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**Title:** "Some Women Are Born Fighters" : Discursive Constructions of a Fighter's Identity by Female Finnish Judo Athletes

**Year:** 2018

**Version:** Accepted version (Final draft)

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**Please cite the original version:**

Kavoura, A., Kokkonen, M., Chroni, S., & Ryba, T. V. (2018). "Some Women Are Born Fighters" : Discursive Constructions of a Fighter's Identity by Female Finnish Judo Athletes. *Sex Roles*, 79(3-4), 239-252. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-017-0869-1>

“Some Women Are Born Fighters”:

Discursive Constructions of a Fighter’s Identity by Female Finnish Judo Athletes

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## Abstract

Martial arts and combat sports have been traditionally associated with masculinity, and a range of contradictory meanings have been attached to women's engagement and experiences. The present study draws on cultural praxis and feminist poststructuralist frameworks to explore how female martial artists are subjectified to dominant cultural discourses surrounding fighting and competition. Interviews with nine female *judoka* (judo athletes) were gathered in Finland and analyzed using Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA). The FDA revealed that in female judoka talk, judo was constructed as a sport for all, but also as a male domain and a manly sport with fighting and competition as innate masculine qualities that are not learned. Two sets of wider, competing discourses provided the dominant structure for participants' constructions of judo: (a) a mass sport discourse versus an elite sport discourse and (b) a gender equality discourse versus a female biological inferiority discourse. Drawing on this discursive context and in seeking to make sense of their experiences, participants constructed a "naturally born fighter" identity. Although this might be an empowering identity for female judoka, it does not advance the agenda of gender equity in martial arts because it constructs "ordinary" women as biologically incapable of competitive judo. Our findings reveal that even in the relatively egalitarian culture of Finland, gender hierarchies persist in judo and that it is only by disrupting prevalent constructions of fighting and competitiveness as masculine that progress toward gender equity can be made.

*Keywords:* cultural praxis; cultural sport psychology; feminist poststructuralist theory; gender; martial arts

“Some Women are Born Fighters”:

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Feminist scholars argue that our societies continue to be organized in gendered ways and that women struggle more than men do with gender stereotypes prescribing what they can (and should) do, think, and feel (Butler 1990; Holmes 2009; Vertinsky 1994; Walsh 2001; Weedon 1997). A plethora of research has revealed that certain physical and psychological attributes (e.g., reason, intellect, assertiveness, strength, and competitiveness) remain persistently associated with male biology, whereas others (e.g., sensitivity, modesty, being warm, kind, cooperative, and dependent) are associated with female biology (see Francis et al. 2017; Jokinen 2000; Prentice and Carranza 2002). Such associations lead to certain fields and disciplines being constructed as male, thereby positioning women as unequal and marginal (Walsh 2001; Weedon 1997). Examples include farming, which is perceived as a masculine domain on the grounds that women’s bodies are not capable of heavy physical work (Saugeres 2002; Stoneman and Jinnah 2015); physics (and science in general) because women are thought to lack reason and intellect (Brickhouse et al. 2000; Francis et al. 2017); service in the armed forces because women are innately incapable of enduring the physical and mental challenges and hardships of military life (Barrett 1996; Vaara et al. 2016); and video gaming, which is constructed as a male activity on the view that women are less skillful gamers than men are (Paaßen et al. 2017). The belief that these gender differences are rooted in human biology normalizes an unjust concentration of power in the so called “male domains”; that is, gender inequalities are made to seem like a natural and unchangeable phenomenon (Holmes 2009; Vertinsky 1994; Weedon 1997).

Sport is yet one more domain that has been historically associated with masculinity (see Messner 1990; Young 1993). Despite positive changes in popular beliefs about women’s

physicality and athleticism (Anderson 2008; Channon 2014; Woodward 2014), participation in competitive, physically demanding, and/or “violent” sports, which involve a high risk of injury and require tolerance of pain, is framed as a masculine experience (Matthews 2015; Young et al. 1994). This is also reflected in the rapidly expanding gender literature on martial arts and combat sports (Channon and Matthews 2015; Channon and Phipps 2017; Kavoura et al. 2014; Matthews 2014; Mierzwinski et al. 2014; Spencer 2012). Fighting is framed as a violent activity associated with the male physique and against female biological nature (Kavoura et al. 2015b; Matthews 2015, 2016; McNaughton 2012; Mierzwinski et al. 2014; Owton 2015). In martial arts’ gyms around the world, masculine identities and notions of male biological superiority are celebrated (Matthews 2014; Spencer 2012; Woodward 2008). Such traditional understandings of men’s and women’s biological attributes are not only linked to gender hierarchies and inequalities, but also shape the ways that female martial artists make sense of themselves and their sporting experiences (Kavoura 2016; McNaughton 2012; Owton 2015).

One might expect that as women increasingly train alongside men, and their involvement in martial arts becomes “normal” (Channon 2013), positive changes toward gender equality inevitably follow. However, research shows that this is not always the case. Gender stereotypes and hierarchies are reproduced in multiple ways, sometimes by women athletes themselves, through the identities that they construct and perform to gain acceptance in this male-dominated field (Halbert 1997; Kavoura et al. 2015b; Mennesson 2000). They may, for example, perform gender and femininity in ways that reify, rather than question, hierarchical gender relations, such as overtly sexualizing themselves (Channon and Phipps 2017). To advance an agenda of gender equity in martial arts (as well as in other fields and activities that are stereotypically seen as

masculine), we need to reveal and disrupt the mechanisms through which the male preserve is reproduced. Our article is directed toward this aim.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

Feminist poststructuralist theory (in this instance, drawn from Butler 1990, 1993; Foucault 1970, 1972, 1978; Weedon 1997) provided a point of departure enabling us to question the taken-for-granted male superiority in martial arts. We see gender stereotypes (and the unequal relations that are shaped by them) as resilient to change, not because they are “natural,” but because they are structural (i.e. they exist in the institutions and social practices of our society) and socially reproduced through language and discourse (Weedon 1997).

