo you are trained to see things with your eyes, react instantly to happenings and make moment judgments with your mind. In a kendo match you watch your opponent with your eyes, react quickly to his moves and grab chances for attack, as seen through your mind.

This focus on the mind, on the mental awareness and alertness takes the attention away from the physicality. As the study of Koivula (2001) has pointed out, physical strength is, indeed, one of the key aspects related to a sport being perceived as masculine. Furthermore, the fact that there are no weight categories in kendo, contributes to women being less conscious about their body. It is also important to note that the same study (Koivula, 2001) found that sports perceived to be gender-neutral scored higher in cognitive efficiency than sports perceived to be masculine or feminine. Hoffman and Schraw (2010) described cognitive efficiency as the ability to reach learning, problem solving, or instructional goals through optimal use of mental resources. It is clearly an important ability both in sport and life contexts. However, from the existing literature it is not clear how exactly focus on the mental side of sport is related to perceived gender-neutrality of sport.

Another interesting fact arising from the study of Koivula (2001) is that sports perceived to be gender-neutral scored higher in the categories of equipment and fair-play than sports perceived to be masculine or feminine. While the relationship of kendo and fairplay will be discussed further, the discussion will now focus on the equipment. Based on Koivula's (2001) findings, it is possible to argue that equipment used in sports somehow mediates the gender differences. As the protective armour is used in kendo, the risk of injury is minimised. Danger and risk are, in fact, related to people's perceptions of masculine sports (Koivula, 2001). Furthermore, the equipment prevents actual body contact from taking place. It has been shown that even judo, the sport that shares the same budo values as kendo, enabled gendered interactions, such as men moderating their actions when practicing with women (Guérandel & Mennesson, 2007). This may be the case due to the fact that judo sports framework is based on body

contact, and these physical interactions are mediated by social understandings of gender.

Another aspect contributing to neutrality of kendo, is non-existence of belt system. International Kendo Federation (2006) has suggested that there are no visible differences in dress between kendo grades. As one of the participants suggested, one cannot tell from the appearance of kendo practitioners their level of skill, and therefore has to approach every opponent with open mind and full commitment. Different coloured belts indicate the level of skill in many martial arts, for example, judo, karate and taekwondo. Oh, Hannon and Banks (2006) suggest that colour belt system may serve as a motivational tool and a reward for students of taekwondo. However, it may also be argued that belt system acts as a mechanism of extrinsic rewards facilitating ego orientation. Consequently, absence of belt system in kendo might be seen as facilitating task orientation. As discussed in the previous section on personal development, the participants, indeed, valued process orientation of kendo. Coming back to the issue of no difference in appearance between kendo practitioners of different skill level, it can be speculated that by equalising this aspect, kendo practitioners are trained to become accustomed to handling individual differences, including gender differences as well.

To continue with, the participants expressed a strong belief that respect to fellow practitioners is a key feature of kendo. They also contrasted kendo with other sports that often fail to achieve the ideals of sportsmanship and fair-play. In fact, Kiyota (2002, p. 20) suggests that respect is important in kendo because the opponent is “the means through which the practitioner realizes the true self.” Indeed, kendo adopts the kind of approach that Shields and Bredemeier (2011) would describe using a metaphor “sport is partnership”. In the framework of this metaphor, the opponent is seen as enabler, who challenges one to get better, helps one to excel and to reach their potential. Shields and Bredemeier (2011, p. 36) see the competition guided by the ‘partnership’ metaphor as “true competition”, and the overall approach to sport as an ideal model of sport. Numerous studies have focused on sportsmanship education of youth athletes (Mathner, Martin, Tatum, & Chouti, 2010; Wells, Arthur-Banning, Paisley, Ellis, Roark & Fisher, 2008) with some or little positive effects found. The issue of these programmes is that they are externally imposed on the sports context and sportsmanship is not stemming from the philosophy of sport itself. The suggestion for other sports is to put more effort into inscribing sportsmanship into the rules of the sport and written or unwritten codes

of conduct of sport clubs and federations in order to make sportsmanship not just an idealistic value but a working norm of every sport.

