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**Author(s):** Kavoura, Anna

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## **(Re) negotiating an athlete's identity during training and researching judo in Finland**

Anna Kavoura

This chapter examines how a female Greek *judoka*'s (judo athlete/practitioner) experiences are shaped by the Finnish judo cultural context. Based on field-notes constructed during a larger ethnographic research project, this research builds upon recent scholarship on women's issues in martial arts (e.g. Channon & Jennings, 2013; Channon & Matthews, 2015a; Kavoura, Kokkonen, & Ryba, 2014; Kavoura, Ryba, & Chroni, 2015; Lokman, 2011; McNaughton, 2012). I employ an autoethnographic approach to discuss the changes that occurred in the ways that I make sense of myself and my experiences in judo during my relocation to Finland. I focus on the processes of cultural adaptation and identity negotiation, as well as how these are discursively shaped by the social environment. In order to shed light on the ways that the cultural context shaped my experiences and understandings, I draw upon the *cultural praxis* framework (Ryba & Wright, 2005, 2010) and feminist poststructuralist theorizing.

In the sections that follow, I discuss my theoretical and methodological choices. Then I present my autoethnographic account through critically and theoretically engaging with the data. While this chapter primarily entails an analytic self-reflection of my personal experiences, this knowledge is useful for those who work with athletes. As understanding the ways that athletes' experiences are shaped through their cultural environment is important in facilitating supportive training environments for all, as well as in helping all athletes to have longer, healthier, and more enjoyable sporting careers.

### **Cultural praxis and poststructuralist framework**

This study utilizes a cultural praxis framework (Ryba & Wright, 2005). This framework was selected because it calls for sensitivity to the various cultural identities of athletes, and it advocates for social justice and change. When aligned with poststructuralist theory (in this case, drawn from Butler, 1990, 1993; Foucault, 1969, 1975) cultural praxis has the potential to unravel the ways through which certain identities and experiences are normalized and privileged within

discourse, while others (e.g. those of women in male sporting cultures) are silenced or marginalized (Ronkainen, Kavoura, & Ryba, 2016; Ryba & Wright, 2010).

In this study, I draw upon Foucault's (1969, 1975) concepts of *discourse* and *discipline* and Butler's (1990, 1993) *performativity theory* to discuss how my experiences and identity negotiation were shaped by the cultural context. For Foucault (1969), discourses are systems of thought and knowledge. These systems are governed by certain rules and have the power to shape our understandings and realities. People can only make sense of themselves and their experiences by drawing on existing cultural discourses. Moreover, according to Foucault (1975) people's activities, behavior, and bodies are socially regulated through mechanisms of disciplinary power. Disciplinary power manifests itself through hierarchical observation, examination, and normalization (measuring each person according to a norm). Additionally, disciplinary power has a homogenizing effect which encourages people to strive hard to achieve the societal norm.

Butler's work is particularly useful in theorizing identity. For Butler (1990), identities are something that people perform, rather than have. The performative acts of identity are culturally influenced and strongly related to gender norms and expectations. Butler (1993) also discusses the issue of agency when performing gender and identity. While people have some agency in this process, their agency is constraint and regularized through the repetition of cultural norms. This means that we learn how to perform our gender and identities, similarly to the way that actors learn their roles, through the repetition of the performances of others in similar roles.

The above mentioned poststructuralist concepts have been extensively used by sport sociologists and psychologists, as well as by gender and feminist scholars in sport, to map the discourses (of gender, age, class, race, and so forth) that shape the identities and experiences of athletes (e.g. Kavoura, Ryba, & Chroni, 2015) and to shed light on the disciplinary practices that athletes are subjecting their bodies and themselves in order to fit into the cultural norms and ideals (Johns & Johns, 2000; Markula & Pringle, 2006; Rail & Harvey, 1995). Martial arts scholars have drawn on Foucault and Butler to explore how women's bodies, identities, and experiences are constructed and negotiated in the male domain of martial arts (Jennings, 2015; Kavoura, et al., 2014; Kavoura, Ryba, & Chroni, 2015; Knijnik & Ferretti, 2015; Maclean, 2015) and to inquire into the strategies that female fighters employ to change their positioning (Kavoura, Chroni,

Kokkonen, & Ryba, 2015). Aligned with autoethnographic perspectives, poststructuralist theory has been employed to reveal the diversity of women's experiences in martial arts, and to open up space for non-traditional identities of female fighters (McNaughton, 2012).