Foucault (1972) used the notion of discourse to describe ways of thinking, producing meaning, and constituting knowledge. He argued that it is within these systems of thought and knowledge that we learn to accept certain things as true. Consequently, dominant discourses shape our understandings of ourselves and give meaning to our experiences (Weedon 1997). Foucault (1970, 1972, 1978) made convincing arguments to show how power dynamics and hierarchical relationships are reproduced within discourse, for example by constructing certain practices as natural or good, while marginalizing others. His theory of discourse was appropriated by feminist theorists (e.g. Butler 1990, 1993; Weedon 1997) who explicated how women often become the agents of their own oppression by (consciously or unconsciously) subjecting themselves to dominant binary logic of maleness versus femaleness.

Numerous scholars, inspired by Foucauldian and feminist poststructuralist theory, have drawn on discourse analysis to investigate how gender power dynamics operate within various cultural discursive constructions—for instance, the work by Francis et al. (2017) on the construction of physics as a masculine subject and Willig’s (1997) study on constructions of

sexual activity. The ways in which cultural discourses shape people's identities and experiences have also been investigated (see Paulson and Willig 2008, for a discussion on how older women negotiate their identities and their ageing bodies). Examples of this kind of work in the sport sciences can be found in the study by Roy and Ryba (2012) on Muslim women's sporting experiences and that by Kavoura et al. (2015b) on the identities of female Greek judoka.

Our paper focuses on discursive constructions of judo (and hence also of fighting and competition) and examines how these shape the identity negotiation of female Finnish judoka. As in our previous work (Kavoura 2016; Kavoura et al. 2012, 2015a, 2015b), we position this study in cultural praxis (Ryba and Wright 2005, 2010), a framework that aligns well with poststructuralist theory and discursive work, while advocating social justice and change by making visible the various marginal identities of athletes (McGannon and Smith 2015; Ronkainen et al. 2016a). The cultural praxis framework challenges theories and research that ignore culture and sees athletes' identities "as constituted by various discourses of race, ethnicity, gender, generation, sport events, and the national sport system" (Ryba et al. 2013, p. 11). Thus, in the present paper, we see female judoka's identities as inseparable from the context in which they are performed and its various cultural discourses and material practices (Butler 1990, 1993; Ryba et al. 2013).

### **A Primer on Judo**

Judo is a sport of Japanese origin, founded in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by Jigoro Kano (Miarka et al. 2011). Kano's vision was to develop a holistic model of physical education—one that would train body, mind, and spirit (Kano 1986/2005). He created a system that consists of throws and ground techniques (such as chokes and armlocks) and named it *judo*, which means "the gentle way" (Miarka et al. 2011). In his teachings, which are still influential today, judo

was promoted as an inclusive sport that could be practiced by every citizen regardless of age, size or gender (Groenen 2012; Kano 1986/2005; Miarka et al. 2011). However, scholars who have examined the history of women's involvement in judo (Groenen 2012; Miarka et al. 2011) argue that, in practice, judo was never as inclusive as its theory suggests. The authors argue that the development of women's judo was constrained by dominant patriarchal ideologies that framed women as fragile and as biologically inferior to men. Women were allowed to practice judo, but their practices had to remain within certain limits fixed by men (Groenen 2012). Until the late 1960s, women's involvement was encouraged only as a form of self-defense and was restricted to softer forms of training, such as *kata* (practice of form and technique), whereas *randori* (free style practice of fighting) or any efforts to participate in competition were strongly resisted (Groenen 2012; Miarka et al. 2011). It was only in 1992 that women's judo joined the Olympic program, although it was an Olympic sport for men since 1964 (Miarka et al. 2011).

Today, judo is a highly competitive Olympic sport for both men and women. Although judo competitions are sex-segregated in the sense that male and female judoka compete in different categories, training sessions are usually mixed-sex; men and women practice along each other and often fight against each other (Guerandel and Mennesson 2007). Despite the empowering possibilities that mixed-sex training offers (Channon 2014), judo *dojos* (martial arts schools) continue to operate under structures of masculine domination, and what is expected of male and female judoka often reflects gender roles and stereotypes circulated in the broader socio-cultural context (Guerandel and Mennesson 2007). Women remain underrepresented as practitioners and athletes, as well as in coaching and managerial placements (see for example, Sindik et al. 2014). Judo continues to be a sport governed by men, as manifested by the 24-



member, male-only Executive Committee of the International Judo Federation (IJF; see <https://www.ijf.org/ijf>).

### **The Finnish Context**

Finland is a relatively egalitarian country, ranking high in international gender equality reports (Humbert et al. 2015). As the first country in the world to accord women the right to both vote and stand for election to Parliament (Sulkunen 2007), and a country where compliance with gender-equality legislation is supervised by various state mechanisms (see Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2016), Finland is considered a pioneer in gender equality. International reports depict Finland as one of the leading European countries in its proportion of female members of parliament (European Union 2016) and female participation in the labor force (OECD 2016) as well as the second-best country in the world in which to be a girl (Save the Children 2016). Moreover, in the list of the world's most gender-equal countries, Finland occupies second place after Iceland, closing nearly 85% of its overall gender gap (World Economic Forum 2016).

