WOMEN'S SELF-DEFENSE AND SOCIAL INTERACTION

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WOMEN'S SELF-DEFENSE AND SOCIAL INTERACTION

A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

of

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The present study explores the process of and changes in social interaction of women who recently completed a women's self-defense course. Eighteen women from three different courses participated in semi-structured interviews and answered questions related to changes they experienced in their interactions at home, at work, and in public spaces as a result of taking their course. The qualitative analysis was performed looking through the lens of social interaction. It was found that situational awareness, perspective-taking, and self-perceptions of efficacy were powerfully affected by taking a women's self-defense course. Implications for future research include the potential for perspective-taking as an intentional pedagogical tool to help both aggressive and passive responders.

_____, Committee Chair
Kevin Wehr

_____
Date

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To my mother:

Writing this thesis has been, without a doubt, the most difficult undertaking of my life. In writing it I was forced to reflect on and modify my own perspectives, interactions, and responses, and as such, I am grateful for your love, tolerance, and emotional and financial support throughout. Without it, this thesis would not have been possible.

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Though he passed in 1995, I must also acknowledge my Dad who, to his credit and before his time, was enlightened enough to ignore many of the norms for gender socialization and teach me self-sufficiency in matters that were, at the time, considered quite unfeminine.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Social interaction is the ongoing adaptive process by which we humans use perspective-taking, encode and decode various communication cues, analyze the physical environment and incorporate prior knowledge and experience in order to arrive at a definition for a given situation. Our responses to that situation are influenced by our self-perceptions and our internalization of perspectives – those of our culture, reference groups, and significant others – before acting (Mead 1934). As individuals, we also bring all that we are – genetics, biochemistry, and personality – into each new social interaction. Ecologically socialized by parents, schools, community, and culture, prior experiences in social interactions may affect the ability to cope with stress or strain in ways that conform to social norms. This may cause some to respond to situations they define as fearful or threatening by engaging in aggressive behavior (Dodge et al. 1986; Fite et al. 2008; Lansford et al. 2007; Trickett and McBride-Chang 1995). It may cause others to cope by becoming passive, a coping strategy which may result in their victimization (Rakos 1991). Women are particularly vulnerable because they are socialized to behave in ways that are passive and subordinate, making them more likely to have encountered the adverse experiences – criminal victimization, child maltreatment or neglect, abusive relationships and gender discrimination (Johnson 2005; Wood 2001). These factors present greater risk factors for criminal and aggressive coping strategies by females than males and, in fact, female offenders claim higher rates of sexual abuse,

physical abuse and neglect than do males (Belknap and Holsinger 2006; Schilling et al. 2007).

This study explores women's self-defense through the lens of the social interaction process by employing semi-structured interviews of women who completed three different types of women's self-defense courses. After giving consent, the participants answered a variety of questions about how their social interactions with others had changed since completing the course. Using the social interaction process described by Mead (1934) as a framework, different elements of the process that contribute to and are affected by completing a women's self-defense class were evaluated. At the most basic level, social interaction consists of two co-present individuals (Goffman 1967) engaged in mutually-adaptive, ongoing cycle of interpretation, definition, and action until those individuals are no longer co-present. During the interaction, each individual determines context through assessment of both the physical environment and a variety of social cues and takes the perspective of the other in order to determine intent in order to arrive at a definition of the situation. This definition evokes a specific response based on the tools available to each person as provided by their socialized perspectives and social skills (Mead 1934).

According to McCaughey (1997:109) training in women's self-defense is "training in threat management." Women's self-defense classes are generally designed around the more specific purpose of providing women with a limited scope of simple, physical techniques with which to defend themselves against assault and teaching them situational cues to increase their knowledge and situational awareness, but many also

incorporate some degree of verbal assertiveness and boundary setting training in order to more appropriately manage stressful conflict interactions. In fact, in a study by Hollander (2010), 54 percent of the women stated they enrolled in a women's self-defense course to gain self-confidence or to become more assertive, and 49 percent for the purpose of learning verbal self-defense.

Women's self-defense courses are not like martial arts classes. Most women's self-defense programs are designed to teach simple techniques that can be applied by women against larger and stronger assailants in courses that are finite in length and curriculum. Most also incorporate a verbal assertiveness component with some measure of interactive practice, and provide information on gendered violence. Some programs offer adrenal stress training or conditioning with a padded attacker, while others do not. The three programs from which the participants for this study were drawn were different from each other in many ways. The first program centered on adrenal response scenario training that allows women to practice verbal and physical strategies on a padded attacker. The second course was a semester long university course offered by its kinesiology department where unprotected mock attackers were brought in for physical skills practice only at the end of the semester. The third program, offered for free, operates in a large urban area under the auspices of its police department. Physical skills in this program were practiced on pads and verbal techniques using a variety of different methods, but none under adrenalized conditions.

While training in the martial arts has been shown to be a therapeutic and effective means of violence prevention (Daniels and Thornton 1992; Nosanchuk 1981; Nosanchuk

and MacNeil 1989; Trulson 1986; Twemlow and Sacco 1998; Twemlow, Sacco and Fonagy 2008; Weiser et al. 1995; Zivin et al. 2001), practice is predominantly focused in physical techniques and a philosophical tradition, and martial arts training is typically a longer term endeavor. In contrast, women's self-defense courses tend to focus on providing information and teaching prevention and assertiveness skills with the passive responder in mind and typically do not teach how to avoid responding with aggression and violence when confronted. Many women's self-defense programs also do not specifically integrate emotional healing and rehabilitation from trauma into their curricula despite the considerable empirical evidence that the life course trajectory of women who either become victims of violence or become aggressors as adults begins in early childhood as a result of some form of maltreatment, neglect or other form of adversity. However, in a study of women accessing battered women's services and batterer intervention programs, Abel (2001:414) discovered that both female perpetrators and victims of interpersonal violence shared "victim-related exposure to violence." This shared exposure to victimization in early childhood has been shown to adversely affect social interaction processes (Dodge et al. 1986; Fite et al. 2008; Lansford et al. 2007; Trickett and McBride-Chang 1995).

At the other end of the spectrum, passive or avoidant responses are similarly maladaptive and are also associated with both childhood and adult victimization. Generally victimization is associated with a reduced sense of personal control (Umberson et al 1998), which may translate into avoidance coping (Sullivan et al 2005) or ineffective boundary setting in order to avoid or minimize physical injury (Messman-Moore and

Long 2000). Childhood sexual abuse also results in more internalizing disorders like social withdrawal and isolation, depression (Trickett and McBride-Chang 1995) and post-traumatic stress disorder (Hetzel and McCanne 2005). In turn, emotionally dysfunctional individuals report a higher level of victimization (Vandecar-Burden and Payne 2010).

This is important because fear of violence is what prompts most women to enroll in a self-defense class (Hollander 2010), a fear which is not unfounded. A survey of over 3,000 female college students revealed that women who had participated in a self-defense course were more likely to have been victimized in early childhood than women who had never taken such a course (Brecklin 2004). Furthermore, Brecklin (2004) found that women who had been both physically and sexually abused were nearly twice as likely to take a women's self-defense course as those who had not been maltreated in childhood. Taking into account that prior studies had looked at the victimization rates of only women enrolled in self-defense classes, however, Hollander (2010) included a control group of women enrolled in other university classes in addition to those enrolled in the university's self-defense course and found a negligible difference in rates of prior assault history, which she also attributes to higher rates of female victimization overall. What these studies have not revealed, however, is how the social interaction process is involved or affected by taking a women's self-defense course.