### **Employing an autoethnographic approach**

This study is part of a larger ethnographic PhD research on the experiences of female judo and Brazilian jiu-jitsu (BJJ) athletes (see Kavoura, Chroni, et al., 2015; Kavoura, et al., 2014; Kavoura, Ryba, & Chroni, 2015). Borrowing from the methodological orientations of other female scholar-athletes (see for example, McNaughton, 2012; Owton, 2015; Ronkainen, Harrison, & Ryba, 2013), I have employed an autoethnographic approach to self-reflect on my personal experiences in training and researching judo in Finland. One of the benefits of an autoethnographic approach to inquire into processes of identity negotiation is that it entails “a way of exposing or revealing the interior of an experience or subject position, making it available as a point of understanding for those unfamiliar with a particular identity or subject position” (McNaughton, 2012, p. 2). Moreover, autoethnography aligns well with poststructuralist theory (see for example, McNaughton, 2012) and with the tenets of the cultural praxis framework (Ronkainen et al., 2016; Ryba & Wright, 2010).

Specifically, I have employed the method of *analytic autoethnography* proposed by Anderson (2006), which “refers to ethnographic work in which the researcher is (1) a full member in the research group or setting, (2) visible as such a member in the researcher's published texts, and (3) committed to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena” (p. 375). Through commitment to theoretical analysis, this method ventures deeper than simply documenting personal experience, or evoking the emotions of the reader. The goal of analytic autoethnography is to use empirical data to gain insights into broader social phenomena (see also, Ronkainen et al., 2013).

In this chapter, my goal is to shed light on the process of a female (and foreigner) athlete's identity negotiation in the male dominated scene of Finnish judo. For this purpose, I draw on fieldnotes that were constructed during the period of relocation to Finland, between October 2013 and April 2014. During this time, I maintained a detailed training/research journal, recording my experiences and observations of judo practices, competitions, training camps, and

other judo-related social events. This journal allowed me to reflect on my understandings and relationships in the field, and provided a means of documenting how these changed during the course of the research. Most of the fieldwork was conducted in a local judo club. In this club, at the time of data collection, approximately 14 athletes were training in a typical training session, among which three were women. I trained there approximately two times per week (four hours). In total 38 entries (192 pages) were recorded in the researcher's journal.

While coding and organizing the data, searching for patterns and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006), I used a theory driven approach, trying to test if the overarching concepts (namely, biology, gender, femininity, and judo/sport)<sup>1</sup> were relevant to the ways that I was making sense of myself and my judo experiences. While these four concepts were visible in my field-notes, only the judo/sport concept dominated my journal writings. A data driven approach was conducted later, which revealed another dominant concept, that being the body. The body (and how it moves) is gendered and is strongly related to dominant discourses regarding human biology. I draw on poststructuralist theory (Butler, 1990, 1993; Foucault, 1969, 1975) to discuss how cultural discourses around the sporting body, and competitive judo/sport shaped my identity negotiation during the time of data collection. I have altered the names of people in the accounts in order to protect their anonymity as much as possible. However, I am aware that judo in Finland is a rather small field and the people, places, and events that I discuss about may still be recognized.

## **Entering the field**

*...or (re)adapting to the Finnish and judo culture*

*It's been maybe more than two years since the last time that I have been in this place and I feel very excited. I head to the women's locker rooms and I start unpacking my gi<sup>2</sup>. While I change my clothes, I start wondering... Where are the other women of the club? I see no other female*

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<sup>1</sup> These concepts were relevant to the identity negotiation process of the female Greek judokas that I interviewed for a previous study (see Kavoura, Ryba, & Chroni, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> "Gi" is a term of Japanese origin that refers to the martial art uniform. Not only judo, but many martial art disciplines use gi. In judo it is called "judogi".