Not all gender gaps have been closed in Finland, and differences remain in the opportunities open to women and men. In practice, many aspects of gender equality have remained under the level suggested by international comparisons (Turpeinen et al. 2012). For instance, a gender pay gap continues to exist (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2011) as does gender segregation in Finnish working life (Statistics Finland 2016). Furthermore, traditional, gendered inequality persists in the division of domestic work and childcare (Statistics Finland 2016). Thus, it is not surprising that — regardless of the perceived improvements in gender equality over the past 10 years (European Union 2015) — the majority of Finns still consider women to be in a worse position than men (Kiiänmaa 2013).

In the Finnish sporting world, analogous contradictions exist. On the one hand, Finland is among the few European countries that started to mainstream the gender perspective (see Wiman 2010) in sport coach and instructor training, and The National Women's Sports Operators' Network in Finland (LiikunNaiset) adopted mentoring as a way of promoting the status of women in various sport-related positions (European Commission 2014; Turpeinen et al. 2012). On the other hand, Finnish women remain underrepresented in receiving financial support from the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Finnish Olympic Committee (Turpeinen et al. 2012) as well as in serving in managerial and coaching positions (European Commission 2014; Turpeinen et al. 2012). To our delight, the board of the Finnish Judo Federation currently consists of ten members, among whom five are women (see <https://www.judoliitto.fi/judoliitto/ihmiset/hallitus/>).

Yet, research shows that female athletes seem to feel less competent than males and, consequently, do not aspire to positions of leadership (Ronkainen et al. 2016b). Regardless of projects and campaigns aiming to promote gender equality and to increase the number of young girls participating in male-dominated sports (such as the Finnish Football Federation's "Princess Football" project; see Hokka 2014), sports in Finland continue to be heavily gendered at all levels and ages (Suomi et al. 2012). Tough endurance sports and sports relying on heavy equipment or vigorous physical contact, such as ice hockey and football, are perceived as masculine (Laine 2004; Pirinen 2006; Turpeinen et al. 2012), whereas women have had easier access into aesthetic or expressive sports (traditionally seen as feminine), such as gymnastics, figure skating, and dance (Marin 1988; Statistics Finland 2016; Turpeinen et al. 2012).

In such an ambiguous sporting context, surprisingly few empirical studies have investigated the lived experiences of female athletes in Finland. Most gender-related research

has been conducted in the fields of sport journalism and media studies, showing, for instance, how the media typically focuses on female athletes' motherhood or attractiveness (Turtiainen 2010). Despite changing discourses (Kaivosari 2017), the Finnish sport media describe women in rather contradictory ways—as heroic and successful athletes, but also as heterosexual, girly objects whose achievements, records, performances, and athletic skills do not need to be taken seriously (Pirinen 2006). The few empirical studies that have explored the experiences of female Finnish athletes (all conducted by female researchers) revealed that even in the comparatively egalitarian Finnish context, girls' and women's participation in sport is constrained by gender hierarchies (Herrala 2015, 2016; Kavoura et al. 2015a; Rannikko 2016; Ronkainen et al. 2016b).

Ronkainen and her colleagues (2016b) explored the gendered experiences of Finnish distance runners and found that female athletes were more likely to experience psychological distress and loneliness during the final years of their athletic careers. When making sense of their experiences, female runners drew on dominant cultural narratives that construct elite sport as a project of youth and incompatible with being a grown woman, a mother, and a wife.

Kavoura et al. (2015a) studied female Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu (BJJ) athletes in Finland and found that gender hierarchies exist in this context and that female athletes adopt various strategies for advancing their careers, such as taking initiative in promoting women's BJJ; creating local, national, and international networks of female BJJ enthusiasts; and organizing women's only courses and seminars. Moreover, Herrala (2015) investigated female adolescents playing the masculine-typed Finnish national game of ice hockey. By playing ice hockey, female adolescents were creating a new gender culture and dismantling the dichotomous gender order, while at the same time reproducing the old biology-based stereotypes of males as more physical, aggressive, and enduring, and thus able to develop athletically more than females (Herrala 2015).

Furthermore, in her study on the experiences of alternative sports participants, Rannikko (2016) found that female roller derby players emphasized the aggressive, full-contact nature of their sport; enjoyed tackling and body contact, which previously had been impossible for them; and viewed bruises as a sign of good training. Female skateboarders, on the other hand, felt that they had to be very skilled in the sport to be able to escape the false stigma of being just a skateboarders' girlfriend (Rannikko 2016). Overall, these studies foreground and confirm the need to further investigate the subjective experiences of female athletes in Finland and to shed light on how and why the actual practices relating to gender equality in sport deviate from the statistics published in equality reports. Building on previous sport feminist scholarship, the study presented here aims to (a) explore how judo is discursively constructed in female Finnish judoka talk and (b) explore how female judoka are subjectified and negotiate their identities in relation to the cultural discourses circulating in the Finnish judo community.

## **Method**

### **Overview**

In the present article, we draw on interviews conducted during a period of fieldwork in Finland that took place between October 2013 and April 2014. The first author (who is also a judoka) was the field researcher. Most of the fieldwork was conducted at a local judo club to which she had access because she had trained there in the past. In this club, approximately 14 athletes participated in a typical training session, of which three were women. Verbal permission was requested and granted from the head coach, who was informed about the purpose of the study. Because the number of women training in the club was small, the head coach provided assistance in establishing additional contacts and gaining access to judo events outside the club. Thus, additional data were gathered in larger training camps and competitions.

