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Women fighters as agents of change: A Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu case study from Finland

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Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu (BJJ), a grappling system of combat, evolved from the teachings of a Japanese judoka who moved to Brazil in the 1920s. Focusing on ground fighting, BJJ is rapidly evolving into a combat sport with competitions taking place worldwide (Hogeveen & Hardes, 2014; Spencer, 2014). Unique to the BJJ culture is the way that the ‘secrets’ of the sport are transferred from expert to novice and from one club to the other. Clubs are organised into international ‘teams’, shaping global communities of practitioners that share techniques and philosophies. Unlike many other martial arts that insist on the traditional way of passing knowledge from one teacher to many students behind the closed doors of the dojo (martial arts school), BJJ is open to innovation (Hogeveen & Hardes, 2014) and its techniques are conveyed from ‘many masters to many students’ via the Internet and expert seminars (Spencer, 2014). As students improve their technical knowledge and skills, their progress is defined according to a colored system of belts. In most cases, the journey from white to black belt is extremely difficult compared to other martial arts due to the strict promotion criteria of BJJ (Spencer, 2014).

Central to BJJ is the idea that a smaller person can defend successfully against a bigger and stronger opponent by applying leverage and correct techniques (Hogeveen & Hardes, 2014; Spencer, 2014). Emphasising skill over size and strength, the idea that BJJ is an ideal sport or self-defense system for women is a common discourse among BJJ practitioners. While a discursive construction of martial arts as a system in which technical fighting mastery can overcome physical size and strength lies at the core of most, if not all, martial art disciplines (Channon, 2013a), the number of women who practice BJJ (and martial arts in general) remains small compared to that of male practitioners, who dominate the world of martial arts (Mierzewski, Velija & Malcolm, 2014).

Previous research on martial arts has attempted to explain why men outnumber women. Employing mostly quantitative methods, a number of researchers examined

biological (Karagounis *et al.*, 2009) and psychological gender differences (Mroczkowska, 2004; Szabo & Parkin, 2001), reinforcing the stereotype that women are somehow less suited for martial arts than men (Kavoura, Ryba & Kokkonen, 2012). However, feminist researchers unconvinced by this explanation investigated the complex social structures and gender dynamics that operate in martial arts (e.g., Hargreaves, 1997; Mennesson, 2000; McNaughton, 2012) and shed light on the obstacles that female athletes face in career development, such as ridicule (Mierzwinski *et al.*, 2014) and discrimination (Halbert, 1997; Sisjord, 1997; Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2008, 2009). Feminist scholars called attention to the need for progressive social change in the male-dominated domain of martial arts (Hargreaves, 1997; Kavoura *et al.*, 2012). So far, recommendations on how to bring about this change have not been offered. To meet this need, the present study explores strategies that can improve female participation and career development in BJJ and initiate the desired social change within the sport.

Given the lack of scientific knowledge on how to increase women's involvement in martial arts, we looked at scholarly work on strategies used in sport in general (van Tuyckom, Scheerder & Bracke, 2010) and in other historically male dominated endeavours such as science (Hazari *et al.*, 2010). According to Tuyckom and colleagues (2010), women's participation in sport varies by country, and different policies are to be followed in each cultural context. Hartmann-Tews and Pfister (as cited in van Tuyckom *et al.*, 2010, p. 1081) found that three structural features of a sport system increase female participation: (a) special programmes and initiatives to attract women, (b) women's own sports-political organisations, such as sport clubs and associations, and (c) statutory provisions, such as laws targeting gender equality. The majority of European countries do not follow these recommendations but, instead, emphasise talent detection and development in elite sport (van Tuyckom *et al.*, 2010), strategies that appear to regenerate gender stereotypes

and inequalities. Evaluating the strategies used to boost women's participation in the male-dominated scientific field of physics, Hazari and colleagues (2010) demonstrated that having an instructor who explicitly addresses the under-representation of women in science can be successful. Other strategies hypothesized to be important, such as having female scientists as guest speakers, discussion of women scientists' work and frequent group work, were found to be insignificant.