*judoka. Anyway, I got ready and headed down the stairs that led to the dojo<sup>3</sup>. In the corridor I spotted someone I know. It was one of the guys that has been training here since 2006, when I first came here. He recognized me too and he stopped to say hi. He gave me a welcome back hug. I am always afraid to initiate a hug in Finland, but when a Finn hugs me, it always feels like something special. It feels like (s)he has allowed me to enter a sacred space that one does not usually like to share with others. I follow him through the door. A couple of young male judoka are sitting on the bench, waiting for the training to start. I don't recognize any of them. The head coach is standing on the mats. When he sees me, he smiles and comes towards me. "Who's that girl?" he says. I realize that I must look very different since the last time he saw me. "Where have you been?" he asks, "in Denmark, in Greece, in many places...but now I am back" I reply. "For how long this time?" he asks, "Maybe for the whole year" I answer. "Good" he said. Elina is also on the mats. She is the only other woman attending the training today. I try to make eye contact with her in order to say hi, but she doesn't look at me. She was never very social. We line up according to the color of our belt in order to do the usual greeting ritual. The coach explains what we are going to do today. Then he asks us to warm up with light ne-waza randori<sup>4</sup>. Elina turns to look at me now. She says nothing, but she nods her head which means that she wants to take the first ne-waza randori with me. I approach her and we knee in front of each other. We greet each other with the usual ritual way and I say "pitka aika"<sup>5</sup>. She nods yes, not saying a word again, and we start fighting.*

[...]

*At the end of the training session, I approach the coach to tell him about my research; about my double goal of training and collecting data. He asks what my research is about. I shortly explain that it is about women's experiences in judo. He says that he could probably help me to get some interviews from the women of the national team. He adds, "We are not doing anything bad to the women athletes here in Finland". (Research log 8.10.2013).*

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<sup>3</sup> "Dojo" is a training place for martial arts, usually covered with mats that are called "tatami".

<sup>4</sup> "Ne-waza" is the term used for ground work. Groundwork in judo is carried out when both athletes are on the ground, for example after a throw attempt, and it consists of holds, strangleholds, and armlocks. "Randori" refers to sparring.

<sup>5</sup> It means something like "long time no see" in Finnish.

In most cultures, martial arts remain a male terrain (e.g. Maclean, 2015; Owton, 2015). When a woman enters this male dominated space, she might feel like an “alien intruder” (McNaughton, 2012, p. 8) and she might have to strategically manage her identity performances in order to adapt, become accepted, and succeed in this masculine culture (Kavoura, Chroni, et al., 2015; Kavoura, et al., 2014; Kavoura, Ryba, & Chroni, 2015). As I (re)enter this field, I am aware of my double marginal position: I am not only a woman, but also a foreigner.

Returning to my old judo club, I needed to (re)adapt to this familiar, but foreign culture. I needed to (re)negotiate my positioning and relationships, and I needed to balance multiple roles and identities. When I first came to Finland in 2006, I was a 22-year-old eager to compete judoka. Even though I never reached an elite level in judo, at that time of my life I identified as a judo athlete, since judo was my main sporting activity. I lived in Finland between 2006 and 2010, and during these years I participated in several regional judo competitions. By the time of data collection (between October 2013 and April 2014), I found myself back in Finland. However, I was not that young competitor anymore, and this time it was my research that drove me to the judo mats. It had been more than three years since the last time I competed in judo. Currently, my main sporting activity is BJJ, in which I compete internationally. The main difference between these two grappling disciplines is that in judo the emphasis is on the throws, whereas in BJJ the emphasis is on the ground work. Thus, I (re)enter the field as both an insider and an outsider: I am an insider, because I am a former (and present) member of the club, and I have been a competitive judoka in the past. However, my status as a foreigner, that occasionally visits the club, makes me also an outsider; and to add on that, I am more of a BJJ athlete and a researcher rather than a judo athlete, as I enter the field.