## Interviews and Participants

Having established relationships with the athletes through the field researcher's involvement in training sessions, training camps, and competition tournaments, participants were recruited for individual interviews. The interviewees were nine women with a median age of 30 years at the time of the data collection (range 20 to 49 years) and median training experience of 12 years (range 4 to 20 years). Five of them were competing at the international level (of whom one was a Paralympic athlete), two were competing at the national level, and two were retired elite athletes involved with coaching and administration.

Most of the interviews took place in a training institute during a national team training camp, two interviews took place in a university office, and one interview was conducted online via Skype (see Sullivan 2012 for the appropriateness of Skype for qualitative data collection). The purpose of the inquiry was explained and a consent form was signed before each interview. Although an interview guide (available as an [online supplement](#)) was used to ensure that certain issues were addressed consistently in all interviews, participants were given the opportunity to freely discuss any issues related to their sporting careers. Specifically, participants were asked when, how, and why they started judo and to narrate their sporting careers. They were also asked about positive and negative moments, as well as about major challenges faced in their career and how they coped with these. Moreover, participants were explicitly asked for their opinion on why few women do judo in their clubs (and in general), as well as what kind of strategies could be used to increase the number of female participants. The interviews lasted between 25 and 50 minutes, and they were audio-recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions yielded 129 pages of single-spaced text. All the interviews were conducted in English. To protect confidentiality, all names used in the present paper are pseudonyms.

### **Field Researcher's Positionality**

Fieldwork, qualitative interviewing, and knowledge production entail relationships of power, and researchers must acknowledge how their own experiences, subjectivities, and other distinguishing features (e.g. gender, class, race, culture) might have influenced the research process (Krane 1994; Ryba and Wright 2010; Woodward 2008). In addition, researchers who physically participate in the research field should reflect on the personal, practical, and political reasons that led them to engage their own bodies and selves in the data collection (Matthews 2015). Hence, a meaningful point of reflection was how the first author's situation in relation to the field of research (Haraway 1988; Matthews 2015; Woodward 2008) played a role in co-constructing and interpreting the data (Doucet and Mauthner 2008; Kerrick and Henry 2017).

The first author is a Greek woman who has been living, studying, and training in Finland for several years. Her researcher positioning was constituted as an "insider" in terms of gender, age, and training experience in judo. The participants, knowing that they were talking with another female judoka, felt safe to provide accounts of their gendered experiences in judo. However, as Woodward (2008, p. 547) argued "the research process can never be totally 'inside' or completely 'outside', but involves an interrogation of situatedness." As a non-Finn, the first author was also an "outsider" in terms of cultural background. This allowed her to embrace distancing as a researcher and to position participants as the experts (Kerrick and Henry 2017; Ryba and Wright 2010; Woodward 2008) on what it is like to be a female Finnish judoka.

Besides the above mentioned practical reasons that led the first author to engage in embodied research, as well as the obvious academic justifications to explore an under-researched field, the most important factor that drove the interviewer to embark on this research project was her own personal experiences in judo and BJJ. She has many times felt constrained by the

gender hierarchies embedded in martial arts cultures. Her politically-minded research agenda was to reveal and challenge the ways that these hierarchies are discursively reproduced.

### **Data Analysis**

The interview transcripts were analyzed following Willig's (2008) stepwise approach to Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA; see also, Kavoura et al. 2015b; Paulson and Willig 2008; Roy and Ryba 2012). The first author conducted the analysis under the last author's guidance. The interpretation of the findings was then discussed with the second and third authors whose feminist positioning and research expertise in issues of gender were significant in shaping the results.

First, the lead author identified and coded all direct and non-direct references to judo that reflected shared meanings and taken-for-granted understandings. Second, we placed these discursive constructions of judo within wider sporting and societal discourses circulating in Finland. After that, we explored how female Finnish judoka negotiated their identities by considering (a) what possibilities for action the discursive constructions of judo offered to the athletes, (b) what subject positions were available for the athletes within the identified sporting and societal discourses, and (c) what the practical and psychological implications of adopting or rejecting the available subject positions were.

## **Results**

### **Discursive Constructions of Judo**

For more information about the women quoted, please refer to Table 1. In exploring how judo was constructed in female Finnish judoka talk, the discursive analytic procedure revealed that although judo was constructed as a "sport for all," it was also described as a "male domain" and as a "manly sport" characterized by the innate masculine qualities of fighting and

competitiveness (see Table 2). Although there were some variations in the ways that the participants framed judo, all three discursive constructions were present in each of the nine interviews.

**Judo as a sport for all.** Similarly to how Jigoro Kano (1986/2005) promoted judo in his teachings, female Finnish judoka framed judo as a sport suitable and beneficial for all and as an activity in which age, size, gender, or even strength do not matter. For example, Heli, responding to the question, “How did you start judo?,” described judo as an activity that can be done by (and with) the whole family:

My eldest son started practicing judo when he was six, and then my youngest son also wanted to join. I was following their practices for several years and then I got interested. I signed up too and a year after me, their father also started doing judo. So, everybody has at least tried and we adults are still kind of hooked with it.

(Heli)

Responding to the same question, Jenni talked of judo as empowering and as a sport that made her feel confident and outgoing: “I used to be shy. I was not socially very flexible and it was very nice for me that I could go and do physical things with people who were nice, smiley, and welcoming. I felt good”. Heli also thinks that she has benefited from judo in multiple social, physical, and mental ways:

I think that judo has given me a lot because it is kind of a whole community that I ended up being involved in. Also, I think that practicing judo has given me self-confidence because I know now that I can manage with different types of people. And I think that, especially after I started competing, this mental kind of self-confidence grew in me. It made me feel strong [laughing] and I don’t mean only



in a physical way but also mentally. It made me feel that I am able to face my own fears. (Heli)

Such accounts are in line with findings from previous studies that have advocated women's participation in martial arts and combat sports as a potential source for individual empowerment (Channon and Phipps 2017; McNaughton 2012; Mierzwinski et al. 2014; Owton 2015).

