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Title: The identity negotiation of female judo athletes in Greece and Finland

Year: 2018

Version: Published version

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Please cite the original version:

Kavoura, A. (2018). The identity negotiation of female judo athletes in Greece and Finland. *Sukupuolentutkimus*, 31(2), 51-56.

The identity negotiation of female judo athletes in Greece and Finland

Anna Kavoura

Judo is an inclusive sport that could be practiced by every citizen, regardless of age, size, or gender (Kano, 2005). At least, this is how it was promoted in the teachings of its founder Jigoro Kano, and this is how it is still advertised by judo clubs around the world. Yet, the few scholars who have examined the history of women's involvement in judo (e.g. Groenen, 2012; Miarka, Marques, & Franchini, 2011) argue that in practice, judo was never as inclusive as its promotion touted. Until the late 1960s, female judoka (judo athletes) were restricted from competing or taking part in randori (free-practice of fighting). Instead, they were told that because of their "fragile" nature, and for their own safety, they should stick to self-defense and to softer forms of training called kata (Miarka et al., 2011). And while judo has been an Olympic sport for men since 1964, it was not until 1992, that female judoka were finally allowed to compete in the Olympics.

Despite the progress that we have seen since then, judo is still a sport associated with masculinity, and women remain underrepresented at all levels (as practitioners, athletes, coaches, and decision makers). For example, the current Executive Committee of the International Judo Federation consists of 23 members, among whom there is only one woman. One can only wonder how female judoka experience this male-dominated sporting context, and how they negotiate their identities in order to advance their careers. My PhD research was set to answer these questions.

Specifically, I focused on female judoka's identities in Greece and Finland. While there are many academically sound reasons to compare gendered experiences in these two national contexts (for instance, Greece is a culture characterized by persisting gender inequalities, while Finland is considered to be one of the most gender-equal countries in the world; see EIGE, 2017), my motivation for this study did not arise from the numbers published in the statistical reports, but from my own experiences of living and training judo in these two countries.

Finland is one of the few countries that has recently established a gender balance in the board of the Finnish Judo Association, which currently consists of 10 members, among whom four are women. In Greece, the board of the Hellenic Judo Federation consists of 15 members, among whom only three are women. With approximately 120 registered judo clubs in Finland and 126 in Greece, it is estimated that thousands of people practice judo in the two countries. However, as shown in my dissertation (Kavoura, 2018, p. 28), the numbers of female participation in competition are very small in both Finland and Greece. Research-based knowledge on how to promote female participation in judo, and how to better support the careers of female athletes is much needed in both countries.

Yet, there is a scarcity of research on the experiences of female judo athletes. In fact, psychological issues related to practicing or competing in martial arts and combat sports (MACS) have been mostly studied based on male participants (see Kavoura,

Ryba, & Kokkonen, 2012). My research aims to fill this gap. With this study, I respond to calls by critical scholars of sport psychology (e.g. Ryba, Schinke, and Tenenbaum, 2010; Schinke & Hanrahan, 2009) who have long been arguing for an examination of the socio-cultural context as one of the main factors affecting athletes' experiences and identity negotiation. I also draw and build upon previous feminist and gender studies (e.g. Baird, 2010; Halbert, 1997; Hargreaves, 1997) who have critiqued the privileging of male identities and experiences in MACS (and in sports in general). Thus, bringing cultural and feminist critiques together, my research focused on examining the intersections of gender, culture and identity in judo.

To achieve this goal, I strategically drew on cultural praxis (Ryba & Wright, 2005, 2010) and feminist poststructuralist (Butler, 1990, 1993; Foucault, 1972, 1977, 1978; Weedon, 1997) frameworks. Within these frameworks, athletes' identities are viewed as cultural constructions accomplished through identification with (or negotiation of) various discourses of gender, class, race, sexual orientation, the national sport system etc. This means that athletes might construct and perform multiple (and often conflicting) identities according to the cultural contexts in which they are displaying themselves and the discourses that are available to them. I drew on a Foucauldian understanding of discourse, which refers to ways of constituting knowledge and producing meaning (Foucault, 1972). Discourses are linked to particular ways of thinking about one's self and others, as well as about the world around us (Weedon, 1997). Thus, my first aim was to identify the discourses that are circulated in Greek and Finnish judo cultures. My second aim was to reveal the ways that female judoka drew on these discourses to construct their identities.