*There is a tournament going on in our city today. I came to watch. One young guy from my club is standing in front of the door. “Why you are not competing?” he asks. “I am too old for that” I reply, “no!” he says. “And I haven’t been training much” I add. I walk a bit around. The athletes are walking around wearing hoodies over or under their gi, in order to keep themselves warm before the fight. You can spot the most talented young competitors immediately. They wear a patch on the back of their gi with their last name along with the initials for Finland. This signifies that they are competing internationally. After the fight, the boys take the upper part of their gi off. They walk around, showing off their naked upper body. One of them has big and*

*developed muscles, they almost look unnatural in his short and young body. Another young guy approaches him; he starts “checking him out” by touching his abs. The girls immediately fix their hair when they leave the fight. Some girls also take the upper part of their gi off too; they are wearing tight white t-shirts underneath. I go and sit with the audience. Not many people are watching the competition and most of the people there are parents of the competitors. The audience is mainly quiet. Sometimes you can hear a male voice shouting. It is either a father, or a coach. I cannot hear any female voices shouting. (Research log 12.10.2013).*

Each time we find ourselves in a new context, we (re)negotiate our identities by drawing on the discursive resources that are culturally available (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1969). By observing others in similar roles, not only do we learn which aspects of ourselves we can perform, but we also construct new understandings of who we are in relation to our cultural context (Butler, 1990; 1993). As I walk around the competition place, I observe the identity performances of these young judo athletes. These performances are always gendered. Physicality is performed and celebrated, but in a gender appropriate way. Observing these performances, and at the same time drawing on dominant discourses around age and performance expectations surrounding the athlete’s identity (Ronkainen, et al., 2016), I find it difficult to think of myself as a judo athlete. I cannot identify with these young judo competitors that I described in the above extract. Nowadays, I find it difficult to set realistic and attractive competition goals for myself in the highly competitive Olympic sport of judo. In contrast, BJJ offers a more inclusive competition culture, which provides categories for different ages and levels, even in the most prestigious international tournaments (Kavoura, Chroni, et al., 2015). However, in this chapter, I argue that our identities are fluid (Butler, 1990) and making meaning out of what we do and who we are is a complex, context-dependent, and constantly shifting task.

## **The body**

*...and learning how to move it the judo way*

*We start to warm up by doing “shadow techniques”. The coach names the techniques and we have to execute them without a partner, while we move from the one side of the dojo to the other. We have to do each technique first from the right side and then from the left side. The coach is observing our movements. My left side executions are really bad. I am having problems in*



*coordinating my body and movement and I feel really bad. I feel that I do not deserve the brown belt that I am wearing. When the coach looks at me I get stressed and I start moving even worse. I am the disgrace of judo. My body doesn't move like a judoka's body.*

[...]

*I started feeling better. We are doing uchikomi<sup>6</sup> and I am paired up with Heli. My repetitions are fast and explosive. In every repetition, my chest hits Heli's chest and I am almost lifting her body from the ground. The coach is watching. "Do it always like that. Do not change anything" he says. He doesn't give compliments easily. I feel good. (Research log 26.11.2013).*

Our bodies (and what we can do with them) are central in making sense of ourselves and our sporting experiences (Lokman, 2011; Maclean, 2015). In sporting cultures, bodies are observed, evaluated, and categorized, according to certain cultural expectations around the "ideal" athletic body (Cosh, Crabb, LeCouteur, & Kettler, 2012; Markula & Pringle, 2006). Athletes and sporting practitioners spend many hours of training in learning how to move their bodies in certain ways. Athletes discipline themselves into sporting practices of hard training, repetition and dedication, it is through these practices that their bodies are standardized, normalized and sportized (Cosh, et al., 2012; Foucault, 1975; Johns & Johns, 2000; Rail & Harvey, 1995). In judo, in order to perform successfully the judoka's identity, you need to move like one.

Disciplining your body into learning the judo movements, rhythm, and physicality, is a key feature in such a process of identity negotiation. Moreover, as our bodies (and movements) are gendered, cultural expectations regarding how a woman's body should move and look like, might contradict those of a fighter's body (Jennings, 2015; Knijnik & Ferretti, 2015).

*There is a white belt woman on the mats whom I have never seen before. She seems out of place. I ask her if she wants to pair-up with me. She is afraid of my invitation. I smile in order to show her that she has nothing to be afraid of. She pairs up with me but without saying a word. I am wondering if she is just shy, or she can't speak English. We are doing uchikomi and I try to say something in Finnish to her. Finally, she says something! She asks me if she is doing it right. She actually speaks good English so we start communicating normally. The coach demonstrates the*

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<sup>6</sup> "Uchikomi" means repetition training and in the context of judo it refers to the repeated practice of a throwing motion.