There continues to be a call for understanding the connection between maladaptive social interaction and childhood maltreatment, as well as to develop interventions "to change interpersonal schemas" (Lang et al. 2004:1115). Abel (2001:418) specifically calls for intervention programs to be "developed with an

awareness of the possibility that women in batterer programs have had previous victim-related exposure to violence, and may have high trauma symptomology." Sullivan et al. (2005) also recommend programs that focus on social support, coping skills and self-efficacy as central to intervention strategies – all of which are well within the scope of women's self-defense courses to provide. In fact, Stevenson (2006:200) argues that "a self-defense class is essentially an activity-based social work group that uses specific programming to accomplish its dual purpose" of teaching self-defense techniques and improving women's lives by giving them a greater sense of personal safety, and that it resembles group therapy practices in how members interact with each other and the instructor with respect to how they take the perspectives of others and offer mutual emotional support. For this reason, self-defense programs for women have the potential to affect social interaction from more than the narrow perspective of the prevention of victimization. They also have the power to heal the emotional wounds from adverse experiences in childhood and to positively affect a woman's situational response style. The potential for women's self-defense programs to extend beyond the scope of victimization prevention is clear. Results from numerous studies have shown that taking a women's self-defense increases assertiveness (Brecklin 2004; Orchowski et al 2008; Ozer and Bandura 1990; Weitlauf et al. 2000), reduces hostility, aggressiveness and violence (Weitlauf et al. 2000), decreases anger (Weitlauf et al. 2001), enhances coping self-efficacy (Ozer and Bandura 1990; Weitlauf et al. 2001), and improves social interactions with both strangers and acquaintances and boosts self-confidence (Hollander 2004). In a review of self-defense literature, in fact, Brecklin (2008) found that the positive effects of

self-defense training extend beyond the ability to perform physical technique. Her evaluation of program results indicated that learning self-defense consistently improves assertiveness, increases a woman's feelings of control over her life circumstances, reduces her levels of fear and anxiety, and positively affects her self-esteem and sense of physical competence. Furthermore, positive results of assertiveness training have also been shown in psychiatric patients diagnosed with depression and other disorders (Lin et al. 2008), indicating that self-defense training may be therapeutic for women recovering from the trauma of early childhood maltreatment, adult victimization, or both.

The discussion relevant to women's self-defense and social interaction that follows is organized according to the fundamental elements of the social interaction process. These include situational context, perspective-taking, defining a situation, the relevant perspectives of others, and the germane socially-learned strategies involved.

Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study explores women's self-defense through the lens of social interaction. Argyle (1969:199) describes social interaction as a system wherein the goal is to achieve "a stable pattern of behavior satisfactory to both" people involved in an interaction. This system of mutually adaptive behavior takes place within a physical context, and it begins with an encounter between two social actors, each of whom enter into it motivated by goals specific to that interaction. Each must perceive the social cues of the other which are then filtered through the perspective each has acquired through socialization and experience. The interpretation of context and social cues is then applied to arrive at a definition of the situation, which in turn guides both behavior and action (Argyle 1969; Mead 1934). Because all social interaction involves this ongoing adaptive activity, taking a women's self-defense course must also involve and affect this system in a number of ways.

Environmental Context

All social interaction begins with co-presence (Goffman 1967) conceptualized as a mutual acknowledgement of the other, but the situational context, which is both temporal and spatial, exists independently of any social encounter that takes place within it (Gahagan 1984). Because behavior is a function of both person and environment (Argyle 1969), this suggests that the interpretation and definition of a situation is also a function of person and context. Situational awareness is a concept rooted in the study of people in task environments. It is the process of consciously assessing environmental

factors, both material and contextual exclusive of verbal and nonverbal communication, in order to predict events and guide subsequent behavior (Endsley 1995; Smith and Hancock 1995). It is directed by self-efficacy and knowledge, and results in new information which in a self-defense situation allows women to define a situation as safe or threatening and to adapt their behavior, or to modify the environment or their relationship to it accordingly.

Situational awareness is a state of alertness to one's surroundings with respect to both material objects and other individuals within those surroundings. In fact, McCaughey's (1997) comparison of learning self-defense to driving a car is useful in this context. Her description of the process as similar to learning how to drive a car on the opposite side of the road is about situational awareness. Driving under new circumstances becomes an effortful task that requires full attention until one gets used to it. Attention to context for self-defense is important because there are certain elements of the spatial environment over which one has no explicit individual control. However, a woman's relationship to a specific context can be controlled, for example, through the employment of coping strategies, like carrying a weapon or by staying indoors.

Particular environmental characteristics affect women's threat perceptions, emotions, and responses (David et al. 2004; Fairchild 2010). Women feel a greater sense of fear at night, on the street, on public transportation, and in other public spaces, like parks and gardens (Fairchild 2010). Female veterans who were sexual assault survivors indicated they were fearful of getting into elevators with one or more men, being in crowds, going for walks, getting into their cars, staying alone at home after dark, and

going to sleep at night (David et al. 2004). They also felt less empowered to assert themselves in these circumstances when harassed by unknown others. Nearly half of all women worry about their safety all or most of the time (Gordon et al. 1980), and their perceived vulnerability and internalized fear of victimization brings women to enroll in self-defense courses to learn physical self-defense skills (Hollander 2010).

In addition to teaching physical techniques for self-defense, women's self-defense courses attempt to redefine what constitutes a dangerous context by emphasizing mental preparedness and providing accurate information about potential risks. For this reason, objective situational awareness in terms of women's self-defense is important because it contributes to a woman's definition of a situation as potentially threatening to her personal safety. Many courses also present women with strategies for ways in which they can control their physical environment or change their actions relative to it in order to practice safety or self-defense while emphasizing each woman's agency in exercising such strategies, all of which serves to create new perspectives which can be developed as a function of training and experience in a given task environment (Endsley 1995:44).

Perspectives

Perspectives are a person's world view. It is the amalgamation of "what is taken for granted about the attributes of various objects, events, and human nature. It is an order of things remembered and expected as well as things actually perceived, an organized conception of what is plausible and what is possible" (Shibutani 1955:564). Women's socialization and personal experiences shape their perspectives, both with respect to self-appraisals as well their perception of others. Patriarchal institutions shape women's

perceptions of self as "unaggressive, shy, intuitive, emotionally expressive, nurturing, weak, hysterical, erratic and lacking in self-control (especially when menstruating), dependent, passive, subjective, submissive, indecisive, and lacking in self-confidence" (Johnson 2005:86). Over the course of a woman's lifetime, this structural subordination and disdain of women not only contributes to negative perceptions of self (Wood 2001), but also to women's victimization (Johnson 2005).

Personal experiences with victimization and trauma as children and as adults contribute to women's assumptions and generalized beliefs about others, predominantly men, as untrustworthy, dominating, aggressive, and violent, and indeed, men are more feared in indeterminate situations than are women (Harris and Miller 2000). A considerable body of literature confirms the link between childhood maltreatment and the development of healthy coping strategies and self-concept (Trickett and McBride-Chang 1995), as well as the re-victimization of women as adults (Messman-Moore and Long 2000; Rich et al. 2005; Sullivan et al. 2005). Combined, the continuing social and personal experiences of general disregard to which women are subjected generates perspectives of generalized danger that present barriers to women effectively defending themselves. Perspectives of self as powerless, unworthy or incompetent frequently result in avoidance coping strategies (Bandura 1989; Ozer and Bandura 1990), or they may result in aggression and violence in situations defined as threatening (Fite et al. 2008).

