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Comparing Girls' and Boys' Lived Bodies of Middle School Students in Self-Defense Utilizing Participant Observation

Giovanna Follo

Wright State University - Lake Campus, giovanna.follo@wright.edu

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Abstract

The Frailty Myth proposes that the female body can be *frozen*, restricted by the ever present negative gendered narrative perpetuated by society. Embodiment occurs when the female body is *thawed*. The opposite can be argued for boys. Boys are taught to live their bodies, that is they have a sense of embodiment. Therefore, boys do not have to concern themselves with thawing their bodies as they already experience their bodies in strong and liberal ways. In this study, I compare how girls and boys live their bodies utilizing participant observation. Six themes emerged: being the instructor, gendered discourse in action, body proximity and movement, *The Invincibility Effect*, the grade six and seven/eight divide and *lived* body moments. The implications of these observations suggest how activities such as self-defense have the potential to create a lived body, that girls can work toward a lived body and gender can be observed through everyday lived experiences. Though research exists within the literature; it does not seem to address the performance of the *lived* body within this population, utilizing a comparative approach.

Keywords

gender, self-defense, participant observation, middle school students

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Comparing Girls' and Boys' Lived Bodies of Middle School Students in Self-Defense Utilizing Participant Observation

Giovanna Follo

Wright State University - Lake Campus, Ohio, USA

The Frailty Myth proposes that the female body can be *frozen*, restricted by the ever present negative gendered narrative perpetuated by society. Embodiment occurs when the female body is *thawed*. The opposite can be argued for boys. Boys are taught to live their bodies, that is they have a sense of embodiment. Therefore, boys do not have to concern themselves with thawing their bodies as they already experience their bodies in strong and liberal ways. In this study, I compare how girls and boys live their bodies utilizing participant observation. Six themes emerged: being the instructor, gendered discourse in action, body proximity and movement, *The Invincibility Effect*, the grade six and seven/eight divide and *lived* body moments. The implications of these observations suggest how activities such as self-defense have the potential to create a lived body, that girls can work toward a lived body and gender can be observed through everyday lived experiences. Though research exists within the literature; it does not seem to address the performance of the *lived* body within this population, utilizing a comparative approach.

Keywords: gender, self-defense, participant observation, middle school students

Much of the research reviewed addressing martial arts and/or self-defense focuses on older populations. Studies examining women in martial arts and/or self-defense are increasing. These studies have begun to utilize autoethnography. Autoethnography incorporates participant observation. Few of these studies have examined girls and boys within the middle school age population. In addition, when these studies have focused on this age group, they have not presented comparative examinations of girls' and boys' bodies as they learn self-defense. The evidence-based literature is clear as to the efficacy of self-defense programs targeting K-12 girls. These studies suggest that the girls were able to utilize the material that was taught to them. In this study, I examine and understand, through comparative observations, how girls and boys use, perform and live their bodies as they learned self-defense in middle school. These observations bring a nuanced examination of gendered bodies in a population that is underrepresented within the research. I highlight how *lived* bodies have a larger implication in learning how to become self-protectors in using their bodies as weapons, how one views threatening scenarios, and body proximity.

Self-Defense Programs

My experience within the martial arts, combined with being a sociologist, gave me confidence in my ability to choose the appropriate program for the middle school. With over 20 years of experience in traditional martial arts, being a third-degree Black Belt in Karate, and being a certified instructor in *Super Kid*, *Commando Krav Maga (CKM)* and *Smartsafe*, I was confident that a reality-based self-defense system would be ideal for this group of students. Each one of these programs would serve a specific purpose in addressing age-appropriate scenarios but also gendered scenarios.

Super Kid

Super Kid is a reality-based self-defense program that is specifically designed for children within this age group. The focus of the program is on bullying scenarios inside and outside of the school environment and predator (child abduction and known attacker). I only used this program as an introduction for the grade six girls and boys. The scenarios within this program were basic, with basic techniques, and addressed what I assumed would be more relevant situations to the students. The bullying scenarios address targets being pushed, being grabbed, defending from being struck and how to survive if you end up on the ground. Predator scenarios revolve around being taken from a person that is not their parent. I do not distinguish between known and unknown attacker.