*technique of the day and we start practicing it. We have approximately the same height and weight. However, her movement lacks self-confidence. This is of course normal for white belts. I try to keep my movements gentle and smooth, and not to throw her very hard. I don't want to scare her. Trying to copy my movement, she does a couple of slow and clumsy repetitions. The coach sees her and shouts "push her!" in English. Then he continues in Finnish saying something like "this is competitive sport that we are doing here". He wanted to tell her that she needs to be more explosive in her movements. She became a little frustrated and confused. Maybe it was my fault that I did not demonstrate the proper rhythm and intensity of the exercise. (Research log 12.11.2013).*

Women often get conflicting messages about their bodies and movements, and this might hinder the process of cultural adaptation to "masculine" sporting cultures, such as martial arts (Lokman, 2011). Female bodies are not supposed to be aggressive and violent (Lokman, 2011; McNaughton, 2012). Constructed as biologically inferior, female bodies are often thought to be incapable of competitive fighting (Kavoura, Ryba, & Chroni, 2015; Knijnik & Ferretti, 2015; McNaughton, 2012) and more suitable for "softer" forms, such as self-defense (Channon & Matthews, 2015b; Lokman, 2011). The following two research log extracts reveal the tensions experienced by female martial artists. While we try to resist such cultural understandings of the female body (extract 1), we are ourselves deeply subjected to them and we often end up reproducing them unconsciously (extract 2).

*I am with Heli in the locker rooms. She asks me about my back problems. I start explaining to her that I had to skip the past few trainings. I went to a chiropractic and he instructed me not to engage in fighting or any other form of intense training for at least three days. When I asked him if I could go to the gym to lift some weights, he replied "No, but you can do these exercises that women do" and he demonstrated some stretching. Heli and I laughed at what the chiropractic said, as we headed towards the dojo for judo training. (Research log 25.11.2013).*

*The coach demonstrates the technique of the day. He explains that the hips need to be flexible. The movement of the hips is very important in that throw, he says. He moves his hips as if he were dancing in order to demonstrate how flexible the hips need to be. It looks a bit funny seeing such a huge guy moving like Shakira. Heli and I look at each other, trying not to laugh. When we*

*start practicing what he just showed us, we find ourselves wondering how he move his hips better than us. (Research log 24.2.2014).*

Female bodies are often imagined as lacking muscular strength, but as possessing both rhythm and flexibility (Lokman, 2011). Previous scholarly work on women's embodied experiences in martial arts reveals that women are continuously battling against such cultural understandings (Knijnik & Ferretti, 2015). The biggest battle for a female fighter might be the one against her own understandings of what she thought that her body could do. Despite the persisting masculine and sexist ideologies in most fighting cultures (Knijnik & Ferretti, 2015) martial arts scholars generally agree on the subversive possibilities of martial arts training for women (e.g. Jennings, 2015). For example, when training in a mixed environment, some women will come to realize that they are stronger than some men; and some men might discover that they possess better rhythm and flexibility than some women. These are important lessons in subverting gender stereotypes, which are used to subordinate women in sport, and in building mutual respect and appreciation of each other's skills and efforts, as well as greater gender equality in sport (Maclean, 2015).

### **Negotiating a judo athlete's identity**

*....or getting your ass kicked to collect research data*

*At the end of the training I discussed with the coach about the upcoming training camp of the national team. He said that I could go there with him if I want to collect some interviews, and I should definitely take my gi with me. I try to tell him that I do not want to disturb the training of the national team. It is perhaps better if I don't train. I am not at the same level with these athletes. I just want to come and collect data. "I will only take you with me if you take your gi and you promise to join all the trainings. We train three times per day. I will pick you up Saturday morning", he says. (Research log 3.3.2014).*

It is worth mentioning for a moment the potential tension that exists between the different roles and identities of being both an athlete and a researcher. These phenomena have been extensively discussed by other scholars (see for example, Anderson, 2006), and whilst I struggled with these issues during the data collection, those reflections are part of my field notes rather than in this chapter. However, I will focus on the process of negotiating an athlete's identity, as well as how

this process was shaped by observing others and comparing myself to the norms and ideals of being a judo athlete. Moreover, I will discuss how I (re)constructed a judo athlete's identity by subjecting myself to the disciplinary training practices of judo culture, and how this process was facilitated by the supportive practices of significant others. For example, as the research-log extracts (above and below) illustrate, it was the coach that not only assisted in the data collection process, but also opened up a window, which enabled me to see myself again as a judo athlete.