Perspectives, or what Argyle (1969:183) refers to as "central translation processes," can be either conscious or unconscious. When perspectives are not at the forefront of a person's consciousness, they result in automatic behavioral responses, but

perspectives can brought to the surface and challenged at which point a new translation process can engender conscious and deliberate behavior until it becomes ingrained, intuitive behavior (Argyle 1969). Bandura (1989) explains that the testing of old and the reconstitution of new perspectives relates to self-efficacy in much the same way that it does situational awareness. Predictions of competence are challenged by way of the goal-setting process which, ultimately, in self-defense is generally personal safety.

Women enroll in self-defense courses for a variety of reasons, including a desire to improve their self-confidence, to become more assertive and learn verbal boundary setting skills, and because of fears related to being assaulted (Hollander 2010). "Judgments of personal efficacy affect choice of activities and selection of environments. People tend to avoid activities and situations they believe exceed their coping capabilities, but they readily undertake activities and select social environments they judge themselves capable of handling" (Ozer and Bandura 1990:472). Therefore, a woman's perception of her own competence to be verbally assertive or to physically defend herself if necessary is an important component in achieving the goal of personal safety. Women's self-defense classes challenge women's perspectives of the futility of resistance to sexual assault by replacing them with images of self as empowered and physical beings (McCaughey 1997).

Perspective-taking

Another essential component of competent social interactions is one's ability to role-take or to take the perspective of the other. Mead (1934) describes the process as imagining the goals or intent of another and determining the other's reaction to us during

the course of that interaction. Not only do we determine intent based on verbal and non-verbal cues but we also bring in knowledge and personal experience gained over time in interactions with known others. In those cases where we are required to deal with unknown others, we must rely on taking the role of the generalized other or that of a specific reference group and assume shared meaning with the unknown other. Regardless of the other whose role we take, however, our ability to take another's perspective allows us to modify our own behavior accordingly. Perspective-taking ability, therefore, improves through continued communication and interaction. Women's self-defense classes not only provide women with a new reference group for the purposes of perspective-taking, but they may also provide the opportunity for them to repeatedly take not only their own role, but also the role of the other in a potentially dangerous situation in order to develop this ability.

Shared meanings of the symbols we use – language, gestures, nonverbal communication – are vital to our ability to take the role of the other and those meanings are understood in the context of the social situation (Mead 1934). Therefore, the first place where an interaction can go awry is when the symbols exchanged do not mean the same thing to both sender and receiver. An unknown man who brings up his hand toward a woman may be interpreted as an invitation to shake hands in a business encounter, but it may also be an attempt to grab her wrist in a social encounter where he is an unknown other, or where his nonverbal communication indicates more hostile intentions if he is a known other. Though his intent behind lifting his hand toward her is still only to shake hands, her interpretation may be one of hostility. Perspective-taking is a process of

interpreting symbols based on shared meaning, because "a symbol can evoke in another person's mind the same response that it does in our own; thus we can imagine their mental reactions and anticipate their responses and on that basis choose courses of action" (Gahagan 1984:50). If the symbols we receive or the signals we send are unclear, communication is disrupted and the ability to take the perspective of the other is related to the quality of the interactions that take place over time (Cast 2004).

The ability to effectively take the perspective of a significant other, or of the generalized other when no other reference group is present, is essential to assertive communication. "Understanding what factors are important in recognizing when perspective-taking is related to supportive behaviors and when it is related to disruptive behaviors may help to clarify various motives behind perspective-taking in interaction" (Cast 2004:305).

Definition of the Situation

In 1928, Thomas and Thomas astutely observed that when a situation is defined as real, it is real in its consequences. Insofar as the definition of a situation is concerned, it is the way in which the definition guides subsequent social interaction and behavior that serves in the creation of the consequences. This applies relative to women's self-defense in how coping strategies are employed in threatening and ambiguous situations. Individuals who incorrectly define a situation as threatening or who interpret another's social cues as hostile (whether in reality they are or not), respond in fear and may generate an aggressive or violent response (Dodge et al. 1986; Lansford et al. 2007; Trickett and McBride-Chang 1995). Therefore, if a woman's estimation of the situation

as threatening is incorrect, an inappropriate response her part may escalate a situation, whereas if it is in fact correct, then employing the appropriate response can reduce or eliminate the danger. Similarly Rakos (1991) observes that individuals may also incorrectly interpret social cues or define a situation as non-threatening when indeed it is. This may result in using an avoidance strategy that could place a woman at greater risk.

The use of aggression and violence in response to a threatening situation can be either maladaptive (Fite et al. 2008) or it may be appropriate. In the case of maladaptive responding, Goldstein et al. (1998:7) offer a clue about how the perspectives and perspective-taking of significant others mediate responses in threatening situations:

> Having learned well how to be aggressive, found
> aggression to be consistently successful, and received
> generous encouragement and support from important others
> to keep being aggressive chronically aggressive [people]
> have a final quality that keeps such behavior going. Stated
> simply, they don't know what to do instead.

Avoidance coping and non-assertive behaviors are similarly products of social learning that are incorporated in the perspectives that guide behavior. However, in addition to the perspectives, the ability to correctly interpret social cues plays a crucial role in women's self-defense, and Goldstein et al. (1998) above also make it clear that learning alternative responses in potentially dangerous situations is vital to threat management.

Social Cues

Both social actors in an interaction must engage in an ongoing process of interpreting the many social cues sent by the other in order to determine the other's goal in the interaction. In this way, they can make the continuing adjustments necessary to

achieve equilibrium, or the point at which both social actors achieve a stable pattern of interaction (Argyle 1969).

Nonverbal communication encompasses touch, gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, posture, and proximity, among others. These cues are important to women's self-defense for several reasons. First, women must be able to attend to and interpret both verbal and non-verbal clues indicating the potentially harmful intentions of another. Secondly, because nonverbal cues are usually subconscious and therefore more accurate (Ouellette 1993), women may have to be taught to become aware of and to send confident, appropriate, and congruent verbal and nonverbal messages in order to avoid confusing the message receiver.

Evidence that men do perceptually distinguish submissive women from dominant ones based on nonverbal cues has been demonstrated (Richards et al. 1990), and people who had recently completed a self-defense course were perceived as harder to attack than those who had not because of the way they walked (Johnston et al. 2004). Furthermore, Johnston et al. (2004) demonstrated that a low-vulnerability walking style was something that could be taught. Women also become more aware of their body language after taking a self-defense course, and the women in Hollander's (2004) study found themselves making positive adjustments to their own nonverbal communication, by making more eye contact and taking up more space during social interactions. Similarly, Guthrie (1995) observed positive changes to the posture and bearing of women who trained at a feminist martial arts school. Through a greater sense of confidence and body awareness, women

who train in self-defense report that they are more resolute, and less servile and gullible than women who have not taken a self-defense course (Brecklin 2004).

Self-defense classes may also make women aware of what aggressive body language looks like in order to prevent them from escalating situations by giving the impression of aggression, and also to perceive when someone with whom they are in conflict is likely to attack. For example, clenching and shaking the fists, rocking back and forth or bouncing up and down are nonverbal indications of aggression (Ouellette 1993).

The decrease in aggressiveness and hostility of women who take a women's self-defense course found by Weitlauf et al. (2000) may be similarly explained by a reduction in fear, an improved ability to distinguish between threatening and non-threatening social cues and a greater sense of self-efficacy. After taking a padded attacker self-defense course, women believed they were more capable of managing threatening situations and became less anxious in potentially risky situations (Ozer and Bandura 1990; Weitlauf et al. 2000). Furthermore women had greater control over their emotional responses after taking the course (Ozer and Bandura 1990; Weitlauf et al. 2000) which, according to Fite et al. (2008) mediates social interactions.