Commando Krav Maga (CKM)

Super Kid and *CKM* were specifically used for the grade seven and eight girls and boys. The focus was again on bullying and predator under the *Super Kid* design. These were scenarios that the boys within this age group would encounter. In addition, I applied techniques and scenarios that would be addressed in the *CKM* program as was relevant to the boys. Within all classes, the students, at times, would ask about *what-if* scenarios. At this time, in the older groups, I would refer to *CKM*. *CKM* is a reality-based program that addresses scenarios in the areas of ground survival, knife defense, gun disarming and strike defense. I did not address any gun disarms. I did address knife defense as this seemed to be a plausible scenario that the boys would encounter. This knife defense reviewed overhead strike and a lunge strike. This was generally defined as a male scenario where the girls were taught the rear-hostage knife technique.

Smartsafe

Smartsafe is a reality-based self-defense program that was designed for women and girls. It addresses scenarios that are most commonly experienced by them. It involves a continuum of defense which moves from verbal, non-physical defense to physical defense. In addition, I discuss violence within social context and the psychological barriers that women and girls, through gendered socialization, may experience. The program addresses ground survival, knife defense, gun disarm, and strike defense. I did not teach the gun disarm. I did teach the rear hostage knife defense as this was the second technique within the program. It was deemed one of the most common situations that would be experienced. *Smartsafe* was specifically used with the grade seven and eight girls. At times, it was used in combination with *Super Kid* and *CKM*. I found that this group of students encounter all the scenarios that would be addressed by each of the programs.

The Lived Body: A Synthesis

In 2016, I was granted the opportunity to teach self-defense to middle school girls in a Midwest school in the United States. I began this project with grade seven and eight girls. My intention was to empower these girls through self-defense. During this time, the girls encouraged the school to include the boys. During the next two years of the project, 2017 to 2019, I was able to observe grade six, seven and eight girls and boys as they progressed through the program. As the participant-observer, instructor and researcher, my focus became observing and comparing the *lived* body as they learned self-defense.

Within this discussion, the *lived* body is a synthesis of the *thawed* body and embodiment. In the *Frailty Myth*, Dowling (2000) suggests that the female body is *frozen* as a result of internalized gendered discourse, that is emphasized femininity (Messner, 2002) and hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2002). Emphasized femininity can be utilized as a method of internalizing women's and girls' subordination (Connell, 2002; Hargreaves, 1994). Bartky (2003) uses adjectives such as incompetent, weak, restricted and incapable to describe the frozen body. Masculinity can be described as the opposite of femininity. Therefore, hegemonic masculinity can use adjectives such as competent, strong, unrestricted and capable. However, Dowling (2000) implies that the female body can be *thawed* through physical activity. This *thawing* allows for embodiment. Embodiment refers to being able to use the body to perform tasks (Carlson, 2018). Finally, physical feminism, as McCaughey (1998) concludes, observes that self-defense can be seen as a catalyst or tool for thawing the female body. This process is what I refer to as a synthesis of the female body which results in a lived body. This is not where the female body begins or is socialized to be.

Embodiment is a key step to developing the lived body. Embodiment is a difficult process in achieving the *lived* body. The research points to how embodiment is a gendered experience. Self-defense provides a unique tool to understand embodiment where physical feminism tends to challenge the gendered roles of victim and self-protector (McCaughy, 1998). To better understand the importance of self-defense, Rentschler (1999) suggests that self-defense is an everyday practice. This practice changes women's and girl's relationship to their own bodies. I suggest that self-defense has the potential to change how the girls in the study change their relationships to their own bodies, where they see themselves as self-protectors and begin the process of achieving a lived body.

By contrast, a male body is socialized to be a lived body as a whole. This is not to assume the male body to a monolithic experience, however, generally, the male body is taught to be unrestricted, *thawed*. Whitson (2002) clearly gives an understanding of how boys are socialized to have a lived body. Whitson argues that boys are socialized to use their bodies with skill. Boys are taught to *live* their bodies and experience their bodies in active and in powerful ways (2002). Whitson (2002) concludes that boys, as a result of living their bodies, tend to have a better relationship with their bodies. I observed this socialization as a gendered experience in terms of body proximity and the sense of *immortality*. Therefore, girls and boys do not start at the same starting line when discussing the lived body. I illustrate this point through the gendered experience observed within this research. The implication of understanding this gendered experience lends to understanding the importance of physical activity and the implications of gendered body discourse.

K-12 Self-Defense Research

Self-defense can be classified under the general umbrella of martial arts. Martial arts are generally defined as a male dominated sport (Follo, 2012) which makes this environment a unique one in observing gendered *lived* bodies. However, much of the research addressing self-defense and girls K-12 has produced efficacy results in the research but little to no observations are highlighted within research projects.