In very positive terms, the Finnish judo scene was described as a field characterized by equality; however, this "equality" had to be gained by the female athletes. For example, in response to the question "What do you think about the levels of support that male and female athletes get from the judo federation?," Eliisa stated:

I think it's quite equal for males and females because we have [name of female athlete] who is the best competitor in Finland. This is nice because we have these old judo guys who are coaching now and they think that men rule the world. It's so nice to be able to show them that this is not the case. (Eliisa)

Findings from previous research also suggest that women in fields perceived as masculine have to work hard in order to gain the same access to resources that their male counterparts have or to subvert dominant beliefs about their athletic inferiority as well as to gain appreciation for their sporting skills and achievements (see for example, Rannikko 2016).

**Judo as a male domain.** Despite the "judo for all" and equality-orientated stories, as well as the multiple benefits and empowering possibilities for women we described, the participants recognized that in Finland (and elsewhere) judo is largely dominated by men:

In my club, we have approximately 120 judoka. So, according to the Finnish standards we are an average judo club. But, we don't have many women. When I

started, I think we had three women. Nowadays we have probably ten. (Sara, responding to the question “Are there many people training in your club?”)

Along with that, participants talked about high drop-out rates for women in judo. For example, in responding to the question, “Have you always been the only woman in your club?,” Elli said: “Sometimes some girls came, and then they quit, and again, and again. Yeah, most of the time I have been the only girl.”

At first, participants would state that being the only woman, or fighting with men, was never a problem for them and it was something that they were used to: “I was so used to it, because usually it is like that in sports. I think at first I hadn’t even realized that most of the people I was training with were men” (Sara). “I was the only one, but I was OK with that” (Hannaleena). However, the stories shared later contradicted this statement. For example, around the time of the interview, Hannaleena was considering changing to another sport: “Nowadays I like BJJ more because I get to train with other women. In judo, there were only guys.”

Overall, although the participants stated that their gender was never an issue, they provided rich accounts of the difficulties that women and girls face when entering a male-dominated dojo, including prejudice and ridicule (see also, Halbert 1997; Kavoura et al. 2015b; Owton 2015).

Sometimes the boys were making fun of me, because I was the only girl. But little by little, I was getting better, and then I was beating them. This made them mad, and their reaction was to make fun of me again. (Elli, in responding to the question “What were the things that really frustrated you in judo?”)

According to Elli's accounts, she encountered attitudes of this kind not only in youth judoka groups, but even in elite adult groups: "I know some guys in the national team who think that women's judo is not as good as men's. They think they are so much better than we are". Heli also felt that female athletes are often ridiculed, or not taken seriously by their male teammates, and she agreed that the lack of other women in training sessions can at times be frustrating:

If everybody else is this kind of tall men, it's difficult to practice with them. Then I am frustrated and of course I would like that there would be more women, just for the size... What annoys me is that some men are kind of playing with you. You can see it that they are playing with you in the randori [free style practice of fighting] when they move like saying "oh you cannot do anything." This annoys me. You just want to do something and throw them, but it doesn't always happen... When they want to rest, they take me [as a partner for the randori] because I am small. I don't know if it is because I am a woman or because I am small. For example, yesterday a guy came a bit late to the practice and we had already started doing some groundwork, and when we were changing partners, he kind of told me "I take you first [as a partner] because I don't need to use so much strength." This kind of comments you can hear often. (Heli)

In line with previous literature (Halbert 1997; Kavoura et al 2015a; Walsh 2001), participants' stories revealed several strategies that female judoka (consciously or unconsciously) employ to survive in this male domain, such as minimizing the impact of gender on their experience and accepting the existing normative practices in their judo communities, connecting with other female fighters, asking for the support of significant (male) others, doing various

“chores” for their club, or striving for better results than their male counterparts. For example, Liina, talked about the importance of having other female partners or female role models:

There was one girl with whom I was very close. There were also a few other girls when I started, like four girls maybe, but then they dropped it. So, I think because of this one girl I made it so far. It was important that there was a female partner for me to train with... And when we got our green belts, we had to move to the next group in which actually there were many female judoka that had some success in competitions. So, maybe this is also one reason that I kept going. If all others would be men, then I don't know what would have happened... And actually, the reason that 2 years ago I moved from my home-city to the city I live now was that so many women and girls train here and among them are the best female competitors of Finland. (Liina)

**Judo as a manly sport.** Although the female judoka's stories reveal that the underrepresentation of women in judo is problematic in many ways, they do not seem to question it. Instead they came to normalize it as a “natural” phenomenon (Foucault 1970; Holmes 2009; Walsh 2001; Weedon 1997) because judo is a manly sport that few women choose (or are able) to do. This construction of judo as a naturally manly sport, which contradicts the “judo for all” stories shared previously, is established through the association of fighting and competitiveness with male biology (Matthews 2014, 2016).

When the participants were explicitly asked “Why do you think there are not so many women doing judo?,” they talked about fighting and competitiveness as innate masculine qualities that most women do not possess (see also Kavoura et al. 2015b). These innate qualities

were linked to the biology or the personality of the individual and were constructed as something that is not learned but one is born with: “Some people are fighters and some are not” Elli said.