Reference Group Perspectives

In interactions with others who are known, like family or friends, perspective-taking over time can become an effective and stable predictor of the behavior in both social actors (Cast 2004). However, when a situation with an unknown other arises, other perspectives must necessarily function as an interim guide. For women, the perspective of

the generalized other is one of patriarchy and institutional oppression and it creates a barrier to effective self-defense.

Women's self-defense courses, however, function as new reference groups in that they provide women with a more empowering perspective. According to Shibutani (1955:563), "a reference group is a standard or check point which an actor uses in forming his estimate of the situation particularly [her] own position within it." This reference group, in McCaughey's (1997) words, is called "self-defensers," and reference group development in women's self-defense courses is encouraged and supported in a variety of ways.

The main features of a self-defense class that promote group development and cohesiveness include opportunities to share narratives and reciprocal perspective-taking (Fraser and Russell 2000; Stevenson 2006). Both instructors and participants in women's self-defense courses build trust and emotional support in a variety of ways. Some take time during the courses to sit as a group and share narratives and others promote group unity by coming together and reciting affirmations of their right and worthiness to defend themselves. Participants are also encouraged to cheer on other participants while they are fighting or practicing their physical techniques.

Perspectives are deconstructed through challenge (Ozer and Bandura 1990) and are reinforced when outcomes meet with expectations (Shibutani 1955). The various aspects of reciprocal perspective-taking in women's self-defense courses allows the women to arrive at a shared perspective, and it is shared perspectives that allow women

to internalize a new set of norms, altering their definitions of situations as well as their subsequent responses.

Socially-learned Strategies

Self-defense courses, in essence, address all of the stages of social interaction. Women may gain awareness of the potential dangers inherent to certain environmental contexts. They are taught to send assertive verbal and nonverbal messages to others, and they are informed of the verbal strategies that others use to test boundaries and which provide clues to the other's goals in the interaction. Women are also taught, either through modeling or otherwise, the nonverbal cues of potential aggression. Together, these help women learn to more accurately distinguish potentially dangerous situations from benign ones. Next, as previously noted, a preponderance of research shows that taking a women's self-defense course positively affects self-perception of competence and empowerment. Furthermore, the women taking the class often bond together, becoming a new reference group whose perspective is internalized, and of course, the overarching purpose of the class is to provide women with new verbal and physical tools to use in dangerous situations.

Assertiveness training is an important component of a feminist-based self-defense course. Often conceptually located at the center of a continuum between aggressiveness and submissiveness, learning to interact assertively is important for both aggressive and passive individuals because "appropriate conflict assertion, unlike aggression, respects the other person's rights and dignity through the use of nonhostile content and vocal characteristics" (Rakos 1991:15-16). Similarly, unlike submissiveness, the individual also

respects one's own rights and dignity by not simply appeasing others in order to avoid conflict. Assertive communication involves more than verbal communication. It is a learned skill wherein the goal is to achieve a balance between "importance of self and other" (Scheff 1995:2). Where social information processing governs how people interpret and define social situations, assertive communication governs how the generated responses are delivered, thus resulting in more appropriate adjustments by the other with whom the interaction takes place.

The verbal portion of the equation concerns attribution of blame or responsibility, which Agnew (2006) includes as a contributing factor in problematic social interactions. Assertive communication skills provide a means by which people take responsibility for their own emotional state and their feelings for another's behavior, rather than attributing blame or responsibility to the other, which can lead to escalating conflict. In women's self-defense classes, women learn to change interaction patterns through the use of three part statements, where they describe the other person's actions, state their own feelings, and firmly request a change in the other's behavior. This offers an opportunity for perspective-taking and helps the other understand why a certain behavior is objectionable to her. Additionally, assertion requires addressing the main issue and the relationship rather than avoiding it by discussing a third party or other event (Scheff 1995).

The complementary nonverbal half of the equation is similarly important. In addition to speaking firmly, making appropriate eye contact and using purposeful, expansive gestures while not physically retreating or advancing are indicative of assertiveness. In contrast, a submissive individual is likely to give ground, avoid eye

contact or look down frequently, and shrink up, and an aggressive person uses a loud voice, interrupts, may use exaggerated gestures, glare, and approach or encroach upon the personal space of the other.

Knowledge of personal boundaries is also a large component of women's self-defense, and they are conceptualized in two ways. The first, called proxemics, in the communications literature, has to do with the personal space around our bodies. Men and women are socialized to use, to protect, and to take up space differently. For example, men tend to be more territorial than women and tend to turn toward aggression to protect it, whereas women are more likely to defer. Men are also more likely to invade the personal space of women than they are of other men, and more so than women are likely to invade the personal space of other women. The interaction effects of this are that when one person invades the personal space of another, the other adjusts by moving backward, or if in a confined space, by looking up or down (Wood 2001). Therefore, the person who invades the space of the other can influence the other's behavior (Hargie 1981) either intentionally or unintentionally. Because women are socialized to be more accepting of personal space intrusions, it is important for women to be aware of this tendency: "without recognizing the importance of intimate and personal zones, we run the risk of increasing other people's anxiety and significantly decreasing our own ability to react properly to an assault" (Ouellette 1993:5). By instilling an awareness of these zones and the inherent power dynamics, self-defense and assertiveness training may teach women to use them to their advantage.

The second type of personal boundary is verbal and relates to information intrusions. "Men – sometimes playfully, sometimes as harassment or a preface to crime – use access information about a woman to attempt to intrude to some degree on her privacy" (Gardner 1989:52). Gardner (1989) further asserts that women learn to become evasive in providing information while attempting to do so without violating social norms. Many women's self-defense courses discuss boundary intrusions as they relate to assertive communication and a potential attacker's attempts to demean or to manipulate women into unwanted access.

A women's self-defense course which includes both physical technique and assertiveness/verbal boundary setting teaches women to adjust their responses to others in a way that protects and affirms their self-worth, identity and emotions while simultaneously respecting the identity and emotions of the other with whom they are interacting, a process which can ultimately lead to rebuilding positive self-perception. Learning self-defense "changes women's interactional patterns with strangers, even when those interactions do not threaten violence. In this way, self-defense training literally trains women to defend their selves – not only their physical and sexual selves, but their psychological and emotional selves as well" along with improving their relationships with friends and acquaintances (Hollander 2004:217).

Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

This study explores women's self-defense from the perspective of the social interaction

process. I gathered the data by conducting semi-structured interviews with 18 women

who had completed three different women's self-defense program. There were six

women from Program One who volunteered to be interviewed, five participants were

drawn from a university kinesiology department women's self-defense class, and seven

women were recruited from two different classes offered by Program Three, a free

program operated under the auspices of an urban police department. Two teenage girls

volunteered to be interviewed for the study but were turned away because the study was

limited to women 18 years and older. All but one of the interviews took place within one

month after the conclusion of their course and each lasted between 15 and 45 minutes.

I chose each of the three programs for a variety of reasons. Having taken two full

length padded attacker classes and one abbreviated workshop, I knew how adrenal

response conditioning programs operated and I felt it was important, given the vast

amount of research conducted in padded attacker courses, to include Program One for

these reasons. I also took into account that the cost and urban setting of the program

could potentially attract a specific demographic profile, despite the fact that they offer

scholarships to women who do not have the financial means to attend.