Methodologically, I drew on ethnography and discourse analysis (Heller, Pietikäinen, & Pujolar, 2018; Krane & Baird, 2005; Willig, 2008). The ethnographic approach that I employed to gather the data, entailed fieldwork in Greece and Finland. Particularly, I engaged in participant-observation in three different judo clubs (two in Greece and one in Finland). I also gathered data during training camps, competitions, and other judo-related

social events. In addition to participant observation, I conducted 19 interviews with female judoka (10 Greek and 9 Finnish). Most of the women that I interviewed were highly skilled, with many years of training experience, many were competing at an elite level at the time that the interviews took place, while others were retired elite athletes that were working as coaches (for participants' demographic information, see Kavoura, 2018, p. 38).

A discursive analytic procedure revealed several discourses as relevant to the ways that female judoka make sense of their experiences. One powerful discourse circulating in judo realms in both Greece and Finland was the female biological inferiority discourse. According to this discourse, women are biologically less suited for physically demanding activities, such as fighting and competition (Milner & Braddock, 2016; Vertinsky, 1994). The physical and psychological attributes that are thought as essential for competing in judo (such as competitiveness, aggression, and strength) are linked to the male biology. They are constructed as something that is acquired by birth (and particularly by being born male), and as something that cannot be easily taught. The discourse of female biological inferiority was drawn by female judoka themselves when trying to explain the female underrepresentation in judo. For example, Liina said:

Well, I think one reason why not 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, FI.)

While the discourse of female biological inferiority was dominant in both Greece and Finland, different discourses of ideal femininity were found to be circulated in the two countries. In Greece, the ideal feminine body was constructed as fit, thin, and sexy – attractive (and attracted) to the opposite sex (Markula, 1995). These femininity standards in Greece were incompatible with athleticism and muscularity, and young female judoka were struggling with this paradox:



Jenny Eräsaari, 2018

I don't lift that many weights to become too muscular, but neither am I not lifting at all. I am lifting moderately in order to have a nice body and look and act like a girl. (Eleftheria, GR.)

In contrast, the version of ideal femininity circulated in Finland offered more acceptance and inclusion for the female athletes of the so-called masculine sports, as it celebrated the intersection of femininity with strength and physicality. Drawing on this discourse, female Finnish judoka were more comfortable with their bodies and did not feel that being a judoka is at odds with femininity:

I think that sports is always good for women, because it builds up the muscles, it keeps you fit,

your posture is better than the posture of other women who don't do sports, and you actually look better [...]. In judo, you build up muscles and because it's a weight-class sport, usually you cannot be fat. It's usually muscles that you have, so I think that's one thing that's good for you, regarding how you look and how you appear to the outside. (Sara, FI.)

Differences were also observed in the ways in which Greek and Finnish judoka positioned themselves in relation to the gender roles and expectations circulated in judo realms and in the general societal context. Greek judoka were subjectified to a patriarchal discourse of gender roles, according to which, men and women are expected to behave differently and

to take up different tasks, roles, and even professions and sports (Kavoura, Ryba, & Chroni, 2015). This discourse was heavily circulated in the Greek judo context. The female Greek athletes who participated in this study reported that they have been discriminated against and deprived of opportunities because of their gender. For example, Melina said:

When I asked why I hadn't been promoted to international tournaments (like male athletes had) since I am a national champion, an official from the federation told me that I was too old. And when male athletes of the same age I was were sent abroad, I was told that this is the best age for male athletes. So, according to them, as a woman, I should have already quit at the age of 28, while 28-year-old male athletes are at the peak age. (Melina, GR.)

In Finland on the other hand, this discourse is being opposed by the circulation of a discourse of gender equality, according to which men and women should have equal access to resources and opportunities, and should be able to develop their abilities and make choices regardless of their gender. This policy discourse is proudly circulated in Finland, a country that is often viewed as a pioneer in the promotion of gender equality. However, feminist researchers argue that the uncritical circulation of this discourse can create new complications, as it makes gender inequalities appear to be a problem that already has been solved (Brunila & Ylöstalo, 2015; Hyvärinen, 2017). For example, while female Finnish judoka felt that they were treated equally in judo, different roles and tasks are still assigned to men and women. For instance, more men than women are involved in decision making, while women are more likely to take up secretarial roles. Competitive, elite, and adult teams are usually coached by men, while women are more likely to coach children, youth, or beginner's sessions. Moreover, women often end up doing more "chores" for their clubs, than their male-counterparts do.