I think most of the men have some inner built thing for any kind of wrestling and competing. They do it when they have been in a bar drinking and even in a friendly situation they compete to each other. We don't do that; and maybe women tend to be more jealous to each other. Men are not like this. They are like friends all together and they are cheering for each other and maybe there is a [sex] difference. I don't mean that all women are jealous to each other, but they have more that feeling than men do, I think. (Hannaleena)

Supporting findings reported by Mennesson (2000), participants in the present study differentiated between competitive and non-competitive (or between “hard” and “soft”) forms of judo. Competitive judo was constructed as hard and as a very serious, painful, and demanding activity that is more suitable for men:

Well, I think one reason why not so many women like to do judo is that they need to deal with the pain. Because sometimes it hurts a bit and that's not something that women are used to. I think it's easier for boys. I don't know, but maybe they are able to handle pain better and they don't get hurt so easily compared to women. (Liina)

By associating tolerance to pain with male biology, the female judoka reproduced dominant masculinist beliefs that construct women's bodies as fragile and inferior (Vertinsky 1994; Weedon 1997). Previous studies on the strategies used by women to advance their careers in martial arts (Halbert 1997; Kavoura et al. 2015b; Mennesson 2000) or in other fields perceived as masculine (Vaara et al. 2016; Walsh 2001) have also reported that women themselves often

reify normative discourses of male biological superiority. In the present study, soft, non-competitive forms of judo (such as doing judo for fun and health, for self-defense, or as a social activity) were constructed as more appropriate for women:

Where I come from, there are a lot of women training. But it's not competitive judo. It is more like soft judo. There are a lot of women there and they are just doing some kind of techniques, a little ne-waza randori [ground fighting], not that hard, and they are not competing. That has been a success in getting women. I think competing in judo as a woman is harder. You can practice judo. That's OK. But competing is just so much harder. (Liina)

We have discussed about arranging a course for women, but we haven't just made it happen yet. Or we have discussed, what if we advertise that this [class] is for self-defense and not for sport. Would then more women be interested to it? (Heli)

### **Dominant Sporting and Societal Discourses in Finland**

We examined the discursive constructions of judo as a “sport for all,” a “male domain,” and a “manly sport” through the lens of feminist poststructuralist theory (Butler 1990, 1993; Foucault 1972, 1978; Weedon 1997). Two sets of wider, competing discourses were found to be at work, underpinning the ways in which the female Finnish judoka talked about judo and their experiences: (a) a mass sport discourse versus an elite sport discourse (see also Helle-Valle 2008) and (b) a gender equality discourse versus a female biological inferiority discourse (see also Kavoura et al. 2015b).

**Mass versus elite sport.** Finland has a long tradition in promoting sport and physical activity for all (Green and Collins 2008; World Health Organization 2016). However, although policies and legislation favor mass sport, elite sport and athletic performance discourses are

circulated in sports clubs and organizations, shaping the ways that Finnish athletes make sense of their experiences. Ronkainen and her colleagues argued that although alternative discourses that place less emphasis on winning exist in the Finnish sporting culture, they are overshadowed by the “winning is all” focus of the elite sport culture (Ronkainen et al. 2013; Ronkainen and Ryba 2012). Critical scholars of sport psychology have argued against the rigid (and gendered) understandings and practices that dominate elite sport culture and can be highly problematic for athletes’ well-being, for example when sport performance is not going well or when expectations in sport conflict with societal expectations of one’s gender (see for example, Ronkainen et al. 2016a, 2016b; Ryba et al. 2015).

**Gender equality versus female biological inferiority.** Finland has been successful in reducing gender inequalities in many respects and celebrates its image as one of the most equal countries in the world (Humbert et al. 2015; World Economic Forum 2016). Gender equality is one of the highest societal values in Finland (Laine et al. 2016). However, feminist and critical scholars argue that despite the discourse of gender equality that is proudly promoted in national self-representations, gender hierarchies continue to exist in Finland and are often overshadowed by the belief that gender equality has already been achieved (Jokinen 2000; Ronkainen et al. 2016b). Hyvärinen (2017) argued that bypassing and downplaying gender issues is a problem that occurs when gender equality is talked about as something that has been achieved. The messages Finnish girls and women receive in this post-feminist era are that all complaining is unproductive and that women themselves are responsible for achieving equal treatment (Hyvärinen 2017). Hyvärinen further explained that reflecting these messages, pop culture in Finland is full of “Wonder Women” stories, that is, stories of high-achieving, strong, independent, and self-confident women (see for example Willans’ September 30, 2013 article in

the *Helsinki Times*). In Willans' (2013) humorous article, titled "Nordic attraction: Why I married a Finnish girl," the Wonder Woman becomes the subject of male fantasies. Representing the desires of the male subject, this beautiful, magical creature, despite being strong and independent, remains true to the roles and characteristics prescribed for her by the patriarchal discourse (i.e. the beautiful lover and the ideal wife).

Even though Finnish women are more physically active than their male counterparts are (Van Tuyckom et al. 2010; World Health Organization 2016), they continue to be framed as biologically different and physically inferior to men. Beliefs about the frailty of the female body are circulated in the Finnish sports media (Pirinen 2006), in sports clubs, and even by female athletes themselves (Herrala 2015). Milner and Braddock (2016) argue that the discourse of female biological inferiority is irrational, citing research demonstrating that women live longer and are physically more resilient than men are. The authors further argue that this illogical discourse dominates almost all sporting contexts, not because it is natural, but because it is structural. Sport (along with all its rules) is a socially constructed institution invented by men for men (Milner and Braddock 2016; Vertinsky 1994).