When I approached the director of Program One, I disclosed my status as a

graduate of the program, as a graduate student conducting research and as a women's

self-defense instructor, I was invited to attended a graduation and participate in one of the

fights. During the graduation, I was introduced as a program graduate, but later during the debriefing session I was introduced to the women as a researcher. By being a program graduate and by having participated in a "fight," I gained insider status (Rubin and Rubin 2005) prior to recruiting the women for interviews. Additionally, I spoke to all but one of the women from Program One in their own homes where they felt most comfortable which, in addition to their age and education, may be the reasons their narratives are often richer and more insightful.

I chose Program Two because it was easily accessible as a university course, but I did not participate in the course. University programs are also frequently used for research in women's self-defense and I felt including this course would broaden the demographic profile of the interviewees. I introduced myself to the course instructor as a university graduate student and fellow martial artist and women's self-defense instructor, who then permitted me to address her students at the end of the semester to recruit participants. I introduced myself to them the same way, and conducted their interviews at the University. It was much harder to establish rapport with this group because I was not an insider (Rubin and Rubin 2005) with them, despite my student status. This may partly have to do with my being substantially older and because the interviews took place on campus, creating a less inviting and comfortable environment for both myself and for them. Their shorter, less insightful narratives may be due to the aforementioned reasons, their age and maturity, their reasons for taking the class, the course material and/or the actual impact taking the class had on them.

I met the director of Program Three, and some of its instructors, at a women's martial arts camp. Because women are often precluded from enrolling in a self-defense course by insufficient time or money, or by a lack of motivation and available classes (Hollander 2010), having learned that this program, also located in an urban area, was offered for free and in different locations every month, I anticipated that the participant demographics would again differ from the other two programs because two important obstacles to taking a women's self-defense course were removed.

 In fact, interviewees were drawn from classes conducted at two separate locations. In this case, the instructors introduced me as one of their friends and peers, providing me with an insider status of a different sort. I also gained insight into the program by taking two of the classes in the next series. Finally, because of the distances involved, I interviewed the women at two separate locations at or near the site where their class was held, rather than at their homes. The demographics of this group turned out to be the most diverse, as did their narratives.

Ultimately, these program choices led to a broad range of narratives and perspectives provided by a diverse group of women, but there were a few features which I considered. To be included in this study, each course was required to be taught by a female lead instructor because male lead instructors may reinforce gender roles and both men and women have difficulty overcoming their gender socialization. Furthermore, female instructors serve as more empowering role models (Fraser and Russell 2000; Searles and Follansbee 1984). By choosing the aforementioned three diverse women's

self-defense programs, I hoped to achieve a balanced demographic sample that allowed for the possibility of between program comparisons.

I explained the purpose of my research in a face-to-face meeting with the entire class of each program before the end of each course. I advised the women what information I would gather and informed them of any potential risks and benefits, and explained how confidentiality would be maintained. After providing them with this information and answering any questions, I asked those who verbally consented to meet with me for their first interview. Their participation in the study and their responses were entirely voluntary and all the women signed a consent form before being interviewed.

Each interview consisted of a standardized set of main questions and potential questions for clarification. These included: (1) How did you come to take a women's self-defense course? Was there a reason you chose this one in particular? Did you have any concerns or reservations about taking the class? (2) How has taking this course changed the nature of your interactions with others? How has it changed the way you interact with friends? With family? At home? At work? In public spaces? Can you give me an example of each? (3) How has this class affected your perceptions of your personal boundaries? Has it also changed your perceptions of or responses to the boundaries of others? (4) Has this course changed your awareness of your surroundings and/or your perceptions of personal safety? If so, how? (5) I have no further questions for you. Do you have any for me?

Additionally, I asked each of them their age, race, occupation, sexual orientation, education, marital status, children and their personal income. The average age of all the

women interviewed was 36.0, however, the range and average age varied considerably by program. The average of the women from the Program One group was 44.5 years with a range of 33 years, the Program Two students' 23.4 (range 7 years) and the Program Three graduates averaged 37.7 with a range of 37 years.

There was little racial diversity among the Program One graduates. Five of the six identified themselves as white. The sixth claimed Hispanic ethnicity. The Program Three graduates who participated in the study were also not as racially diverse. Five of the seven participants from this program identified as white, and two as biracial (white/Asian and white/Hispanic). Of the three programs, the Program Two students represented the most racial diversity: two identified as white, one as African American, one as Asian, and the fifth as bi-racial white/Hispanic. Overall, 66 percent of the women interviewed identified as white, 16 percent as biracial white and some other race, and African American, Asian, and Hispanic comprised six percent each.

Overall, 67 percent of the women interviewed identified as heterosexual, 22 percent as bisexual, and 11 percent as lesbian, and this did not vary much from program to program. The Program Three graduates represented the greatest diversity in terms of educational attainment, with two women indicating that they had earned an Associate's degree, and one woman, a retired Psychology professor, stating that she had earned a doctorate. The remaining women had achieved either a baccalaureate or other graduate degree. The Program Two women represented the narrowest range: they had either taken the course as seniors and had graduated just before their interview, or were still completing their degrees. The Program One graduates generally represented the highest

average of educational attainment with 67 percent having earned a post-graduate degree. Of the entire 18 women interviewed, however, 33 percent had attained a post-graduate degree, 45 percent had completed a four-year college degree and the remaining 22 percent had completed some college (and were still enrolled).

Of the three groups, only the women who had taken the Program Two course were all single, which is likely to be indicative of their age and present educational status. Two women from the Program One group were married to each other, two others were single and the remaining two were divorced. The Program Three graduates consisted of one woman who was divorced, two who were married, one who was single, another who was engaged and two women who stated they were single but living with opposite sex partners. Only one of the 18 women had children, and they were grown and no longer living at home.

The resulting demographic profile of the 18 women and the variations by program may have something interesting to offer. Program One's basics course is offered at $495, which works out to a cost of slightly more than $20/hour, and the average income of the women who attended the course was $102,300. This average includes one woman who attended the class on scholarship because she was not working at the time. The Program Two course, though the most expensive on an hourly basis (a minimum of $38 per hour of instruction depending on the number of units being carried), also represented the lowest average personal income at $14,700. In comparison, the Program Three graduates claimed personal annual incomes from nothing up to $75,000.

Prior to the interview, each woman signed a consent form advising her of her right to decline to answer any questions or to discontinue the interview, and was cautioned that both interviewer and interviewee may find the experience stressful (Warren 2002) and provided with a counseling number if they became distressed as a result. Some women did voluntarily choose to recount past traumatic events during the course of the interview and may have incurred some psychological discomfort, but Campbell and Adams (2009) discovered that many women may voluntarily disclose such information specifically for therapeutic purposes, to further research, or to help other survivors.

Though my purpose for obtaining participants from three different women's self-defense programs was to hear and present a diverse sampling of perspectives, qualitative interviewing is time consuming and costly. Moreover, my research was intended to be exploratory in nature. For these reasons, I kept the number of interviews from each program low. A further limitation of this study is that these three programs are by no means representative of all the women's self-defense programs available and the demographics – like income and ethnic background – are affected by the area in which the programs are located. Additionally, because women self-selected as participants for the study, those whose interactions were not transformed as a result of having taken the class may have chosen not to have their voice heard. All of these limitations can be addressed in future studies.

All interview transcripts and recordings were held strictly confidential and after transcribing the interviews, I randomly assigned pseudonyms to each of the women to

maintain their anonymity. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed and the responses were coded according to the social interaction process. I looked for patterns related to aggressive, assertive and passive interaction styles and how they might relate to the various aspects of the social interaction process and if the women felt the way they relate to others had changed because of taking a class. The three predominant themes that emerged – situational awareness, perspective-taking and self-perception – guided the analysis that follows.