Qualitative studies exploring sports traditionally considered male preserves, including bodybuilding (Shilling & Bunsell, 2009), snowboarding (Thorpe, 2009), rugby, rock climbing, ice hockey (Young, 1997) and martial arts and combat sports (e.g. Halbert, 1997; Kavoura, Kokkonen & Ryba, 2014; Matthews, 2014; Mennesson, 2000; Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2008), identified numerous challenges encountered by female athletes, such as gender stereotypes (Halbert, 1997; Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2008; Young, 1997) and stigmatisation (Shilling & Bunsell, 2009). Female athletes use various strategies, including identity and impression management to avoid social exclusion and to be accepted as both athletes and women (Halbert, 1997). They struggle to maintain balance between a 'sporting' and a 'feminine' body (Choi, 2000; Krane *et al.*, 2004) and between an athlete's and a woman's identity (Halbert, 1997; Kavoura *et al.*, 2014; Mennesson, 2000)—not to mention between the roles and social expectations of an athlete and a woman (Choi, 2000).

Much work still lies ahead before achieving gender equality in sport (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2012) and women remain underrepresented 'in all sports, at all levels, and in all countries when it comes to decision making positions' (European Commission, 2014, p. 14). However, the conditions of women's participation in sport vary considerably by culture (van Tuyckom *et al.*, 2010). Finland is among four of 25 European countries where women are more physically active than men (van Tuyckom *et al.*, 2010) and use private sport services more than men do (Turpeinen *et al.*, 2012). Van Tuyckom and

colleagues (2010) have argued that Finland's longstanding social democratic welfare system and egalitarian ideals allowed gender equality policies in sport and in general to achieve more success. Therefore, knowledge of the 'good practices' employed in Finland could promote gender equality in sport participation (van Tuyckom *et al.*, 2010, p. 1082). The present study endeavours to contribute to the deepening of such knowledge.

Theoretical background

Influenced by the methodological and epistemological questions raised in cultural (Ryba & Wright, 2005) and feminist post-structuralist work (Butler, 1993; Foucault, 1977, 1978, 1982), this study aims to learn from the (subversive) strategies female Finnish athletes use to develop their career in BJJ. To identify and understand these strategies, we need to better understand the experiences of these women which are tightly connected to the social context in which they live (Kavoura *et al.*, 2012; Thorpe, 2009). Moreover, we need to understand the decision-making specifically linked to women's strategic choice of practices. The cultural praxis framework proposed by Ryba and Wright (2005) provides an appropriate space for examining the social context and the gender dynamics operating in it. Unravelling the existing gender dynamics (Messner, 1988, 2014) and the underlying workings of power (Foucault, 1982) in the local BJJ context studied here can illuminate not only the strategies employed but also the reasons these strategies were needed and why they succeeded.

Foucault (1982) used the word 'strategy' in three ways: (i) to designate the means employed to arrive at an objective, (ii) to designate the manner in which one seeks to gain advantage over others and (iii) to designate the procedures used to obtain victory. Referring to the third sense of the word, Foucault discussed strategies of struggle, or the means used to escape power relations. Foucault further suggested that through the antagonism of strategies one could analyse power relations. Taking as a starting point the

forms of resistance against forms of power, one could ‘bring to light power relations, locate their position, and find out their point of application and the methods used’ (Foucault, 1982, p. 780).

According to Foucault (1982), this antagonism of strategies happens between two ‘adversaries’ that are in a kind of game or war. The power relations that exist between the two adversaries are somehow rationalised as adversaries are categorised into hierarchies (of normalcy, health, class, gender, etc.). The term ‘subject position’ (Foucault, 1978, 1982) is utilised to further explain the ways people are categorised into hierarchies based on socially constructed sets of knowledge (discourses) that establish what is accepted as reality in a given society. A subject position is a location for people in relation to these sets of knowledge, associated with specific rights, limitations and ways of acting and thinking.

In this paper we view male and female BJJ athletes as the ‘adversaries’ of the ‘game’. This dichotomy between men and women creates gender hierarchies and relations of power in the field of martial arts, where men can demonstrate their biological ‘maleness’ and superiority (Matthews, 2014). We examine here the strategies used by the female Finnish BJJ athletes as means to change the power relations that exist in their field. Taking as a starting point these strategies allows us to unravel the gender dynamics and power relations that exist in the Finnish BJJ scene. The following section describes the research setting and the analytic procedure that led us to the identified strategies.

Methodological Approach

Research setting

A Finnish BJJ academy was selected as the setting for studying the strategies women martial artists use to develop their athletic careers. This academy, called Club Alpha in this

study, was chosen as a relatively high number of women train there and have had successful sporting careers. A typical mixed-gender training session in Club Alpha includes approximately 20 male and five female BJJ practitioners. To contextualise this setting, a few words about the development of women's participation at Club Alpha are in order. In 2009, only three women trained regularly at Club Alpha. Desiring to have more female partners, these women took the initiative to start weekly women-only training sessions. These women-only training sessions gradually introduced more women to the sport and at the time of writing, approximately 15 women train regularly at Club Alpha. More than half of these women compete at the national level, some have distinguished themselves as competitors at the international level, and some actively coach, referee and organise women's training camps, in addition to being involved with administration.