### **Discussion**

In the present study, we explored how judo was constructed in female Finnish judoka talk. In rather contradictory ways judo was framed as a sport for all, but also as a male domain and a manly sport. Fighting and competitiveness were constructed as innate masculine qualities and, consequently, competitive judo was framed as more suitable for the male body. The female body was constructed as fragile and more suitable for "soft" forms of judo. Two sets of wider, competing discourses prevalent in the Finnish society—that is, a mass sport discourse versus an elite sport discourse and a gender equality discourse versus a female biological inferiority



discourse—were underpinning the discursive constructions of judo by the female Finnish judoka. Because the discursive field of relevance to the judo community is characterized by competing discourses, female judoka perform multiple identities in their conformity with and resistance to what is offered to them within these discourses. Although we would never be able to account for all the identities that are constructed and performed by female Finnish judoka, in the present paper we deconstruct (i.e. we seek to reveal the underlying meanings and power dynamics of) the “naturally born fighter” identity—the identity most often constructed by the participants when trying to make sense of and talk about their judo experiences.

### **(De)constructing the “Naturally Born Fighter” Identity**

In our paper, we see identity as a site of disunity and conflict that is always in process and a product of negotiation of various subject positions and forms of subjectivity offered to us within discourse (Butler 1990; Weedon 1997). In offering particular (and restricted) ways of seeing the world, a discursive field fixes the meaning and hierarchical organization of this world through the subject positions (i.e. locations for people or ways of being an individual) it makes available (Foucault 1970, 1972; Weedon 1997). These subject positions can be taken up or resisted, but this choice does not come without consequences; certain subject positions are privileged, more accessible, or presented as “natural” whereas others are “unnatural” or/and marginalized (Butler 1990, 1993; Foucault 1978; Weedon 1997). If taken up, a subject position opens up particular forms of subjectivity (i.e., conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions, as well as ways of feeling and behaving). In our constantly changing world, discourses are continually competing with each other, and the political interests and social implications of any specific discourse would not be realized (or rejected) without the agency of individuals who take up or resist certain subject positions and reproduce or transform social practices. Thus,

“individuals are both the site and subjects of discursive struggle for their identity” (Weedon 1997, p. 93).

Within the antagonistic discourses that dominate the Finnish sporting culture, diversified subject positions are offered for women. For example, numerous, alternative (and supposedly non-hierarchical) versions of being a martial artist, an athlete, and/or a fighter are proposed within the mass sport or “judo for all” discourse, guaranteed by the notion of equal opportunity for all in and through sport. However, the elite sport discourse tends to be very specific in determining who matters as an athlete (what are the practices that constitute her/him) and what is “natural” or “unnatural” in sport. For instance, media portrayals of female athletes who are fiercely competitive or have an aggressive style of play place them outside normative definitions of womanhood (Douglas 2002). Furthermore, although the “wonder woman” subject position is offered to Finnish women within the gender equality discourse, this wonder woman remains the object of the male gaze and, when she takes up the forms of subjectivity offered by the discourse of female biological inferiority, she perceives herself as physically inferior to men. Even if female Finnish judoka do not consciously identify with the whole range of characteristics assigned to women by the female biological inferiority discourse (e.g. women are soft, passive, fragile, intolerant to pain), they adopt this “expert” perspective in explaining female underrepresentation in judo. Drawing on this perspective that is presented as scientific discourse (Foucault 1970, 1972; Vertinsky 1994), female Finnish judoka construct “ordinary” women as biologically unsuitable for the physical and mental stress of competitive judo, as “quitters,” and as emotional beings who tend to complain about everything.

How then did the female judoka make sense of and explain their own sporting success and experiences? In contrast to how they drew on the female biological inferiority discourse

when describing “female nature” (Vertinsky 1994), when talking about themselves the participants said they always liked competition and during their judo careers they were able to endure pain and overcome serious injuries. They differentiated themselves from ordinary women by performing the self-image of exceptional beings, born with masculine qualities, such as competitiveness, tolerance to pain, and the ability to fight. The participants constructed themselves as naturally born fighters who never complain and are dedicated to their sporting goals. Although this “naturally born fighter” identity may be empowering for female judoka (allowing them to justify their position in judo, to gain a sense of superiority over other women, and to become accepted in the male domain of martial arts), it also assists in reproducing the belief that fighting and competitiveness are innate male qualities and judo is a manly sport for which few women are capable. Thus, performing this identity, which is understood as compatible with the embodiment of the physical and mental characteristics required of a fighter, becomes a means of reproducing the belief that “ordinary women cannot do this.” Such subjectification to the discursive construction of fighting and competitiveness as naturally male characteristics, while refusing to identify with the category of “ordinary woman,” contributes to the politics of exclusion (Hall 1996) that operate in martial arts.

### **Limitations and Future Research Directions**

As with all research, the subjective nature of our interpretation of the findings must be acknowledged. It is possible that other scholars might have understood and interpreted our data differently. Although we are a group of four women from diverse academic and cultural backgrounds, and we discussed the findings several times in seeking to reach a consensus on their interpretation, we nevertheless recognize that the conclusions we have reached are informed by our individual theoretical positions. Other readings are of course possible, and it was never

our intention to provide a single theoretical interpretation that stands as the only, best, or right one. Instead we have provided a partial and *positioned* interpretation (Haraway 1988) of how judo is discursively constructed and how female Finnish fighters identities are negotiated. Future research could examine the identities of women in other contexts perceived as masculine, and it should seek to understand how sexism is cultivated in these highly gendered fields. Moreover, studies on children and youth could help us to determine how and at what ages beliefs about female biological inferiority start to emerge. Understanding the ways through which the male preserve is reproduced would be the first step in bringing about equality. Once the phenomenon is understood, we can begin to combat it. This means that future research should also target the identification of strategies that might prove more effective in disrupting and challenging discourses of male biological superiority.