Chapter 4

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Three major themes emerged from my interviews, and though I use social interaction as the framework for analysis, the interrelationship of these themes became quickly apparent. The first theme is situational awareness. In this section, I describe how the women's conceptualization of situational awareness is one of environment and self in relationship to that environment through the women's own descriptions of how their awareness in this area has changed. In the second section I explain how perspective-taking is an important element of self-defense training and expose the process whereby perspective-taking effects changes in both aggressive and passive responding. The final theme to emerge was the women's new perceptions of self as empowered, capable and competent.

Situational Awareness

Situational awareness is the process of assessing one's surroundings outside of social interaction in order to make predictions and guide behavior (Endsley 1995; Smith and Hancock 1995). It "specifies what must be known to solve a class of problems when interacting with a dynamic environment" (Smith and Hancock 1995:138) and walking is a task requiring situational awareness (Endsley 1995). Although a social situation does not occur until two individuals are co-present (Goffman 1967), the physical context of that interaction influences the behavior of any individuals co-present within it.

Several of the women, when asked how their situational awareness had changed as a result of taking the class, contributed to its conceptualization in terms of women's

self-defense. Sophia (Program Two) described it as "…kind of the big picture…a real

sweeping kind of a scope of where I am…just sort of expand this to really have a sense of

what's around me." For some women it included more than the physical environment and

others moving within it, but also incorporated the awareness of their own external

behaviors (separately from their internal perceptions) that potentially affect their personal

safety:

> I definitely feel it mostly when I'm on the street or when
> I'm going to my car, um, especially if I'm in a deserted
> area or if it's late at night.…I catch myself looking at men
> who try to come at me…'now look around you, know
> where you are, know who's around you,' you know, 'don't
> take for granted this is necessarily what it looks like.'
> (Elizabeth, Program One)

Triggered by public spaces, being isolated and out at night, Elizabeth's conceptualization

of situational awareness encompasses not only the environmental context, but also the

sweeping gaze described by Sophia and an intentional skepticism with regard to potential

risks others pose within the context of the situation. This heightened attention to context

is consistent with Fairchild's (2010) findings that being alone, being out at night, and

being on the street increases women's fear, which suggests that in terms of women's self-

defense situational awareness is activated in what women consider to be high risk

environments:

> I keep an eye on people and, um, to make sure there's
> distance between us and, um, you know, I just look at my
> surroundings to see where, you know, I can go if I needed
> to. (Chloe, Program One)

> …being aware of where things are and much more aware of
> if I see like a police officer on campus or the help boxes…I

try and keep those in my head where those are….(Abigail,
Program Two)

Once activated, it appears that their situational awareness also expands to include access to potential escape routes or others who can help. Abigail (Program Two) explains that mental preparedness was an important aspect of the course for her: "You have to be mentally prepared for any kind of attack…[by going] through the motions in your head…if they attacked me from behind or from the side, what would I do?" Mental preparedness is fundamental to the process situational awareness because perception of the "status, attributes, and dynamics of relevant elements in the environment" must first be synthesized in order to comprehend and predict a situation (Endsley 1995:36).

Some of the women were motivated to take their self-defense course by frightening encounters they had personally experienced, and others were motivated by news of recent assaults on other women they had heard about in the media. Their experiences, however, inform their situational awareness and sense of danger, and although most women are sexually assaulted by someone they know, the fear of being assaulted by a stranger runs contrary to the actual risk of victimization of women versus that of men (Wilcox et al. 2006). Despite the fact that men face higher victimization rates generally, women tend to fear being sexually assaulted by a stranger more than any other criminal act (Wilcox et al. 2006). Though women's self-defense classes typically put considerable effort into deconstructing the "stranger danger" myth, the vast majority of the women interviewed for this study felt safe in their intimate relationships and related situational awareness to what, in some cases, borders on hypervigilance like Sophia's

(Program Three) avoidance of "closed, wooden areas," in environments where the possibility of an assault by an unknown other exists.

> I'm definitely aware when I go into a parking garage. I
> think it's more terrifying and I mean, and I look for where
> my exits are and I definitely check my back seat and, uh,
> when I get into the car I lock the doors….I wouldn't say
> I'm, like, hypervigilant, but I'm definitely aware of what,
> what I would do….(Ella, Program Three)

Ella seems to be trying to convince herself that she's not hypervigilant yet some might argue that checking the back seat of her car is just that. It demonstrates the level of fear with which many women invariably wrestle as they move through their daily lives.

Emma and Abigail (Program Two) discuss their situational awareness similarly:

> I still have to remember, you know, not to let anyone get
> too close to me, because I don't know what they're capable
> of…get too close and all of a sudden they're pulling you
> into their cars. (Emma, Program Two)

> I, like, look behind me, um, make sure nobody's like hiding
> behind my car or make sure there's nothing out of the
> ordinary. (Abigail, Program Two)

Since these particular responses to my question about changes in their situational awareness came predominantly from the women interviewed from Program Two, their age and the course content may be factors influencing their perceptions of safety in public spaces. In contrast, Isabel (Program Two), when asked if her perceptions of personal safety had changed since taking the class, told me she feels "totally safer." Her description of situational awareness seemingly belies this, however:

> I'm way more aware of what's around me…like I'll look
> around me if I like, hear a weird noise, or something, I'd
> just be on my guard…don't let my hands stay in my

pockets in case somebody like grabs me or something.
(Isabel, Program Two)

It could be argued that her situational awareness is what makes her feel an increased sense of personal safety, but her concern with keeping her hands out of her pockets while walking seems contradictory to feelings of safety. Also, all three of the women from Program Two above mentioned they had heard of some frightening encounters on campus in the months prior to taking their class, potentially influencing their situational awareness in the present and Ella's sense of fear was impacted by several recent encounters, ones that prompted her to take a self-defense class in the first place.

Perspectives are the sum of a person's experiences and their beliefs about themselves, situations and the behavior of others. In each case, the women bring with them certain internalized assumptions and generalizations from a variety of sources, and their situational awareness is influenced by their perspectives (Endsley 1995) which help them attend to specific cues and provide for expectations as to what will or won't happen. This is important in that women are exposed to media images and news reports that emphasize stranger assaults over those perpetrated by known others. Such information, in addition to a dearth of success stories and their own personal experiences with victimization, also contributes to the perspectives women bring into potentially threatening situations.

The inaccurate perspectives created by these types of input can become problematic. Endsley (1995) explains that situational awareness becomes more difficult, and therefore more stressful, as the complexity of a situation increases. Inaccurate or missing information or lack of task-related skills can cause women to make incorrect

situational assessments and exercise right-decision-wrong-situation – or vice-versa –

agency. Certainly this is true for women who are less likely to have acquired the physical

self-defense and verbal assertiveness skills in order to enact self-protective behavior in

potentially dangerous situations. It may very well be that some of the women I

interviewed had not yet had enough challenges to their predictions based on old

perspectives of lurking strangers waiting to pounce on unsuspecting females in order to

internalize new ones. Again, this isn't because assaults are never perpetrated by unknown

others, but it is to say that the odds don't favor it, while the behaviors alone may

contribute to the definition of a situation as threatening when it is, in fact, not.