Data collection and participants

Data were collected in two phases of semi-structured interviews. The first phase took place in 2009–10 and involved two women: Aino and Kerttu¹. The second phase took place in 2013–14 and involved five women: Aino and Kerttu were interviewed again, along with three newer members, Jaana, Mirja and Miia. Collecting data in two phases and interviewing the oldest female fighters twice allowed us to explore the existing social dynamics and the strategies used by these women during the years they trained at the club; first, during the early stages of the development of women's BJJ at Club Alpha and, second, at a later phase when women had become more accepted within the club's male-dominated culture.

At the time of the first data collection phase, the interviewees were 25 and 28 years old and had training experience of 2 and 4 years, respectively. In the second data collection phase, the interviewees' ages ranged from 24 to 31 years of old (with a median age of 29). Their training experience ranged from 3 to 8 years (with a median of 5 years). Anna Kavoura, the principal field researcher, had approximately 3 years of training experience in BJJ during

the first data collection phase and 7 years during the second phase. Anna frequently trained at Club Alpha when she resided in Finland. As a female BJJ athlete close to the median age of the participants, Anna was provided with ‘openness’ (Spencer, 2012, p. 124) that an ‘outsider’ to BJJ, or a male interviewer, might not have held.

The locations of the interviews varied from quiet coffee shops near the training site to participants’ residences and the interviewer’s work site. The purpose of the study was explained in detail to the participants, and a consent form was signed before each interview. The interview guide used contained questions about participants’ martial art experiences. For example, participants were asked to describe their sporting career, when and how they started BJJ, the challenges they encountered and how they coped with them. The interviews were conducted in English and were audio recorded. In all, seven interviews were conducted, lasting from 42 to 99 minutes.

Analysis

The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were analysed following an abductive approach (see for example, Patton, 2002; Ryba *et al.*, 2012), which enabled moving between theory and data during analysis. First, the transcripts were subjected to inductive qualitative content analysis, during which various raw themes (or meaningful excerpts) were identified and coded in order to outline preliminary connections between the data and our research questions. Second, the raw themes were categorized deductively into sub-categories and main categories, which were later grouped into thematic units. The interpretation of the data was shaped by feminist post-structuralist theory.

To increase credibility and trustworthiness of the research findings, we followed the strategy called ‘member reflections’ (Tracy, 2010, p. 844). During the analytical process, we sought input from participants in order to verify whether our insights

corresponded with their understandings. The analytical themes presented in the results section were discussed with the participants who recognised them as true and accurate.

Results

The analysis revealed three broader thematic units related to the strategies these women used throughout their BJJ careers: (1) ‘taking responsibility and showing initiative’, (2) ‘building an inclusive and supportive environment’ and (3) ‘persistence’. Below we describe each theme and present its main categories and sub-categories, enriched with interview extracts.

Taking responsibility and showing initiative

The theme unit ‘taking responsibility and showing initiative’ has three main categories: (i) adaptation, (ii) improving fighting skills and (iii) promotion of women’s BJJ. We grouped these categories together as our participants felt that they held the responsibility not only to adapt to the sport’s culture but also to improve themselves as fighters and to promote women’s BJJ in general. Throughout their athletic careers, these women showed initiative and actively employed strategies to achieve these goals.

Adaptation

The first martial arts classes can be a challenge for the female newcomer who might feel like an ‘alien intruder’ in the male-dominated world of fighting (McNaughton, 2012, p. 8). Adapting to this unfamiliar sport culture is a process which all women must undergo and is often associated with feelings of awkwardness. Jaana and Kerttu describe vivid memories of their first day in training, when not many women practiced BJJ.

I opened the door, and all the heat came up out from the door, and I felt like I was standing in a cloud of sweat. And I looked inside the gym, and there were like forty guys rolling. And I

closed the door, and I remember I was standing at the stairs like thinking, 'I am not going to do this. I am not going to do this'. (Jaana)

When I first went there, everyone looked at me like, 'What is she doing here?' I said, 'Hi! I came for the beginners' course'. First, it was quite tough, because the boys used to also use the girls' locker room, and when I came, they all had to go to this one locker room that they had, which was quite small, and I had the girls' locker room only to myself. (Kerttu)

Adapting to this male-dominated culture, or *'finding the way to the group'* as Aino describes her adaptation process, was perceived as a cause that, in and of itself, participants needed to accomplish as their personal responsibility. Instead of adopting the subject position of the weak woman who needs help, participants employed two strategies to adapt and become accepted by their male teammates: (a) actively seeking training partners and (b) being a good training partner.