Among the several studies of gender in martial arts, two have significant results for the girls. Twemlow et al. (2008) and Bailey et al. (2013) indicated that the girls had internalized negative gendered discourse. Other research pointed to the efficacy of the girls being able to implement what they used. Sinclair et al. (2013) examined a group of 14 to 21-years old in Kenya. With n=522 at baseline and n=489 at a 10-month follow-up. The girls reported a 24.6% decrease in sexual assault and 9.21% at the 10-month follow-up. Decker et al. (2018), a Malawi based study, consisted of 6644 girls at baseline and follow-up of 4278 girls. The incidence of

sexual assault was reduced. Jordan and Mossman (2018), in New Zealand with 2731 girls, recorded what appears to be self-reported results such as increased empowerment and the use of their voice.

Two research studies suggested gendered concerns that begin to be addressed within this research. First, Lakes and Hoyt (2004) examined a sample of 99 girls and 99 boys in a martial art group in a physical education class with children K-5. Lakes and Hoyt suggested that the boys indicated improvement in self-regulation as compared to the girls. The researchers attributed this to the program design where the program was designed for boys rather than girls. My research specifically addressed this concern in understanding the gendered framing of confrontational situations. The authors also suggest that gender socialization may have contributed to the girls not being able to participate fully in the program. If the researchers were not taking into account that many of these girls were entering the program with a *frozen* body, it is not surprising that the girls did not respond to the program.

The second study highlights the involvement of boys in an active bystander type of program as the girls were participating in a self-defense course. This research tends to look at addressing violence against young women as a gendered approach. Sarnquist et al. (2019) conducted their study in Kenya. The participants ranged between 10 and 14 years of age. Both groups proved program efficacy. The girls indicated a decrease in sexual assault and the boys indicated an increase in being an active bystander. This study addressed the issues along gendered lines where boys are being taught to take assault seriously and the girls are taught to be self-protectors. These both address gendered discourse. I am assuming that the bystander intervention program addresses perceptions of violence within social context. In addition, I am assuming that the self-defense program teaches self-defense along a continuum which ranges from verbal, non-physical to physical techniques.

Although gender was mentioned by Lakes and Hoyt (2004), they did not address their main conclusion about gender. Gender differences were considered a design issue. But they were not out to address gender and seemed to consider it as an afterthought. My research addresses the gendered aspects of self-defense as part of the program design. The Sarnquist et al. (2019) study understood that boys and girls need to go through some form of training. In this research, I specifically point to the gaps that seemed to be in the current research that looks at K-12 self-defense research, the gendered experience in self-defense. In addition, I dive into observing the gendered body experience that the boys and girls performed through self-defense. Gendered body discourse can inhibit girls from *living* their bodies and becoming self-protectors and boys have learned it from the start.

Methodology

Upon receiving approval from the relevant Institutional Review Board (IRB #06147), I began the process of conducting the research in Fall of 2016. The research took place at a religious-based middle school in Indiana, U.S.A. This was a three-year experience. The findings will focus on participant observations that took place from 2017 to 2019. During these two years, grade six, seven and eight girls and boys participated in the self-defense class.

Researcher-Participant-Observer Role

Throughout this research I took on the researcher-participant-observer role and focused on aspects of the ethnographic and constructionist grounded theory approach. For the purpose of this research, I utilized characteristics of traditional ethnography. I had a broad research question and would observe the whole social field (Andreassen et al., 2020) of the P. E. classes. During this longer observational process, my aim was to understand the actions of the students

as they participated in their gendered everyday experience (Gobo & Marciniak, 2016). This ethnographic approach enabled me to examine the nuanced reality of middle school students. A complimentary approach was utilizing Charmaz's (2005) perception of constructionist grounded theory (CGT). Here, CGT provided an avenue where process and action is the focus of the research. CGT addresses the participants meanings, action and lived reality. In addition, CGT allows, through the analysis of relationships, for the interpretation of meanings, actions and lived realities. As a result, I focused on applying self-reflexivity and participant observation. Charmaz (2005) identifies the researcher's lived reality as an aspect of data interpretation. This was evident during my research in the position of instructor and researcher.

During the first and second years of this research I used a pre- and post- program survey but realized that I was not garnering the gendered data that I wanted. The students, at the middle school level, were not able to write their thoughts in such a way as to provide an introspective look at situations in their lives. My methodological approach turned to self-reflexivity and participant observation. As the participant-observer, instructor and researcher, I would use self-reflexivity to better understand the social context (Li, 2008) of the observations that I would be making of the students. Cooper et al. (2017) points to the connection that can be created from the self-reflexive vignette, story or observation to the theoretical.