For some of the women, however, their perspectives had already been sufficiently

transformed to allow them to focus less intently on potential stranger assaults. Alexis

(Program One) describes her situational awareness as something less effortful, something

which she attributes to having internalized what she learned in her class:

> I was thinking about our experience traveling and I'm
> realizing that I think I was less on a conscious level aware,
> like I was spending really less conscious level
> energy…because I feel like it's so ingrained now….I'm not
> so worried about getting into a situation that I can't get
> myself out of….

Alexis' response demonstrates the connection of reduced fear and improved self-

efficacy to situational awareness. Endsley (1995:45) describes the lower level of

conscious awareness mentioned by Alexis as "automaticity," which is a result of the

repeated refinement of perspectives created by the ongoing comparison of the predictions

made by old perspectives and actual positive or negative results of those predictions.

This definition of "automaticity" is similar to that of intuition as subconscious perception,

and like the challenges to old perspectives, it is possible that most of the women's

situational awareness had not yet developed to the level of intuitive awareness. For some

women their fear of "stranger danger," combined with their situational awareness, caused

them to restrict or alter their accustomed routes, again despite the fact that women's self-

defense classes, especially those which subscribe to a feminist philosophy, clearly

suggest that restricting one's own freedom of movement is a matter of personal choice.

However, harboring the perspectives created by the experience of frightening situations

during their lives, both Ella (Program Three), who took the class on the recommendation

of both her therapist and a police officer, and Chloe (Program One), whose therapist also

suggested she take a women's self-defense class, typify how fear combined with

situational awareness encourage accommodation to routine:

> There's this way to get out of my building that's through
> the back way, you go through like this hallway into, there's
> a big trash room, with a big elevator so when people move
> in…and you go down this hallway and like one of the
> stores has their, like, their, like back storage area, and it
> also, and leads out into, like there's a door that you have to
> have a special, like, um, pass key to get into, but um, once
> you're out of there, it's sort of where the parking garage
> elevators are to go down to the parking garage, and I just
> decided that it's too unsafe for me to go that way. (Ella,
> Program Three)

> I never put myself in situations where, um, something
> could happen to me like….I do a lot of walking, but I don't
> walk up this hill (referring to a hiking trail located near our
> interview site), just because of the fact there aren't a lot of
> people around – not by myself. (Chloe, Program One)

Keeping in mind Fairchild's (2010) findings regarding situational context, the

perspectives in place for these two women are deeply internalized given the residential

and daytime contexts. However, their schemas may take longer to overcome, given that

Ella's frightening encounter took place in her apartment building, and that Chloe, now a

senior citizen, has internalized her fears of victimization since childhood. Their

assessment of potential danger and their choices to restrict or accommodate their

routines, however, are also likely related to their feelings of self-efficacy. The amount of

threat one perceives in any given environment is relative to one's self-perceptions of

competence to cope with potentially dangerous situations (Bandura 1989).

Olivia (Program One), a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, and who, as it turned

out, had repeated the Program One course several times, exhibits some sadness with

respect to reality of her new perspectives:

> …I feel like I know too much now about human interaction
> and part of that's great and part of that's also, like, "Oh,
> man, this is a bit of a drag," because there's more to going
> out and walking down the street."…I feel very much like
> now that I know so much about what could happen that
> perhaps I'm a little more hypervigilant than the average
> bear, and so part of me is, "Oh, that's a drag." Then again,
> the other part is like, "Well, actually, maybe it's a good
> thing."

Olivia indicates how she has internalized and synthesized her previous experiences with

sexual harassment and victimization with the knowledge and skills she has acquired by

taking women's self-defense. As a result, her situational awareness seems grounded in a

somewhat bittersweet reality.

When asked about changes to her situational awareness and perceptions of

personal safety, Samantha (Program Three), illustrated that perspectives can also be

challenged in both directions. Describing how her schema has shifted slightly from

feelings of safety and security to a greater awareness of potential danger, Samantha

(Program Three) told me:

> In a way it's affected me in a, in a manner I don't
> like….it's such a friendly place, and the people talk to each
> other just like they're people, not like they're
> strangers….and I felt that was contaminated a little bit. I
> was walking down the street and happy to be here and
> saying hello to people…and now I think, well, maybe I
> shouldn't do that so easily. Maybe I'm being, uh, naïve,
> and not careful enough….and I don't want to feel that way,
> really….That was the suggestion of the class. That's what it
> seemed like to me, that I'm inviting someone to be
> friendlier than they should be…. [I feel] a little less safe
> because of things I heard in class. I've been very fortunate
> in my life in terms of being a recipient of violence….things
> I heard in class, and stories people told about being
> accosted….I started to think, well, maybe this is more
> prevalent than I realized and maybe I should be more
> cautious.

Where Olivia's perspectives and situational awareness were built on numerous

victimization experiences, Samantha's comments indicate that her perspectives were a

result of a lack of experience with victimization and violence.

The women's descriptions of situational awareness reveal its interrelatedness to

internalized perspectives and perceptions of personal safety, and they suggest that context

contributes to the definition of a situation as threatening or benign, thereby affecting the

social interaction process. Along with her perception of her own coping efficacy,

situational context affects a woman's interpretation of any social encounter within that

context and ultimately, in addition to the socially-learned strategies available to her,

influences her choice of response (Fairchild 2010).

Situational awareness prompts behavior oriented towards achieving a specific goal (Smith and Hancock 1995). For women in this study, that goal is personal safety in what they deem as high-risk environments, and their awareness has less to do with avoidance strategies than it does with risk assessment and mental preparedness. Having set the stage then, it is time to bring in the social actors, because in addition to situational awareness, perspective-taking emerged as a significant theme involved in changing the way that women interact with others in their daily lives as a result of taking a women's self-defense class.

Perspective-taking

Perspective-taking is necessary to the process of interaction in that it serves as a way to understand the feelings and behavior of others (Mead 1934). The process of perspective-taking is incorporated into women's self-defense courses predominantly in four respects and in varying degrees depending on course content. First, women take on the perspective of self as observer when they watch other women in the course engage with an attacker, either a mock assailant or an imagined one in classes where the women practice skills in other ways. Second, women take the perspective of the attacker in order to decode the social cues that will enable them to enact a revised response. This dimension of perspective taking is similar to that of playing chess (Puddephatt 2003), where one player attempts to take the role of the opponent in order to discern what their opponent's next move might be. Third, women may take the role of a past self in a traumatic encounter in order to gain mastery over the experience as a rehabilitative tool. Finally, the women all take on the role of potential victim as they defend themselves

against padded attackers or imagined ones in other ways. Perspective-taking may also be fostered through the formal or informal sharing of experiences among the women. These dimensions of perspective-taking affected the women's experiences in a number of different ways.

The women indicated how their classes affected the accuracy of their perspective-taking ability and how it balanced the power in some of their relationships. Many also took the role of past self in order to master previous victimization experiences. Their description of their experiences also provided insight into how taking a women's self-defense course reduces aggression and engenders supportive behaviors through perspective-taking. An environment of trust, security and intimacy can develop in a women's self-defense course (Stevenson 2006), and because perspective-taking develops and improves through interaction over time in intimate relationships (Cast 2004), it suggests that interaction with a specific reference group, such as that in a women's self-defense course, helps its members develop a fuller understanding of how specific others who want to harm them are likely to respond to their behavior. This understanding is, of course, also supported by dissemination of accurate information in classes with respect to the strategies and behaviors employed by potential assailants.