Engaging in combat with a woman is often avoided by male martial artists, who may grow up with the default belief that men are strong, women are weak, and thus men should neither hit a girl (Channon, 2013b) nor lose to one. Our participants shared that they had to be extremely proactive in getting a training partner and sometimes had to strategically plan how to avoid ending up alone at training.

Many of the guys did not want to train with a girl, especially a beginner girl who did not know how to do anything. I had to be really active in finding a training partner; otherwise, I was the one always left without a partner. Usually, I took the one standing next to me, and usually, the guys did not know how to refuse. (Kerttu)

I remember talking to my partner before going to the first training. I was really nervous. If there were not going to be any girls, then who would be my training partner? And we made a

strategy that, when they asked us to take a partner, I should immediately turn to my right and pick up the guy there. (Jaana)

This active role that Kerttu and Janna took to adapt in the ‘masculine’ culture of BJJ is something that has very seldom been evidenced in research on martial arts, as previous findings often assist in the reinforcement of gender stereotypes, constructing women fighters as more ‘passive’ than their male counterparts (Kavoura *et al.*, 2012). The role of science in rationalising social hierarchies has been pointed out by Foucault (1978). Being subjected to scientific and cultural discourses that represent women’s bodies as weak and passive (Vertinsky, 1994), both men and women find it challenging to face each other in a combat situation (Channon, 2013b).

Moreover, men’s unwillingness to pair up with a woman is highly problematic for female martial artists, because sparring with men is necessary for a successful training career as women are underrepresented on the training mats (Channon, 2013b; McNaughton, 2012). Our participants reported that, after almost forcing a man to be their training partner, they had to prove that they were worthy sparring partners.

I had to show them that I can also do this. It doesn’t matter that I am a girl. I am still a good fighter. So I was trying more than 100%, even when we had to grapple with 50%, because I had to be a good opponent or a good training partner for the other. (Aino)

Aino seems to be aware that ‘being a girl’ and ‘being a good fighter’ are constructed as contradicting images. Therefore, effort is needed in order to become accepted as both a ‘girl’ and a ‘fighter’ (Kavoura *et al.*, 2014). This gendered construction of fighting creates relations of power in the field of martial arts that privilege the male athlete (Matthews, 2014). In addition, the gendered language that we learn to speak (for instance the way that Aino positions herself as a girl) contributes to the (re)construction of gender dichotomies and the

materialisation of male and female sexual bodily abilities and characteristics (Butler, 1993). Overall, as fighting is constructed as an unnatural activity for the female body (Matthews, 2014) women martial artists have to be active in proving their competency, adapting to the martial arts culture and better developing themselves as fighters.

Improving fighting skills

Previous studies have reported on the anxieties that improving oneself as a fighter create for women martial artists (e.g. Halbert, 1997; McNaughton, 2012). In the 'male preserve' of combat sports (Matthews, 2014), women have to perform well in order to prove their ability and their right to be in the field. Failure to prove their competency might result in social exclusion from training through ridicule and discrimination exhibited by male instructors and teammates (McNaughton, 2012). In this study, participants perceived improving their performance as a personal responsibility. They employed three strategies to achieve improvement: (a) self-study, (b) smart training and (c) setting goals and testing themselves in competition.

Self-study entailed personal efforts, in addition to the effort put forth during regular training hours. That women have to try harder in order to succeed in the 'masculine' world of martial arts has been reported by other scholars (McNaughton, 2012). The women in our study invested much effort in their development, watching and reading related material, going to seminars, taking private classes with experienced instructors and visiting other clubs. They reported that they invested more effort in improving their fighting skills than their male teammates did. Self-study combined with high intensity, 'smart' training was perceived by our participants as a mean for improving their fighting skills.

The term 'smart training' was often repeated by the women in our study when describing the optimal, 'safe' ways of training to improve performance and prepare for

competition. High-intensity sparring entails risk of injury (Spencer, 2012, 2014). Protecting oneself from that risk and devising ‘smart’ ways of training for competition were essential elements for our participants’ performance enhancement and career development. Especially when training with men, they felt that the risk of injury was higher than when training with women. ‘*Sometimes, I have been a bit scared that the guys will hurt me*’ Mirja shared.