Qualitative research in all its forms is prominent within the study of sport as can be reviewed in the studies by Preston and Fraser-Thomas (2018) and Cox et al. (2017). The complimentary ethnography and CGT approaches support my use of self-reflexivity within this research. In addition, self-reflexivity brings a nuanced perspective of these students experiencing their bodies as they learned self-defense. I gathered rich data of their gendered experience. Therefore, descriptions of vignettes and events that have taken place within these two years will be utilized to understand gendered process and experience of these students.

Participant observation is an ideal approach for data collection for this research because of its sensitivity (Li, 2008), the age of the group and the nature of teaching self-defense as the participant-observer. I turn to Berthelsen et al. (2016) as they review the importance of the method and their interpretation of Charmaz. The authors point to participant observation being able to capture the lived experience of the participants in terms of action and process. This is important within this research as the students are taught various techniques and scenarios framed. Charmaz (2008) suggests that coding, initial and focused, involves identifying actions so the reader is able to appreciate the process. In addition, Berthelsen et al. (2016) point to the position of the researcher within the setting where one can examine language and symbols. This is particularly of issue with this research where I am the instructor and researcher who is embedded within the environment. Here, I am able to direct the class only, I do not direct the conversation. However, I do need to be conscious of biases that I may have but this does not decrease the validity of the data collected. Charmaz (2005) suggests this is an aspect of CGT that needs to be considered. Of note, as discussed by Reed-Danahay (2017), Bourdieu approaches the issue of self-analysis and reflexive sociology where importance of self-reflection can be brought to the theoretical framework. Reed-Danahay (2017) and Takyi (2015) places the researcher with the social context of the participants and I am placing myself within the social context of the students which gives a perception that may not be achieved by any other methods.

Sample

During the 2017 to 2019 school years, boys and girls in grades six, seven, and eight were asked to participate. During 2017-2018, 72 students took part in the pre-program questionnaire and 62 students took part in the post-program questionnaire. At baseline, the sample distribution was 29 boys and 43 girls. Post-program sample consisted of 21 boys and

41 girls. Children were sent home with a packet consisting of a pre-program survey, assent and consent form. Post-program surveys were given in May. Forty-four classes were taught with each class approximately 40 minutes in duration. During 2018-2019, I focused on observational fieldnotes therefore no pre- or post-program surveying took place.

A letter was sent to the parents indicating the observations were to take place with no parents asking for their child not to be observed. All the students were included. The class sizes ranged according to grade. The grade six classes had 24 girls and 24 boys. Grade seven class consisted of 15 girls and 30 boys and grade eight class consisted of 24 girls and 20 boys. Thirty-four classes were conducted during the school year where each class was approximately 40 minutes.

Procedure

The focus of this presentation of finding will focus on the last two years of research, 2017-2019. The participants' safety, privacy and confidentiality, was of utmost importance. As the instructor, I ensured that the scenarios were explained in an age-appropriate manner. I am a certified instructor in all these programs. The training for the programs is extensive and I have experience teaching a variety of ages. To ensure privacy and confidentiality, my observations were conducted during class time where all students were present. I was not specific as to the "name" of the student but focused on the behavior. Student descriptions are purposely vague as to not be able to identify by description. Student names were not included. The procedure for 2017 to 2018 were as follows:

- Upon Institutional Review Board approval (IRB#06147), all students were sent home with a research packet.
- The pre-program survey was completed before the first self-defense class.
- Classes were conducted twice a week; the grade six classes were same-sex, and the grade seven and eight classes were sex segregated.
- Observational notes were made at the end of classes and memos took place soon after.
- The post-program survey was conducted in May.

The administration aided in the distribution of research packets for all grades that consisted of assent form, consent form and pre-program survey.

The third year of the research took place between 2018 and 2019. During this year, the procedures changed considerably. The prior year proved difficult to gain a good number of packets returned. I decided that the focus the third and last year would be on observational notes. In addition, I noticed that much of the significant, rich data was taking place observing gendered experience every day. Parents of the students were notified through an emailed information letter stating that the research was taking place and observational notes would be taken. Grades six, seven and eight boys and girls were included in the third year. I taught classes twice a week, alternating between the two grade six classes and the same-sex boys' and girls' classes. Classes were taught between September 2018 and May 2019. A total of 44 classes were taught.