*I had to use a map to find my way to the dojo of the sport institute. I opened the door and I saw a big court, like an indoor basketball court with tatami everywhere. A few judoka are already here, waiting for the training to start. Some young guys are sitting on the benches and some girls are lying on the mats. Some other young male judoka are going around with their compression tights and rash guards. They all look extremely fit and I realize that I am among the best Finnish judoka. I start wondering what am I doing here. I feel a bit worried. Will I survive the training? My coach comes in. He asks me if everything is all right with my room. "Everything is perfect" I reply. "This is your lucky day. It's going to be ne-waza training", he says. I smile. "I will probably manage to survive the first training then", I say. He introduces me to the head coach of the national team and tells him about my research. "So you are interested only in women? You are not interested in men?" the head coach asks. My coach and I both laugh. He asks me if I am still training judo nowadays, because this is randori training and it might be intense. I tell him that I am still training sometimes. "You don't have to do everything. Do whatever you feel like" he says. I nod ok, but my coach jumps in saying "She will manage. Anna is doing BJJ". I see a young guy with whom I have been training before. "You came to teach them how to do randori?" he asks. I look at him a bit puzzled, trying to figure out if he is making fun of me, or he is just joking, trying to be friendly. "I came to get my ass kicked in order to get some interviews" I reply. We line up to start the training. There are five or six coaches standing in front of us, among them only one woman. We are more than 50 athletes, although I can only see about ten women. The first athlete in the line says "sensei ni rei"<sup>7</sup> and we do the usual greeting. The head coach explains what we are going to do in today's training. Then my coach introduces me and my study. Everybody turns to look at me and some people nod their heads in a supportive manner. The training starts and we are asked to make pairs. The female athletes quickly pair up*

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<sup>7</sup> It means something like "bow to teacher".

*but I am left without a partner. I find a young brown belt guy who is also without a partner. We start with some ne-waza exercises to warm-up and I notice quickly that I can do the ground work much better than this young guy. I start feeling more confident. (Research log 8.3.2014).*

Within poststructuralist theorizing, athletic identity is conceptualized as a complex cultural construction that is crafted in relation to the social context and the available discursive resources (Kavoura, Ryba, & Chroni, 2015; Ronkainen et al., 2016). When athletes try to perform socially acceptable identities, they draw on dominant understandings of what it means to be an athlete. Ronkainen et al. (2016) argue that the understandings and discursive practices that are associated with elite sports culture are rigid, and they marginalize athletes who fail (or refuse) to meet the norms and expectations, constraining their experiences and endangering their well-being.

During my first training session with the national team I battled with feelings of anxiety. As I compared myself with the elite judoka around me, I felt like an outsider that did not fit in to this culture and I felt like I would not be able to meet the intensity requirements of the elite judo training. I was relying on my BJJ and researcher identities to justify and negotiate my position in this new environment, rather than refer back to my past experiences as a judoka. In order to fit in, I was trying to perform a culturally acceptable identity by observing others in the same role. On the tatami, bodies become the theatrical stages on which identity performances take place; and gender plays a constitutive role in these performances.

*The head coach shouts to the athletes to help fix the tatami. There are some gaps between the mats that might be dangerous. The boys are more eager to help than the girls. They lift and push the mats, some of which are quite heavy. Some girls help as well, but most of them are standing around and waiting, including me. I feel that I might not be able to lift and push the mat properly and embarrass myself. (Research log 8.3.2014).*

Previous research in martial arts suggests that identity performances might differ when we are in the company of people of the same sex, compared to when we are in mixed-gender spaces (Lokman, 2011). In her ethnographic research, Lokman observed female beginners learning Aikido. She noticed that (similarly to what the above extract describes) female beginners that trained in mixed-groups often felt incapable of carrying the mats into the storage room.

However, in the women's-only training group, carrying the mats was part of the routine and no lack of self-confidence was observed.