The experiences and identities of female judoka were also influenced by dominant discourses that constitute what it means to be an athlete. In Greece, a discourse of athletic performance was heavily circulated in judo clubs. The core rationality of this

discourse was that to count as an athlete, one needs to meet certain performance expectations. Winning was emphasized, and many disciplining practices were orientated toward achieving this goal. On the other hand, the Finnish judo context was characterized by an antagonism between an elite sport discourse and a mass sport discourse (Kavoura, Kokkonen, Chroni, & Ryba, 2017). While mass sport is highly valued and promoted in Finland (as is the idea of "judo for all"), winning and athletic performance are the dominant values in relation to competing in judo, often at the cost of enjoyment, health, and well-being.

In relation to the circulation of the aforementioned discourses, female judoka strategically constructed multiple (and often conflicting) identities, each serving different purposes. My research agenda lead me to focus on these identities that are repeatedly performed and assist in the reproduction of gender hierarchies and stereotypes. The successful and feminine athlete was an identity repeatedly performed, especially by young female athletes in Greece. This identity was linked to the discursive construction of ideal femininity as an essential quality for judging the value and worth of women. Young female Greek judoka, not only disciplined themselves to achieve the standards of ideal femininity, but also constructed those who could not (or did not want to) comply with these standards as being lower in the hierarchy.

The natural-born fighter identity was performed by female athletes of all ages in both countries. This identity was linked to the discourse of female biological inferiority and to beliefs that "ordinary" women are "soft", passive, fragile, and unsuitable for competitive judo. For example, Elli said:

I don't know why these other girls didn't like judo. I don't know how to explain it. They were soft. I think it was that. (Elli, FI.)

To differentiate themselves from this stereotypical view of women, female judoka constructed themselves as exceptional beings, born with masculine qualities, such as competitiveness, tolerance to pain, and the ability to fight:

I was always a tomboy. I liked to wrestle and in school I was always fighting. I was not made for ballet and stuff like that. (Sotiria, GR.)

While performing the identities of the successful and feminine athlete and the natural-born fighter might be empowering for female judoka (and might even be considered as a strategic choice in order to become accepted and appreciated in the masculine culture of judo), the repetition of these identities assist in the reproduction of gender hierarchies and inequalities. For instance, by performing the “natural-born fighter” identity, female judoka themselves reproduced the belief that judo is “by nature” a male sport that most women cannot do.

To conclude, this study revealed that in their effort to become accepted and appreciated in male dominated fields, such as judo, women themselves often end up reproducing gender stereotypes, through the language they use, the practices in which they engage, and the identities they perform. This has important implications for those interested in promoting gender equality in judo and other contexts typically viewed as male. Future interventions should not just focus on enhancing the numbers of women and girls in these fields in which females are underrepresented, but they should also target the deconstruction of gender stereotypes. Cultural beliefs and gender stereotypes play an important role on the ways that female athletes make sense of who they are and what they can or ought to be. And when the belief that ordinary women are unsuitable for competitive judo is circulated in judo clubs (sometimes even by female ath-

letes themselves) it is no wonder that the numbers of female judo competitors in both Greece and Finland are disappointingly low.

There is a need for creating educational opportunities that will help athletes, coaches, parents and all others involved in sport to become more aware of how certain beliefs, practices, and language assist in the reproduction of gender inequalities and constrain the career development of female athletes. Critical scholars of gender and sport have argued that the availability and circulation of alternative discourses is important in resisting and changing gender hierarchies and inequalities (Butler, 1990; Markula & Pringle, 2016; McGannon & Johnson, 2009). For example, discourses in which muscle is not seen as incompatible with femininity, and womanhood is not seen as incompatible with fighting. Those who work with female athletes and wish to support their career development, could assist in this task, first by reflecting on their own beliefs and stereotypes, and second by using non-gendered language and practices (see McGannon & Johnson, 2009; Thorpe, 2008). Finally, it is important that female athletes themselves become more aware of the power dynamics that they reproduce (or resist) when talking to the media, posting online about themselves on social media, or interacting with other athletes.

Anna Kavoura (PhD) defended her thesis 'Successful and feminine athlete' and 'natural-born fighter' on May 12, 2018 at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. anna.kavoura@jyu.fi

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