Field/Observational Notes

Throughout the time of this research, I was observing gendered experience. I understood that as the participant observer I needed to ensure that I did not make the environment uncomfortable and have someone "writing things down" as they were talking or

the group having a conversation. I did not get ethics approval to record conversations and knew it would be cumbersome to do so with such a young group. I believe my only option was to make notes between classes and rely on my memory of what happened during the class. At the end of each class, I would comment on what techniques we had learned and reviewed. This was also the time where I would write down quick comments of gendered experience within the classes. Once I was done for the day, I wrote extended comments and memos. I filled in the observation of the narratives of specific situations and observed everyday gendered scripts using the iPad. I turned to audio recording as it seemed to be more unfiltered. I felt as I was writing on the iPad, I was self-filtering. However, the audio-recording on my iPhone felt liberating. I was also able to identify my tone in relation to the extended comments. In these last two years, I organized the observations as a comparison between a co-ed environment and sex-segregated environment. I wanted to examine if the co-ed environment produced specific gendered interaction because of the two groups interacting in the same class. To examine the grade seven and eight students, I would note the specific scenario framing and observe gendered script in that manner.

Data Analysis

Initial coding was conducted by reviewing observational notes and audio recordings. The observational notes consisted of the memos I composed based upon what I recalled from my time in the classes. The initial coding was a list of observations. During the second stage of coding, I was taking the list of observations and grouping them together. Saldana (2016) refers to this as pattern coding. The groups were based on comment language that I had used to narrate or common observed behavior. Based on the second stage of coding, six themes emerged. These themes are being the instructor, gendered discourse in action, body proximity and movement, *The Invincibility Effect*, the grade six and seven/eight divide, and *lived* body moments.

Findings

Though this was a three-year research project, the focus of these findings will be on the gendered participant observations. Between September 2017 and May 2019, as the instructor of a self-defense program in a physical education class, I was able to observe how grade six, seven and eight girls and boys learned self-defense. My focus was to compare how girls and boys used their lived bodies in this environment.

The structure of the classes was similar. The class began with some sort of warm up, followed by an issue talk though this was sporadic. The talks occurred more frequently with grade six. Finally, we worked on techniques. As presented in Table 1, six themes emerged from observations. Table 1 outlines these themes and presents description and an illustrative observation. Each theme is discussed in detail below.

Table 1

Emergent Themes Derived from Participant Observations

Emergent themes	Theme description	Illustrative observation
Being the instructor	This describes my gendered thoughts and actions.	I realized that I frame scenarios in a gendered way. The girls get assaults and the boys get fights.

Gendered discourse in action	This describes experiences that indicated gendered typical comments, shared narratives that can be connected to gendered discourse.	One of the grade seven and eight girls shared that a friend had been with a boy and set her boundary. Then the boy went further, and she did not give consent.
Body proximity and movement	This describes how the body is used. Proximity is the distance between bodies. Movement is the body in action.	The girls and boys enjoyed striking the block pads. When I told them to yell as they hit, you could feel the energy.
The invincibility effect	This describes the perception that nothing can happen to me.	The grade eight boys were going to Washington, D.C. They thought they could not get abducted.
Grade six and seven/eight divide	This describes how things changed or not between the grade six class and the grade seven/eight classes.	The motivation between the grade six students and the seven and eight students were noticeable. On the same say, the grade six class would be excited and doing the workout. The grade seven girls seemed to be moving in slow motion.
<i>Lived</i> body moments	This describes moments where the students showed that they were increasing or ready to experience their embodiment.	The shy, reserved boy who did not want to do anything decided to go into the reality circle. He fought to the end as the class encouraged him.

Note. The table identifies the emergent themes and how each theme has been defined. The theme is illustrated by observation, comment and/or event.

Being the Instructor

During the second stage of coding, I realized that I forgot *me*. I have come to understand that inherent in the participant observer role is *self-reflexivity*. As the instructor, I was bringing my own gendered socialization within this physical education class. I was the tomboy and young woman that did not have the confidence that I do now. My embodiment did not happen until I started karate in 1990. I understood, later-on, the influence that karate had for me and wanted to give it to others. This was illustrated with these students throughout the two years that I write about here. My eagerness to teach young people self-defense was challenging and unexpected. In addition, the thought of conducting a research study as I worked with these students was secondary.

In addressing Lakes and Hoyt (2004) in terms of their conclusion with the effectiveness of teaching boys and girls, I was aware because of my experience in teaching self-defense, that girls and boys needed different foci. Therefore, I chose to use a combination of different programs to address the different groups of students. This was based on a gendered perspective on my part of what I believe I needed to teach the boys, girls and the co-ed group. I chose to be gender specific in teaching the grade seven and eight girls and boys. For the grade six

students, I navigated through a generic bullying and predator curriculum. I did not generally focus on a gendered framing of the scenarios. I focused on fights, bullying and predator for the grade seven and eight boys. For the grade seven and eight girls I added in *Smartsafe*, a program specifically created to address the most common situations women and girls could encounter.