To conclude the discussion of the sports framework, Title IX, requiring equal opportunities for men and women in all aspects of education including sports has significantly increased girls participation in sports in the US (Vest & Masterson, 2007), and Brighton Declaration on Women and Sports has been endorsed by more than 300 organisations worldwide (IWG on Women and Sport, 2013b). However, the fact that gender stereotypes and social pressures continue to influence women's involvement in sports calls for something more than merely providing equal number of opportunities for men and women to participate in sports. In his study Chapman (2004) suggests the possibility for types of involvement in sports which are non-gender-specific and thus equally open to participants of whatever sex. The present study has proved that such a possibility, indeed, exists, and is suggesting channelling effort to the development of gender-neutral sports.

6.4 Clash of cultures and the ways of surviving it

Although kendo has been considered by participants as a context open to everyone regardless of gender, they all mentioned cases of gendered cultural encounters in a kendo context that were somewhat challenging and unpleasant. These were usually the cases of encountering Japanese kendo teachers, who were disturbed by the presence of a white woman in a dojo, or failed to express gratitude to women for their effort organising kendo activities. This of course can be attributed to the differences between the Japanese and Finnish cultures, since the Japanese culture has traditionally been hegemonically masculine (Manzenreiter, 2008), while Finnish culture is one of the most prominent countries in the world in terms of gender equality (Plantenga, Remery, Figueiredo & Smith, 2009). However, what is more relevant than simply acknowledging the cultural differences is considering the strategies of coping with cultural clashes.

Indeed, the participants demonstrated awareness of the cultural and personal differences and their reactions to negative cultural encounters differed: from accepting and letting go to embracing the challenge and employing it for social change. However, they did not ignore or deny the differences. Schinke, McGannon, Parham and Lane (2012, p. 44) suggests that in today's culturally diverse sport context one can "choose to exclude or ignore culture as important, or to be open to a diversity of athletes and

experiences.” They, however, favour the former approach due to positive consequences of decreased cultural stress, enhanced sport enjoyment and performance. Although, Schinke et al. (2012) refer to the practice of sport psychologist, it is intuitive that cultural awareness and inclusion strategy would have similar effects when employed by athletes and coaches themselves.

Sammut and Gaskell (2009) present a categorisation of approaches to intercultural relations that can also shed some light on the findings of the present study. They suggest three points of view: monological, that represents hegemonic beliefs, present stereotypical views, and stand in strong opposition of others’ perspectives; dialogical, that represents emancipated beliefs, acknowledges the possibility of alternative perspectives, but stays loyal to the logic of own beliefs; and metalogical, that expresses opinions, is open to alternative truths, and doubts the certainty of knowledge altogether. It can be argued that the previously discussed traditionalist points of view reflecting in the gender-biased behaviours of Japanese teachers represent the monological perspective to cultural interactions. While the ways Finnish women cope with such behaviours represent both dialogical and metalogical perspectives. Sammut and Gaskell (2009) argue that for intercultural contact to produce positive outcomes there is a need to move from monological or dialogical to metalogical perspectives. Porpora (2001) suggests that the search for truth is a community affair can only be undertaken in the event of diversity, and only by listening to those who disagree with us can we take a different perspective and discover the limitations of our own views. Again it can be argued that the ways of dealing with cultural differences presented in the current study were somewhat effective, and it points to an important issue in sports that certainly requires more attention.

To continue with, another key point of discussion is who is the host of the culture and who is the guest entering that culture during the cultural encounters. Is it the Japanese teachers entering the Finnish kendo culture or kendo is inherently a Japanese product, and, wherever it is practiced, it will still be the island of Japanese culture? Who is the ‘other’ that is supposed to adapt to the mainstream culture? One participant expressed an idea that there is no need to ‘go native’ to learn how to do kendo and here the idea of distinction between the national culture and sport culture became evident. The question rises how much the sports framework (goals, rules, and norms) is affected by the socio-cultural context? Indeed, it would be valuable to know how much and in what ways the national culture influences the sport culture and how different the

cultures of the same sport are across the different countries. Such knowledge could help the athletes, coaches, and sports staff who work and practice in multiple countries and cultures throughout their careers. Unfortunately, there is scarcity of research in this area, and even if such research existed it could potentially lead to detrimental generalisations of a culture as a whole and reinforce cultural stereotypes. Therefore, it is suggested for both researchers and practitioners to assume an open point of view when dealing with cultural differences.