Feeling unsafe when training with the male members of their own club is interesting, since martial art and self-defence classes have often been organised to help women ‘feel both physically and mentally stronger than before’; to ‘feel more confident and believe that they are more capable of getting out of a dangerous situation’ (European Commission, 2014, p. 31).

We women have succeeded in making the trainings even smarter. Earlier, there used to be more like a ‘kill them all’ mentality. But we women have been competing a lot, and we want to create a training environment as good as possible for the people competing. We have been trying to develop the training system so that every training is smart, and it gives you the right tools to make yourself a better fighter in a safe way. But then also we are trying to keep the trainings tough, in a way that you can also train your mindset. (Jaana)

This strategy of training smart and safely indicates that women are rejecting the ‘kill them all’ mentality which Jaana felt existed in the early years of the development of Club Alpha, where the majority of the practitioners were inexperienced men, eager to fight each other. Such a mentality is more likely to result in injuries, training deprivation and even career termination. Aware of the stereotype that women are physically incapable of high-intensity sparring (Channon, 2013a, 2013b; McNaughton, 2012), our participants emphasised that ‘smart’ does not mean low intensity. Instead, it means leaving ones ‘ego’ off the mat and setting specific goals for each training other than ‘killing’ all of one’s teammates. Such a

philosophy is nowadays at the core of the wider BJJ culture (Hogeveen & Hardes, 2014; Spencer, 2014).

In addition to self-study and ‘smart’ training, participants viewed competing as being connected to developing oneself as fighter, helping one stay motivated, set goals and evaluate personal performance.

I became more competition-oriented over the years. This helped me to have a goal and develop myself as an athlete, and kind of my relationship with the sport became more serious.
(Aino)

Competition results were also perceived as a way for women fighters to prove their competence and justify their place in the field. In BJJ, it is common practice for women to grapple against men in training (the majority of their teammates are men) and to fight against other women in competition. During mixed-gender training, the women we spoke to rarely had the opportunity to test their skills against opponents of their own size, but competition results provide the proof of competence they sought. As Miia said ‘*it’s not easy to test your techniques and see your progress when sparring with people much bigger than you*’. The way that BJJ competitions are organised offers women the opportunity to test their skills against opponents of their sex, size and level. Unique to BJJ are the level categories that separate beginners from experts, according to which competitors fight other people of similar experience and skill. However, what is problematic in the women’s categories is the low number of participants that sometimes does not allow the full range of categories to form. Thus, our participants felt that action should be directed in promoting women’s BJJ and increasing the numbers of female practitioners and competitors.

Promotion of women’s BJJ

Our participants took the initiative in promoting women's BJJ and BJJ in general. They employed four strategies: (a) involvement in teaching, refereeing and administration, (b) developing women's only training sessions and seminars, (c) encouraging more women to compete and (d) identifying the gender gaps and making changes.

Despite some positive findings from the UK (Channon, 2013a), indicating that women are becoming accepted as martial art coaches and leaders, this was not true in Finland (and the BJJ scene in general) when Kerttu, Aino and Jaana started training. During the interviews conducted in 2009–10, our participants reported that they had never seen a woman coach, referee or decision maker in BJJ. This underrepresentation of women in such positions in BJJ is in line with findings from Claringbould and Knoppers (2012), as well as with data reported within the European Commission's (2014) proposal for gender equality in sport. However, our participants became active in teaching, refereeing and administration, making themselves (and women in general) more visible in the male-dominated Finnish BJJ field.

With Jaana, we have been doing a lot more than just concentrating in our own training. We have given efforts to every aspect of the sport. In refereeing, in giving the trainings, and now in administration, kind of getting a more active role in the Finnish scene of the sport. (Aino)

By taking up leadership roles, the women of Club Alpha contributed to achieving a better position for women in Finnish BJJ. Moreover, as role models they inspired more women to practise BJJ.

Some beginner girls that joined our trainings told us that the reason why they chose our club and the reason why they chose BJJ among all martial arts was that there were women coaches. I think it's important for some girls to have women role models. (Aino)

Organising women-only training sessions has been proven to be a successful strategy for increasing female participation in sport (van Tuyckom *et al.*, 2010). Our findings indicate that the women-only training sessions at Club Alpha succeeded in introducing more women to the sport and increasing female participation in the club. For example, Miia, who started to practice BJJ in the women-only class, describes her adaptation process as smooth and non-stressful. With a background in other martial art disciplines, she was pleasantly surprised that she could finally train with female martial artists:

When I went to the girls' training, it was completely new to train martial arts mainly with women. It was nice. I liked it. I never had a problem in training with guys, but when they are so much bigger than you, it is difficult to practice the techniques. It's nice that we have the opportunity to train with other women here in Club Alpha.