The girls' group was a surprise to me. I was intending to only focus on *Smartsafe* for the girls. However, what I quickly realized is that the girls have a layering of situations that need to be addressed. It is not enough to focus on assaults because this just is not their lived reality. There is a whole other reality they have to navigate. Lakes and Hoyt (2004) indicated that boys' regulation increased with martial arts, but what I suggest is that this self-regulation is not the main attribute for girls. Their ability to learn the techniques and become embodied is a larger issue and transcends to other aspects within their lived reality. The focus of the Lakes and Hoyt research and my research focus on different aspects. My research suggests that working with girls and with boys need to have different foci.

Understanding the larger gendered environment within a religious school, I hesitated to pair up girls and boys in groundwork with the grade six students. Much of the research other than Lakes and Hoyt (2004), appeared to focus on sex-segregated classes. The boys and girls within my grade six co-ed environment picked up the techniques equally well. Therefore, physical proximity on the ground was limited. But during one class it did happen. It was a grade six girl and boy. The scenario was framed where the attacker gets their target in a headlock and then takes them to the ground. The head is close to the chest area. I was nervous. The students seemed to be a little nervous, but I was not sure if it was the uncertainty of learning the technique or having their bodies so close together. I had this same nervousness when I did not have the physical education teacher (PET) as my demonstration partner. I was nervous when I had to use a male partner for these techniques and purposely chose a female partner when possible. I questioned if this was due to the environment of where the students are learning self-defense. Through years of watching children in martial arts training facilities, this body proximity does not seem to be an issue. This deserves more investigation. As the instructor in the participant observer role, at times I found myself to be more gendered and focus on gender more than the students did.

Gendered Discourse in Action

The current literature with these groups of children learning self-defense does not seem to present findings of gender being practiced in everyday life. Everyday practice within this group of middle school students seemed *typical*. There were the boisterous boys, which seems true within each of the grades. The girls were talkative and maintained space. This was exemplified when we would do groundwork on the mats. The boys would be running around, loud and seemed to go ahead and do the technique even though they did not seem to know what they were doing. Whereas the girls sat in groups on the mats or stood in groups. They were not as loud or running around. The girls asked more questions about the techniques than the boys. This appeared to be the everyday gender scripts that are part of the *lived* gendered body that girls and boys internalize. This does not tell us that boys learn better or faster or that they participate more. This was exemplified in the grade six and seven/eight divide which I will discuss within that theme.

There were several times that gendered socialization affected how the students learned self-defense. I will highlight several observations that illustrate this comment. During the 2018-2019 year, I introduced the rubber knife and the rear hostage scenario. This scenario depicts the target being held by the attacker from behind with a knife. One girl was shaken but the gendered aspect of this observation was the apprehension of inflicting pain on the attacker. This comment was made later in the year as we were doing the *Dirty Uncle techniques*. Here

the known person was trying to force themselves on the target. One of the girls' asked if there was a less violent, hurtful response that could be used. This is a barrier for many women when teaching self-defense. What is evident is that the grade seven and eight girls took the reality of this happening seriously. This was not true for the boys. The boys, generally, did not take the self-defense training seriously. Many of them believed it could not happen to them. Lastly, I noticed, particularly in the 2018/2019-year, homophobic terms being used especially the word *gay*. One observation had two boys sitting beside each other and using this terminology in a sexual way such as, "*hey you think I am cute.*" It also occurred when there was close body proximity.

Body Proximity and Movement

First, I would note that this was a physical education (PE) class and many of the grade seven and eight girls did not want to take part. Surprisingly, this was also true for some of the boys. The grade six students, girls and boys, wanted to be there. I assessed this by their motivation to do the warm-up, how they worked through the techniques and how many of the students did not change into their gym clothes. Generally, the grade six students seemed to move their bodies more and were more motivated to do it. The grade seven and eight students, girls and boys, did not want to move, nor did it seem that they had good endurance. Many comments indicated this. I continually saw the PET start the students over in their exercises. The PET and I had constant conversation during the two years of how we noticed that the students had little motivation and poor endurance.