To conclude, the findings of the current study presented some ways of dealing with cultural differences in a sports context that were somewhat effective. It is an important issue to consider for all those involved in the increasingly globalising sports environment. An open-minded perspective to cultural interactions is suggested as the most effective approach leading to a learning experience of all parties.

6.5 Implications for practitioners, and directions for future research

The open exploratory perspective to data collection has revealed many themes for future research to explore as well as some aspects for practitioners in sports, such as coaches, managers, sport psychologists, and athletes themselves, to consider.

Firstly, more attention should be paid to sport as a life-long process of personal development. Since research has mainly explored life skills development through sport in a youth context, it should widen the target area to include adults as well. Practitioners should pay more attention to the role of the sports framework in facilitating life skills development, striving to inscribe holistic development of athletes into the rules and philosophy of sports.

Secondly, the process of social construction of gender within the sports context, and the role of significant others in this process also requires more attention. Researchers should get more involved in understanding of the personal meanings of gender, while practitioners should be more aware of and sensitive to people's perceptions of gender, allowing them to discover individual meanings of gender and sport.

Thirdly, kendo could be taken as an example of a sport framework that minimises gendered interactions and facilitates equality among the participants. This example could trigger researchers' interest to investigate how different sports frameworks facilitate or debilitate gender equality, this way contributing to the development of gender-neutral sports. Practitioners, in turn, can use these findings to

strive to create bias-free sporting environments, where everyone is welcome regardless of their gender, age, size, or body shape, and can equally enjoy the physical, psychological and social benefits that sports participation provides.

Finally, as the findings show, there is a need for everyone in a sports environment to develop their cultural awareness in order to be able to handle cultural encounters effectively. This is a key issue in the increasingly globalising world of sports where athletes, coaches, and sport psychologists pursue their careers in international environments. Therefore, researchers should focus their efforts on further investigating human experiences of cultural encounters in the sports contexts, and the processes of coping with differences in points of view.

6.6 Limitations

A key limitation of the study is the fact that the participants were reflecting on their experiences in a non-native language. Although the effects of it were minimised through selective recruitment of participants, asynchronous online communication, and the fact that the researcher was also a non-native English speaker, some hindering effects on participants' self-expression might have occurred.

To continue with, the study presented a rich picture of experiences of three Finnish female kendo practitioners paying special attention to the nuances of individual cases as well as comparing and contrasting those cases. However, the reader of this study should not assume that these findings can be generalised in any way. According to Smith et al. (2009), IPA seeks to bring the reader closer to significant aspects of the general through the focus on the detail of the individual, this way allowing the reader to realise how much he or she actually shares with the participant. A suggestion for future studies is to define their sampling in relation to the present study in order to gradually build a picture of experiences for larger populations.

6.7 Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to explore the experiences of three highly skilled Finnish female kendo athletes. The findings revealed four broad themes of experiences: the personal, gender, sport, and the socio-cultural.

Firstly, participants' personal motivations to do kendo are related with the process of personal development and learning skills that are also transferred into other areas of life. This suggests that life skills research in sport, which is currently limited to youth population, should explore adults' learning in sport as well. It reveals the

potential of sport as a context for life-long learning. Secondly, perceptions of gender construction and gender differences vary among the participants. This suggests that more researchers' attention should be paid to personal meanings of gender, while sport practitioners and organisers should be sensitive to individual perceptions of gender. Thirdly, kendo sports framework is generally seen as facilitating non-gendered interactions through promotion of equality and respect. Since these values are ideals of sport in general, other sports can learn from kendo how to implement it in practice. Finally, differences between Finnish and Japanese socio-cultural contexts become evident as participants discuss gendered cultural encounters. It is revealed that open-minded attitude and cultural sensitivity facilitates cultural interactions, minimising negative experiences.

To conclude, the findings suggest the need to see sport more as a process of holistic personal development, paying particular attention to equality and respect among the participants, and to be more sensitive to individual perceptions of gender and different cultural contexts. This knowledge can be relevant to all coaches, managers, sport psychologist and athletes who are committed to creating bias-free sporting environments, assuring equal access and increasing participation in sports.