In addition, the women-only seminars allowed female athletes from across Finland to train together, test their skills and exchange knowledge. Training with other women comfortable with high-intensity sparring can be a 'liberating' experience (McNaughton, 2012, p. 9).

Encouraging more women to compete was another important strategy to improve the position of women in the male domain of BJJ. According to our participants, women could not complain about equal rights if only a couple of women competed in a tournament with hundreds of male athletes:

When there are only few women competing, it is more important to compete, to promote the sport [women's BJJ]. (Kerttu)

You have to go there and show that I am still here, and we need more women. And now we have more women, and we need more weight classes. And it's hard to be always there and

pay all the expenses in order to serve as a good example. 'I enrolled in the competition. ... Let's enrol everybody!' (Aino)

Our participants felt that gender inequality in BJJ is often justified by the low numbers of women practitioners. Instead of waiting passively for change to happen, these women took the initiative to identify the gaps and change things themselves.

I remember after my first competition, I was checking the pictures from the event, trying to find photos of myself. The organisers had uploaded on the Internet many photos of the male fighters, but I could not find any photos of the female fighters. I bought a good camera, and in the next competition, I took it with me. I started taking pictures of the female athletes, and I made my own webpage where I uploaded them. (Jaana)

Although the strategies our participants used to improve their fighting skills are presented separately from those used to adapt to BJJ culture and to promote women's BJJ, they are, indeed, related. Improving oneself as a fighter aids in adaptation, and promoting women's BJJ enhances performance. For instance, our participants were aware that, to improve as fighters, they needed more competition opportunities and more training partners of their size and level, as well as to be taken seriously. Promoting women's BJJ and attracting more women to the sport resulted in creating both more opportunities for women and more pressure to achieve gender equality in the sport. Overall, taking responsibility and showing initiative appeared to be a major theme that came out from our interview data. Another theme that was identified was related to the training environment.

Building an inclusive and supportive environment

The female martial artists' experiences are shaped by their environment, while the social and gender dynamics in training often are related to the number of female

participants (Kavoura *et al.*, 2012). This theme reflects the efforts that our participants invested in building an inclusive, supportive and non-authoritarian environment for women, and has two categories: (i) collaboration and (ii) support.

Collaboration

While BJJ is an individual sport, emphasis is given in the team spirit and teams are often referred to as ‘families’. In BJJ one learns in relation to more-experienced others (Hogeveen & Hardes, 2014). The more experienced women of Club Alpha collaborated to develop the quality of the teaching and their performance. Talking about the elements that contributed to the success of the women-only sessions, Jaana shared that *‘it was a combination of the right, enthusiastic people meeting each other that made it work’*.

It was important that we were two, or three in the beginning, more experienced athletes who shared the responsibility of organising and teaching the women’s classes. (Aino)

Participants employed three strategies to create a collaborative atmosphere: (a) building good, stable relationships and friendships, (b) discussing and (c) assigning responsibilities.

Developing stable relationships with teammates is especially important for women, who often feel like ‘strange new species’ and ‘alien intruders’ (McNaughton, 2012, p. 8) in the male-dominated martial arts culture. Getting to know each other and building good relationships and friendships were priorities for the women of Club Alpha.

Starting BJJ was also a way to make friends. In Club Alpha, I have met really cool people, and now they are my friends. (Miia)

Nowadays, because of the competition trips with Aino and Jaana, we have become really good friends. (Mirja)

The opportunity to discuss the techniques and challenges of the sport was also viewed as an important strategy. Aino says that the women-only classes provided opportunities to ask questions about and reflect on various issues concerning female athletes, such as performance anxieties, lack of proper training partners, and frustration at the lack of being recognised as worthy fighters by male teammates and instructors. The opportunity to explicitly address the challenges women face in such a ‘masculine’ culture was found to be significant in increasing female participation in other male domains (Hazari *et al.*, 2010).

Another strategy to promote teamwork was assigning responsibilities to all women. As Aino describes ‘*after they get their blue belt, we expect all the girls to assist in teaching*’. Miia appreciates the opportunity to practice teaching and felt that equality was promoted within Club Alpha.