There is an ongoing discussion about gender segregation in martial arts; some studies focus on the social-significance of mixed-sex practice (e.g. Channon & Jennings, 2013), while other studies discuss the potential benefits of women-only training sessions (e.g. Kavoura, Chroni, et al., 2015). However, martial arts scholars generally agree on the gender-subversive potential of martial arts training and the empowering possibilities for women (e.g. Jennings, 2015). As my research-log extracts illustrate, while there were instances of accepting and reproducing passive feminine subjectivity (as in the extract above), my participation in the training camp of the national team was an empowering experience that involved both physical and psychological transformations, such as embodying self-confidence:

*The training had already started when I entered the dojo. They are doing some funny warm up exercises that the national team's head coach introduced in the training camp. My coach says "Anna knows this already" and he asks me to go first, so the others can see how it is done. Janne, the black belt guy, asks me if I was in the training camp of the national team. I say yes and he looks at me with admiration. We are asked to take a partner for uchikomi. There are no other women in today's training. I ask a brown belt guy to become my partner. But soon, the coach asks me to change partner because of the size difference and then he pairs me up with a child. With the feeling that I do not have a suitable partner, I start to lose my excitement. I was very excited at the beginning of the training. The training camp reignited my enthusiasm for judo. A feeling that I thought I had lost forever. But what happened to the Anna who was always trying to include and help everybody during training? Did the competitive Anna kill her?*

*We practiced some techniques and then the time for randori comes. I become excited again. I am so eager to take randori, and after the tough randori sessions I had during the weekend, I feel that I have nothing to be afraid of in this training. Being more confident than ever, it is the first training in which I do not miss even one round of randori. (Research log 10.3.2014).*

My participation in the training camp of the national team triggered a change in the way that I make sense of myself in relation to judo. My expectations changed: training hard and improving my skills became my primary goal. Also, my relationships with others changed, as well as what

others expected from me. My role as a researcher became secondary, as I became more and more consumed with thoughts about my personal performance. How did these changes happen? The environment empowered me to think of myself as an athlete again and the Finnish judo community welcomed me in the national team's training camp. Further, my coach and teammates in the local judo club showed respect and appreciation for my skills, which enabled me to appreciate and believe in my sporting abilities, much more than before. It was the social environment that pushed me to challenge myself with new sporting endeavors and enabled me to imagine myself in new ways.

*Heli and Elina are preparing for the national championships and I try to help them by giving them some challenge in the randori and other competition-specific exercises. The coach is closely watching their preparation. Janne is not training today, although he is there observing us. At the end of the training he asks me if I am going to compete to the championships as well. "I can't. I am not a Finn" I reply. "Yes, you can" he says. Heli and Elina join the conversation. They are not sure if non-Finns can compete, but they promise to have a look for me. "You should come if it is allowed" Heli says. (Research log 31.3.2014).*

The presence of other female athletes appeared to be a significant factor in this process of identity negotiation. As previous research indicates, great things can be achieved when female fighters collaborate and build support networks: they can make the adaptation process of female newcomers smoother, they can encourage more women to train and compete, and they can even challenge the gender dynamics and their positioning in their club and sport (Kavoura, Chroni, et al., 2015).

*Elina, Heli, and I, are in the car. The coach is driving us to the competition place. Among the people that train in our dojo, we are the only women, and the only ones that will compete in this year's national championships. The weigh in is in the evening. Elina and I are competing on Saturday and Heli is competing on Sunday. I am eating some nuts in the car and I am feeling incredibly hungry as the last four or five days I have been dieting and running in order to make the weight for my category. I don't know how they persuaded me to participate. I think if Elina and Heli weren't going, I cannot imagine that I would be competing! But the fact that I could train with them and test myself against them, made me want to participate. I also thought that it*

*would be fun travelling with them, and they made everything so easy for me by organizing my registration and everything else. (Research log 11.4.2014).*

In dominant understandings about sport, competition is what separates a recreational participant from an athlete. Several challenges and disciplinary practices are associated with competition, such as dedication to training, hard preparation routines, and pre-competition diets (Cosh et al., 2012; Johns & Johns, 2000). Moreover, you need to be willing to put yourself into the situation of performing in front of an audience, which in the case of judo means fighting against an opponent in front of a crowd of people, and getting evaluated and categorized for your skills. Male athletes are often imagined as being more capable of going through these challenges, while women are thought to be non-competitive by nature (e.g. Kavoura, Ryba, & Chroni, 2015). My experiences in Finland, not only changed the way that I make sense of myself, but subverted my own beliefs and understandings related to gender norms in competitive fighting.