### **Practice Implications**

Our findings have important implications for those interested in promoting gender equality in sporting contexts that are typically seen as male. First, we have shown that the increased presence of women alone is not always enough to challenge persistent discourses that construct certain sports as naturally male domains. Female athletes, whether few or many, often end up reproducing the dominant patriarchal gender hierarchies through the language they use, the practices in which they engage, and the identities they perform. Second, changes in the desired direction of gender equality are never guaranteed through legislation and policies. In fact, nothing can guarantee the success of our feminist wishes for a transformed future. Nevertheless, even without guarantees (Hall 1983), practical work with coaches and athletes (perhaps starting with young athletes and possibly even their parents) should be directed at revising and subverting dominant understandings about the frailty of the female nature.

Our findings also have implications for those who work with women in male-dominated sports, such as coaches and sport psychologists. Those who seek to assist the female athlete in advancing her sporting career should be aware of the gender dynamics that operate in male sporting contexts, and they should turn this awareness into action by empowering women, valuing their experiences, and helping them to challenge limiting beliefs about what their bodies can and cannot do (Gill 1994).

### **Conclusion**

The present study expands upon previous feminist research on sport by exploring how cultural discourses of sport and gender shape female athletes' identity negotiations. More specifically, our work shows that fighting and competitiveness are persistently constructed as innate male characteristics. Being subjected to this discourse, female judoka perform identities that contribute to the politics of exclusion (Hall 1994) that operate in martial arts. Our work therefore underlines the need for discursive interventions aiming at permanently revising and subverting discourses that limit women to the social constructed frailty of so-called female nature.

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Table 1

*Participants' Demographic and Interview Information*

| Pseudonym  | Age | Training experience (in years) | Competition status   | Location/means of interview | Interview length (in mins.) |
|------------|-----|--------------------------------|--|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Eliisa     | 20  | 10                             | National team athlete  | Training institute          | 34.45                       |
| Elli       | 23  | 14                             | National/Olympic team athlete                                  | Training institute          | 26.59                       |
| Hannaleena | 28  | 4                              | National level competitor                                      | University office           | 38.08                       |
| Heli       | 43  | 8                              | National level competitor                                      | University office           | 48.17                       |
| Jenni      | 49  | 12                             | Retired elite athlete, involved in coaching and administration | Training institute          | 40.04                       |
| Liina      | 27  | 17                             | National team athlete  | Training institute          | 28.21                       |
| Martta     | 31  | 20                             | National/Olympic team athlete                                  | Skype                       | 49.59                       |
| Piia       | 30  | 19                             | Retired elite athlete, involved in coaching                    | Training institute          | 33.14                       |
| Sara       | 37  | 7                              | National/Paralympic team athlete                               | Training institute          | 25.35                       |

Table 2

*Description and Examples of Discursive Constructions of Judo*

| Discursive Constructions of Judo | Description   | Example Quotes   |
|----------------------------------|---|--|
| Judo as a sport for all          | Judo was framed as an activity suitable for all (regardless of age, size, or gender) and as a sport in which everybody is treated equally in Finland. The empowering possibilities that judo offers for all practitioners (and especially for women) were emphasized.   | [Sara, responding to the question “What was it that you liked in judo?”]<br>“I think it’s actually the equality that I liked. They didn’t care if I am disabled or not. They didn’t care if I am good or bad. Everybody wanted to teach me. [In judo] you can fight in the level you are, and you can become better, and everybody is very friendly.”  |
| Judo as a male domain            | Judo was described as a field in which women are largely underrepresented. Participants provided rich accounts of the difficulties girls and women face when entering such a male-dominated terrain, and they shared strategies that they use to overcome them.   | [Eliisa, responding to the question “Even as a junior, you were competing against women?”]<br>“That’s right, because there are not so many girls doing judo in Finland and you really can’t choose whom you are training with. In my club, there is only me and one other girl. So, two times per week we have to train in a club in another city. Female athletes from all over the capital area gather there, and sometimes there are almost ten girls in the training, so that’s really nice. It would be very difficult if I could only train in my own club.” |
| Judo as a manly sport            | Judo was constructed as biologically more suited for males. This construction was linked to the association of fighting and competitiveness with masculinity. “Softer,” non-competitive forms of judo, such as practicing judo for self-defense, fun, and health or as a physical (and social) activity were presented as more suitable for “ordinary” women. | [Liina, responding to the question “Why do you think there are more men than women doing judo?”]<br>“I think males have some like genetic way to fight. They need to be the Alpha male, so they are born with that. It’s not like that with women. They don’t really fight like that.”   |

**Online supplement** for Kavoura, A., Kokkonen, M., Chroni, S., & Ryba, T. V. “Some women are born fighters”: Discursive constructions of a fighter’s identity by female Finnish judo athletes. *Sex Roles*. Anna Kavoura, University of Jyväskylä. Email: anna.kavoura@jyu.fi

### **Semi-Structured Interview Guide**

1. When, how and why did you start judo?
2. Can you describe your judo career so far?
3. What were your favorite moments?
4. What were the most challenging/difficult/stressful moments?
5. How did you cope with these challenges?
6. Is there anything that you find challenging or stressful today? Can you describe a recent incident in the training when you experienced stress?
7. What is it in judo that you like the most?
8. How do you get along with your teammates and coach?
9. Are there many women training in your club? If not, how does that make you feel?
10. If there aren’t that many women training in your club, why you think is that? Can you think of any strategies that could be used to increase the numbers of female participants?
11. Does training judo affect your social life?
12. Has judo given you any skills that could be transferred to every-day life?
13. What do your friends and family think that you are doing judo?
14. What are your plans for the future?