Body proximity seemed to be an issue for girls and boys in different ways. The girls were generally okay with body proximity with standup scenarios even when they were framed in a gendered manner. The girls appeared to express apprehension when they were doing groundwork especially when the ground choke was practiced. The ground choke had the target on her back and the attacker was between the legs of the target choking the target. This was difficult for the girls even those girls that had practiced it the year before. I had noticed this and made accommodations to make the girls comfortable as they worked the scenario. Body proximity, generally, was not an issue for the majority of the boys. They had equated groundwork to wrestling. There was an issue for at least one of the boys in terms of sexuality. He continually seemed to make homophobic remarks and seemed to be uncomfortable with body proximity. I am not quite sure if this was a defensive strategy or a general uncomfortable feeling.

The Invincibility Effect

The *Invincibility Effect* refers, for the purpose of these findings, to the grade seven and eight boys believing that they will not be bullied or abducted. This was clear through the whole two years. When taking part in the reality circle, the boys were concerned about staying in and fighting or submitting the attacker rather than fighting and escaping and getting away. In the third year, one of the boys questioned if any of this would happen and if it would work. They went further to suggest that it would not happen. It was not reality. It was a sense of invincibility or immortality.

There are two observations that I will highlight. There did seem to be two groups of boys within the grade seven and eight boys' classes. One group did not change and sat in the stands. The boys in the stands were not completely involved all the time, but they were paying attention. The group that participated would work the techniques, listen and seemed to be present. Within the groups that participated, some of the boys looked like they could have been bullied while others looked like the stereotypical *jock*. Of those who participated, jocks and

not, looked like they needed the classes and needed to learn self-defense, like the bullying scenarios had happened to them. The group that participated included perceived jocks and non-jocks. Encouragingly, the jocks did not make fun of the non-jocks. This seemed to be contrary to stereotypical depictions of middle school hierarchical culture.

The second observation occurred during the second year of the research. I was teaching and heard PET address the boys that were not taking part in the class. I overheard that there must have been ridiculing by the boys who were sitting in the bleachers toward those that were taking part in class. The PET said that he wished he knew what to do, that something had happened to him, and then he described a situation. At this point, I wondered if the boys needed a male teacher or if this is part of the *invincibility effect* that seemed to be repeatedly expressed. Does this sense of invincibility come from being socialized in the *lived* body, as part of gendered socialization? In addition, the PET did not want to hear any comments later where they were ridiculing the boys that were taking part in the class. I was not able to investigate what the ridiculing entailed. It may have brought additional nuanced issues to light.

The Grade Six and Grade Seven/Eight Divide

There were several areas where I noticed a grade six and grade seven/eight divide. The grade six students were more motivated to be in PE class and more enthusiastic to learn self-defense class. Even the parent of a grade six girl seemed pleased for her daughter to be learning self-defense. The girl came up to me and thanked me. She told me that because she was learning self-defense, her mom was going to allow her to attend a choir trip. As an instructor, at times you ask yourself if it is worth it; these are the times that make it worth it. The grade six students asked more questions about situations. The boys and girls were more enthusiastic in participating in all aspects of self-defense and participating in the PE class. As previously stated, the majority of the grade six students changed their gym clothes and participated in PE. However, this seemed to change as they transitioned to grade seven. During the transition from grade six 2017-2018 to grade seven 2018-2019, there was a noticeable difference in their desire to participate in PE. This could be due to the change in body self-perception that may take place within this year. The grade seven students could be wary of showing their bodies to their classmates, body image issues and generally becoming more unsure. This is an assumption and deserves more investigation. In addition, the grade six students, boys and girls, were excited about the escape drill but this too changed when grade seven came.

Several other observations support this divide. The grade six boys seemed to understand that these situations could happen to them, but the grade seven and eight boys did not seem to share this urgency. This was illustrated as both boys and girls shared their experiences about staying at home alone or the girls stating they were harassed. There was a gender divide with the grade seven and eight girls and boys. The girls, when comfortable, would share, but the boys did not. They questioned the belief that anything would happen to them. The grade six girls and boys seemed to *live* their bodies. This was not apparent with the grade seven and eight girls. This was noticeable by how many students changed into their PE clothes and the energy during warm-ups. The grade seven/eight girls were represented with three groups: those who participated; those who changed, were on the gym floor but did nothing; and those that sat in the bleachers. The grade seven and eight boys did not seem as dramatic but still noticeable. Generally, the grade six boys and girls seemed to experience embodiment more than the other grades but gendered in terms of the grade seven and eight girls and boys. The girls and boys seemed to decrease the use of their bodies, their sense of *lived* body.

As the participant observer, it was beneficial to notice this nuance as it created a richer understanding of what middle school students experience as they progress through this crucial

transition time. As I again refer to Lakes and Hoyt (2004), as it seemed to be most similar to this study, are there other *grade divides* that we should be examining.