First, I started teaching in the girls’ classes. Me and Mirja were giving the trainings when Jaana and Aino were absent. Now, for the first time, I am regularly giving the trainings for the beginners, and I am officially an instructor. I like it. I feel that I have always been a bit of a teacher, and teaching is something that I would like to do more. It’s nice that I have chances to practice instructing.

This way of sharing responsibilities is inherent within wider BJJ culture, which is less authoritarian and more open to innovation in relation to some other martial arts (Hogeveen & Hardes, 2014). Therefore, we believe that BJJ has the potential to provide a more supportive field for the development of equalitarian ideals.

Support

Social support has been identified as a strong element in athletes’ adaptation process and career development (Ryba *et al.*, 2012). The more experienced women of Club

Alpha, who had acquired the knowledge of what is required for a woman to adapt to the male-dominated culture of BJJ, invested much effort in creating a support network for newcomers. Three strategies to achieve this end were identified: (a) supporting women during adaptation; (b) supporting women before, during and after competition; and (c) receiving support from men with significant roles in the club.

Miia and Mirja, who started BJJ training after the development of women-only classes, describe their adaptation as a smooth process in which they felt fully welcomed and supported by the club's older female members. Going to competition was also easier for them:

I remember my first BJJ competition. Aino and Jaana were going to a tournament, and they told me, 'You are coming with us'. They had planned everything, and I didn't have to organise anything by myself. I just had to wake up in the morning and get in the car. It was easy to go with them. Having so many girls in the club that are active competitors creates a social pressure for you to compete but also social support. I remember once I had to cut my weight, and Jaana made a diet plan for me. (Miia)

Maybe, if there would be only guys asking you to come and compete, maybe I wouldn't be so excited in making the trips. I think it is easier to go when you have other women with you. (Mirja)

Receiving support and appreciation from men with significant roles in the club was also crucial. Our participants stated that *'most of the guys were really nice'* (Kerttu) and that they benefited from the non-authoritarian culture of BJJ which provided a supportive environment, allowing them to make their own choices and show initiative.

When we wanted to start the women's only classes, we didn't have to fight for it. [...] And later on, it was one of the male heads of the club who suggested that we should start a basic course for beginner women. (Aino)

However, gaining support from the male leaders sometimes required strategic planning, especially during the first years when women were not involved in the decision making of Club Alpha. As Aino shared '*people who decide, they are men*' and '*if you go well with the inner circle guys, then the rest of the club just comes along*'. Even though our participants talked about the continued male dominance in relatively positive terms, it is problematic that women need to go 'through' men to make things happen. In this paper, we consider the identified strategies to be successful in creating a supportive and inclusive environment for women in Club Alpha, thus, increasing the number of female practitioners. Knowledge of these strategies can assist in facilitating welcoming training environments for women.

Persistence

This positive development of women's BJJ in Club Alpha was not struggle-free. We would not properly communicate our participants' voices if we excluded from this essay experiences which they perceived as negative. The theme unit 'persistence' covers the strategies our participants used to overcome obstacles: (i) cope with negative attitudes and (ii) change them.

Coping with negative attitudes

Women's entry into martial arts has met various forms of resistance (Mierzwinski *et al.*, 2014). When Jaana started BJJ, she was often annoyed and discouraged by the way male teammates treated her.

I think they just didn't know what to do with me, so I think what they decided to do was to treat me as a guy, treat me as a small lousy guy who cannot do anything. That year, I was the only one who brought a Finnish championship medal to the club, but they kept treating me like a small guy who cannot do anything. I wanted to be respected as a good female practitioner, as a woman athlete.

Jaana encountered similar negative attitudes when she started teaching mixed-gender classes:

When I started teaching the regular classes, nobody really understood what was going on. And for the first month, nobody reacted at all. They were just like, 'Ah, I don't know what's this. Let's not react, and keep on going', so they just kept doing what I was saying. But then, they started to resist. Not all of them. Just a small bunch of people were resisting. And especially the guys who had been there for a longer time. They didn't like it because that wasn't the way they were used to do it. When we were doing the warm-ups, you could hear them complaining to each other, and when I was teaching the techniques, they would interrupt me to show something else, or they would try to challenge me by asking difficult questions.

According to Foucault (1977, 1978), society has its mechanisms of power to regulate the behaviour of individuals and to discipline or punish those who do not adjust their lives to comply with the accepted norms. Not conforming to the cultural standards represented in a given social context, as well as challenging the traditional gender structures and dynamics can have social consequences, such as social exclusion and stigmatisation. The main strategy employed by our participants to cope with such negative attitudes and forms of male resistance was to ignore the critical comments: *'Don't pay any attention'* (Kerttu) and *'just keep going'* (Mirja). It was the persistence of these women that eventually led to a change in the attitudes.