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APPENDIX A

Dear participant,

I am Rita DeksnYTE, a student of Sport and Exercise Psychology at the University of Jyväskylä, currently working on the master thesis project that investigates women's experiences in kendo. The purpose of the study is to explore how high-level female kendo practitioners in Finland construct and balance their identities and how does the sporting context facilitate the process.

Your participation in the study is invaluable as sharing your experience would help to better understand the processes of gender identity construction in sports and contribute to making sports a better place for everyone.

Participation in the project is a two-step process that will take approximately 1.5-2 hours of your time between October and November of 2012. You will be asked to write a reflective text in English at your own time. Participation will be carried out by email and the project website <http://womeninkendo.wordpress.com>

Participation briefly:

Step 1 is writing a short story according to a prompt statement: 'A woman in kendo. Please reflect on your experience and write a story.'

Step 2 is creating a dialogue between the stories by commenting on other participants' stories in relation to own experience.

Detailed information about participation is provided in the Informed Consent Form attached to this email. Please read it carefully. Also feel free to explore the project website <http://womeninkendo.wordpress.com> If you have any questions, don't hesitate to contact me.

If you decide to participate in the project, please sign the Informed Consent Form electronically with your name, pseudonym or initials, date and email address (no need for signature) and email it back to me at rita.deksnyte@gmail.com as soon as possible.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Best regards,

Rita DeksnYTE

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APPENDIX B

Informed Consent Form

‘Being a Woman in Kendo: a Narrative Inquiry’

The following information is provided in order to help you to make an informed decision whether or not to participate. If you have any questions please do not hesitate to ask the researcher. The *purpose* of this study is to explore how high-level female kendo practitioners in Finland construct and balance their identities and how does the sporting context facilitate the process.

The study will examine:

- The lived experiences of female kendo practitioners in Finland
- The ways their feminine and athletic identities interact in and out of kendo
- Personal meanings ascribed to their participation in kendo

The information gained from this study may help us to better understand the processes of gender identity construction in sports, and may contribute to creating bias-free sporting environments and increasing participation in sports.

PARTICIPATION: Participation in the project is a two-step process that will take approximately 1.5-2 hours of your time between October and November of 2012. You will be asked to write a reflective text in English at your own time. Participation will be carried out by email and the project website <http://womeninkendo.wordpress.com>

Step 1 – Writing a short story according to a prompt statement. It requires approximately 45-60 minutes and should be around 1-2 pages, however, feel free to expand your story. The researcher might also ask you some follow-up questions which should take an additional 30-45 minutes. The writing prompt is ‘**A woman in kendo.**

Please reflect on your experience and write a story.’

Step 2 – Commenting on other participant’s stories in relation to own experience. An online environment will be created on the project website

(<http://womeninkendo.wordpress.com>) where participants will be able to leave anonymous comments on other participants’ stories. This will be password protected and only available to the researcher and the participants. No identities of writers or commentators will be revealed. This should take approximately 30 minutes.

You participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to choose not to participate or to withdraw at any time without having to explain the reasons. Your relationship with a researcher would not be affected and your identity would not be revealed. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time by notifying the researcher Rita DeksnYTE (rita.deksnyte@gmail.com). Upon your request to withdraw, you may also request to have all information related to you destroyed. If you choose to participate, all information will be held in strict confidence and no attempt to reveal your identity to others will be made. The information obtained in the study will be seen by a faculty supervisor (mentioned bellow), will be used to write a master thesis, may be published in scientific journals, or presented at scholarly meetings but your identity will be kept strictly confidential and only available to Rita DeksnYTE. I will not store, either electronically or in print, documents with your name on them.

Student Researcher:

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European Masters in Sport and Exercise Psychology

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VOLUNTARY CONSENT FORM: I have read and understand the information on the form above and I consent to volunteer to be a subject in this study. I understand that my responses are completely confidential and that I have the right to withdraw at any time. I understand that I may use a pseudonym or my initials instead of my name.

Name: _____ **Signature:** _____

Date: _____ **email:** _____

APPENDIX C

Figure 1 A snapshot of the online environment for story commenting