Lived Body Moments (LBM)

For many of the students, *living* their body through learning self-defense was a continuous process and this process varied. The *lived* body moments were moments that struck me and that occurred with students that perhaps did not want to participate but eventually did. This happened through punching block pads, taking part in surprise attacks and reality circle. I believe the reality circle drill was the most effective in terms of creating LBM. As one of the grade eight girls has stated. I asked her “what was the difference between doing the ground choke and the reality circle?” She implied that there was a difference between the static nature of a specific technique and probably the gendered framing that I used versus the dynamic movement and non-static nature of the reality circle.

Let me describe the reality circle. The purpose of this drill is to let students understand that being in a confrontation can take a long time or a short time. It is also intended to get students to understand that they need to fight, have the *fighting spirit* until they are able to get away. The point is to survive and not stay there and fight. The target is on the ground, stomach down. The attacker is holding the target down in any way that they choose. The goal of the target is to escape, and the goal of the attacker is to hold the target down. The students were given one minute in each position. Many times, the other students cheered as this was happening.

Generally, the boys were more open to this drill than the girls. The girls, not all, expressed some apprehension. But as the year went on, I had occasions where the girls would ask if we were going to do the drill. In fact, several times, I would have to pick the pairs a week to two weeks in advance. I would also have to ensure that there was an equal amount to boys’ and girls’ pairs with the grade six students. The grade six students were more excited than the grade seven/eight students. I would like to highlight two of the LBM that within these two years was so powerful. These two moments also point to girls and boys experiencing embodiment similarly but also understanding that not all boys are embodied and *live* their bodies.

In one of the grade six classes there was this one young girl who was petite. She was short about a foot shorter than me, the instructor, as I am five foot two inches. The girl was thin, small diameter of arms and legs, glasses, shy and reserved. One day as we are in the reality circle, she taps me on the arm and asks if she can do this next week but does not have a partner. I had to hold in my joy, amazement and surprise. I told her not to worry; we would find her a partner. The next time we did the reality circle, she took part and did great. I could see how she held herself and there was something there that seemed good. The boy I would like to mention was one that began as a boy afraid to do everything. It seemed, that physically, he felt that he was not able to do anything. But that seemed to break through when he finally tried the reality circle. He got himself a partner and worked and fought until his time was done. At first, he seemed defeated because he was not able to escape but those around him supported him. I expressed my support at how hard he had worked and should be proud. But it was not until PET, a large male, went to him and expressed how proud he was of him for trying so hard and fighting to the end. He seemed to straighten up a bit after this. If I did not focus on observations and take a role as participant observer, I am not sure that this example of embodiment would have been captured. I saw the process of embodiment happen before my eyes for these young children. But the young boys’ embodiment challenged my own stereotypes that assume a monolithic lived body experience with boys at this age.

Discussion

By taking the participant observer role within this research, I was able to gain a nuanced perspective of middle school students as they learned self-defense. Several themes emerged that would lend the research to understand the students' voice and *lived* body in a new and richer way. The role that I played as instructor and researcher was a balanced one but one that proved crucial. I was able to expand conversations and inquire when needed. However, I too played a role in how the students experienced the class. This was not clearly stated and appeared not to be addressed in current literature. There were many illustrative observations where gendered discourse is seen in action as these students experience their bodies. They have internalized gendered discourse and had been observed in several ways from body proximity to the *grade* divide. My research has filled the gap within the current literature where utilizing self-reflexivity and observation to investigate a group that seems underrepresented in the literature in respect to the rich experiences and processes that were gathered within this research.

But this leaves more questions to be asked. Though limitations do exist within the research such as a small sample size, follow-up interviewing, focus groups and continued observation, what we have gained is relevant. Further research should focus on a continuing examination as not to underestimate the importance of the participant observer role in understanding social context. I believe the environment in which these students are in as they are observed is important. That is, space and place can affect how one navigates the emergent themes that were discussed here. For example, the students were forced into a PE class where at a training facility, the student participation may be voluntary. What is clear is that the *lived* body can influence how these students experienced the self-defense class. However, even though gender discourse has been internalized, there may be a way of developing a *lived* body.

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Author Note

Giovanna Follo is an Associate Professor of Sociology at Wright State University – Lake Campus. As a sociology generalist, she has several areas of research focus such her work examining the sandwich generation, retention and the Wright State Faculty strike. However, her central focus of research lies in the area of women and girls in martial arts and self-defense. Understanding the importance self-reflexivity, she embraced autoethnography, participant observation and the general qualitative approaches to discover the nuances within her research. Please direct correspondence to giovanna.follo@wright.edu.

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