Changing attitudes

Nowadays, male athletes have '*gotten used to having women teammates and instructors*' (Miia), and it is much easier for new women. Our participants reported that a change in the gender dynamics is visible in Club Alpha during the last couple of years. This change did not happen without struggle, but it is tightly connected to the strategies described above. The identified strategies led to an increased number of female practitioners and competitors, to the degree that most of the international medals of the club are nowadays coming from the women athletes.

There has been a change, because there are more girls training nowadays, so I guess the guys also know better how to train with women. And yeah, of course, because the people competing in our club nowadays are mostly women, so I think a lot of guys also look up to the women. (Mirja)

Women athletes in Club Alpha are nowadays more active than their male counterparts in competing, coaching, refereeing and administrating and thus they are highly appreciated, not only within the club, but within the wider national BJJ community. Persistence and determination were key elements in achieving this change and overcoming negative attitudes, stereotypes and often defeat. Thus, a significant strategy to achieve a successful career in BJJ is to '*just keep going!*'

Discussion and Concluding Thoughts

We attempted to identify strategies used by five Finnish women regularly practicing and competing in BJJ to increase the number of women practicing BJJ and to develop their careers. Our findings suggest that these women changed their positioning in martial arts and the gender dynamics in their club by: (1) taking responsibility for managing

their adaptation process and career development and showing initiative in coaching, administration and promotion of women's BJJ; (2) creating an inclusive and supportive environment by building stable relationships and support networks; and (3) persisting in their goals and ignoring negative attitudes.

These strategies proved to be effective in the adaptation and performance enhancement of the participants and in increasing the number of women training in BJJ at Club Alpha. This knowledge could assist other female martial artists. For example, the adaptation strategies our participants employed could smooth the adaptation process for women new to BJJ, and the strategies used to promote women's BJJ could be used to increase female participation in martial arts.

This study explored strategies implemented by female athletes themselves, and not 'from above' (e.g. equality policies). Such strategies have significant meanings and outcomes, shedding light on the power relations in the field of martial arts (Foucault, 1982). As women enter many fields traditionally dominated by men, martial arts (and sport in general) remain among the last spheres where men can celebrate narratives about masculinity and physical superiority (Matthews, 2014; Messner, 1988, 2014). Women have long been prevented from fighting (Hargreaves, 1997) as, by learning the techniques of physical domination, women could challenge or even destroy this idea of male superiority (Channon, 2013a, 2013b). Thus, on one hand, we have men who recreate and recast their symbolic association with fighting (Matthews, 2014), and on the other, we have women martial artists who claim the right to be treated equally to their male counterparts. According to Foucault (1982), 'there is no relationship of power without the means of escape' (p. 794), and subjects always have the 'possibility of action upon the action of others' (p. 793). Being active, taking responsibility and employing the described strategies were these women's 'agonism' (p. 790) for changing the power relations within their club.

However, we should hesitate before assigning to women full responsibility for changing their situation. Holding women responsible for their underrepresentation in martial arts has been used to justify discrimination and gender inequality and to naturalise male superiority. In this view, women bear the fault if they do not attempt (or refuse) to adapt to the norms and practices of the sport. Although women are certainly not solely responsible for their underrepresentation in the field of martial arts, we believe that, by acting on their agency to disrupt the gender hierarchy, women can acquire the power to bring about desired changes in the field.

In conclusion, our findings suggest that, even in such a highly masculinised context as a martial arts gym, gender dynamics can be changed if action is specifically and persistently directed towards this aim. The power relationships that favour male martial artists are not a male biological privilege but a social construction that can always be reconstructed. As such, the findings of this case study yield multiple implications for the development of women's martial arts. Knowledge of strategies that women employed to succeed in the 'male-dominated' domain of BJJ can assist other female martial artists' improvement and career development. Understanding the social dynamics beneficial to the development of these women identifies key elements (e.g. support networks and non-authoritarian environments) for interventions intended to increase female participation in martial arts. Future research should examine strategies employed successfully by female athletes in other martial art disciplines and sport cultures. Learning from those who have risked and succeeded in paving the way could lead others to meet similar success in their own struggles.

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¹ Readers should note that all names used in this chapter are pseudonyms, for the sake of protecting anonymity