*Bronze for everybody! I am so tired. I don't know if I can write down all the things that happened, all the things I felt. I had four fights. Lost two and won two. My two friends from BJJ came to watch me. They came all this way just to watch me. After my fights, I sat with them, and we discussed the differences and similarities between judo and BJJ. I think they became a little curious about trying judo sometime. It was so nice that they came. (Research log 13.4.2014).*

In addition to the support received within the judo community, getting approval and encouragement for my judo endeavors from the BJJ team, eased the process of finding balance between my two separate athletic roles and identities. As I was (re)negotiating how the different aspects of my athletic self can be combined, I was lucky to see these two communities (judo and BJJ) coming together.

*We lined up for the greeting and the coach announced our results from the National Championships. He called our names and gave a small present to each one of us. During the training people came up to congratulate me. I thank them but I feel a little ashamed because I was not actually happy with my performance. I think I could have done better. But, now I feel eager to train and improve. I just need to train very hard. While we warm up, I make plans for participating in future judo competitions and for next year's Finnish National Championships. Will I be here? As I am thinking about all of these different plans, I become aware that my*



*movements feel different now. I move with self-confidence. I move like a judo athlete. (Research log 14.4.2014).*

*Five women from my BJJ team join the training session. We line up for the ritual greeting and the coach welcomes our new guests. He describes the course of the training. After the warm up, we start practicing some techniques. In the beginning my BJJ friends are paired up with each other and the coach helps them to practice more basic versions of the techniques. I try to help too. Later on, they are instructed to find themselves another partner in order to practice some light form of randori. At the end of the training they look like they have enjoyed it. I stay a bit longer in the dojo. I am stretching and chatting with the people there. It is my last training session today as I am heading back to Greece. The time came to say goodbye again. I hug the coach, thank him for everything, and I promise to come back. (Research log 15.4.2014).*

### **Concluding thoughts**

This autoethnographic study focused on the identity negotiation of a Greek judoka during a period of relocation to Finland. The analysis revealed that the process of negotiating an athlete's identity was eased by: (1) the availability of discursive resources in the new sporting culture and (2) a supportive training environment. When constantly moving between sporting (and other) cultures, athletes have to (re)negotiate their identities, relationships, and positioning, drawing on the discursive resources that are available in their new cultural context. In my case, cultural understandings around the athletic (and the judo) body were central in the ways that I was making sense of myself. The body has to move in certain ways, and has to participate in certain practices, in order to be an athlete's or a judoka's body. Moreover, the body (and what it does) has to comply with the expectations of gender and age. In the egalitarian culture of Finland, cultural beliefs about gender and age, as well as expectations around an athlete's body and performance, are more flexible than those of my home-culture of Greece (see Kavoura, Ryba, & Chroni, 2015). Thus, I was able to (re)negotiate a judo athlete's identity, an identity category that I thought that could not include me anymore. The support I received from others, such as from the coach and other female fighters with whom I could identify myself, facilitated this process.

Although this study is based on my personal experiences and should not be generalized, I believe that certain important observations and practical implications can be derived from this knowledge. People that work with athletes (such as coaches and sport psychologists) need to be aware of the psychological difficulties and identity conflicts that athletes might struggle with when moving between sporting (and other) cultures. They should seek to assist them in building healthier and longer athletic careers by employing cultural sensitivity and by helping them to reconstruct the rigid and limiting beliefs about gender, age, and the body that dominate elite sporting culture (Ronkainen et al., 2016). This becomes increasingly important in today's globalized culture, in which athletes (elite or recreational) often migrate to other countries for sport or non-sporting related reasons (Ronkainen et al., 2013). Also, this is especially important for getting and keeping women in "masculine" sport cultures, such as martial arts and combat sports, as the cultural messages that women receive in such cultures are often incompatible and this might result in identity conflicts and possibly the end of their sporting careers.

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