Indeed, Abigail (Program Two) claims to have come away with one of the most basic changes needed for this: "I did gain a lot of insight into how women view themselves, and how men view themselves as well." But it was mostly in the area of boundary setting where the answers illustrated how fundamental the process of perspective-taking is to enacting changes to the perspectives that inform the social

interaction process. This later translates into an awareness of and an ability to more accurately assess the behavioral expectations that others have of them, as is illustrated by these excerpts:

> I don't consider myself, you know, a very boundary pushing person, but I feel like taking the class made me more aware of ways in which I wasn't aware of other people's boundaries. (Grace, Program Three)
>
> I think I became a little bit more sensitive to the fact that just because I like to talk about it and tell you everything because that's how I deal with it, other people, that's not how they deal with it, and…and if they don't want to talk about it, I shouldn't push them and say, "Well, it works for me, so it has to work for you." (Mia, Program Three)

Consistent with Fraser and Russell's (2000) observations of greater boundary setting skills and improved relationships, Grace relates how she has gained empathy regarding the emotional boundaries of others, as has Mia, who clearly describes how she has applied this new perspective in her personal relationships, an approach congruent with a finding of Weitlauf et al. (2000) who found that what women learn in self-defense courses transforms women in ways unrelated to self-defense.

Perspective-taking results in the interpretation of the actions of others based on shared meaning, and because shared meaning is developed through interaction over time, people who become socially isolated due to anger and aggressiveness or due to the shame, guilt or self-blame that is associated with victimization may easily come to misinterpret or ignore the social cues of others. Taking the role of other students in a women's self-defense class, however, breaks that feeling of isolation by coming to shared meanings, as Chloe (Program One) explained, "It's helped me to know that other people

were in the same situation I was in. It helped me to know, it was like a great support

group…and I needed that because I was really alone with this." This perspective-taking

of fellow students, or what Stevenson (2006) refers to as "mutual aid," is facilitated by

the sharing of experiences through the exchange of narratives at various times throughout

many women's self-defense classes. This type of perspective-taking is also supported in

the classes when the group engages with the woman who is fighting the padded attacker

or kicking a shield during class.

Breaking the isolation, internalizing the perspective of a new reference group and

perspective-taking in order to arrive at new shared meanings can also translate to

attempts to be clearer in communicating those symbols or in one's attempts to understand

miscommunicated symbols as Elizabeth (Program One) explains:

> I think I'm a little bit more clear about what I want and
> what my intentions are, and I take a little more
> responsibility to put that out, um, in order to be
> understood….It occurs to me that, I guess, maybe because
> of the verbal self-defense part that we did where there were
> times when we were attacked – and he kind of really wasn't
> attacking us…where we overreacted to and there were
> times when it escalated and you never knew where things
> were going and it made me mindful of, I think on, or more
> aware that I can take the initiative at the beginning of the
> interaction to set the tone….I think there's less ambiguity
> or lack of confidence in approaching people. I'm a little
> more direct, I guess. Yeah, and if I get a weird vibe from
> people, I think, in response to that I might be less likely to
> blame myself for that….I think I would be a little more sure
> that I had communicated clearly and now what I was
> getting back was not appropriate, or wasn't or didn't
> understand me or something went wrong in the
> communication, but it's not that I wasn't clear in the
> beginning.

Noting how she felt that some of them had overreacted during their "fights," Elizabeth highlights how learned maladaptive responses to perceived threats can escalate an interaction. By being clear with her intentions and taking the initiative at the beginning of a social interaction, Elizabeth has learned to make a conscious choice to change the dynamics of potentially threatening situations. Her desire to take responsibility for the quality of her communication and the initiative in interactions is a consequence of assertion training (Kidder et al. 1983).

Cast (2004:305) asserts, with reference to Stets (1997) that "even though women may understand their spouse's perspective more thoroughly, their low status in interaction (due to their gender) may cause them to resort to more aggressive tactics in order to gain status. These tactics may be one way in which women seek power in interaction," a fact recognized by Mia (Program Two) who told me, "It's like a big part of it is because I'm a woman, people don't, especially with men or even other women, they don't see me as threatening, you know?" This relationship of power to perspective-taking is also important in that the person with the higher status or greater power in an interaction is less likely to feel the need to take the role of the other, ultimately reducing their capacity for empathy (Schwalbe 1988).

Several of the women indicated that they felt that taking the women's self-defense course increased their sense of personal power, thereby causing them to feel more equal in their interactions with others.

> I definitely feel, like, a status increase as a social being in
> the world…like I have higher status than I did when I went
> in there…. (Elizabeth, Program One)

> Talking about a co-worker: …[she is] 20 years older than me and she's single and I'm married, so as soon as she met me she had this chip on her shoulder, because I'm married and she's single and she wants to be married. She just started treating me badly right away…so after the Program Three class I found I was able to , to like stand up to her and now we're actually, kind of, friends….but yeah, I've established myself with her more as an equal in the past couple of weeks. (Eve, Program Three)

Elizabeth (Program One) explains that taking the class caused her to realize "the shadow sides of our own personalities and the way in which we can manipulate each other verbally and how come, where that can come from in a person." The ability to manipulate others and situations in interaction is a function of perspective-taking as a "strategy for exercising power" (Schwalbe 1988:419). The manipulations used by potential assailants are often included in the litany of women's self-defense classes as a way to heighten women's awareness in their future interactions.

As a counterpoint to the equality Elizabeth (Program One) and Eve (Program Three) feel that taking their class has helped them to achieve in certain relationships, Olivia (Program One) explains how her present significant other reacted to the harassing behavior of a mutual male acquaintance, highlighting how gendered, structural power differentially affects men's ability to role-take and understand why women perceive certain behaviors as inappropriate:

> It took me a while to get the man that I'm dating to see that what [my other male acquaintance] did was completely inappropriate….then once I finally got him to get it, he was stuck on the whole, "well, you're background is this so you took it this way."

Her dating partner, who also knew this male acquaintance to which Olivia is referring, struggled with taking Olivia's role for several weeks before eventually arranging for a mediation session between Olivia and her harasser. Eventually Olivia's male acquaintance came to understand how his friend's behavior had impacted her, though for Olivia, it was still "kind of puzzling that he didn't get the piece around somebody threatening me."

Several of the women voluntarily related their experiences of past victimization to me and described for me how taking the role of their past selves helped them to work through those traumatic events. Among them were Chloe and Olivia. Chloe (Program One) was referred to her women's self-defense course by her psychologist who suggested that it would help her release some of her anger. Both women explained how the process affected them:

> I have a hard time with the verbal. I had a hard time saying, "No, no, no," and they had to push me to do that, and I think one of the reasons was because, um, when I was assaulted as a child, I was made to be very quiet, because the fear of God was put into me….I couldn't get the anger out before at all. I couldn't, and this, my ability to kick this person and just kick and kick and kick just really felt good to me, because I was kicking my assailant, you know, and it just felt so good….It's like the only means I've ever had to get back and the assault was when I was eight so, you know, I'm sixty-five now….You know, that's a long time to carry that and not be able to do something. (Chloe, Program One)

> I felt like it really helped purge years and years of held in fear in my body. (Olivia, Program One)

Although she originally took the class only to support her wife, Madison (Program One), who had been with a group of friends at a park when she was verbally

assaulted by a man who approached her as she was getting into her car, also found that

the experience of taking the role of her past self during her fights to be cathartic. She

described her feelings about the incident and how the class helped her work through

them:

> I at least had the clarity to get in my car, lock the windows
> and I just took off, you know, and but, it made me
> feel…very small….So, in the role, in the custom fight, I,
> um, was able to stand up for myself and…I realized I could
> really take care of myself.

Elizabeth (Program One) spoke of her experience in the class as a forum for

working through trauma and fear, but also provided a description of how fear can affect

the ability to define a situation or to assess threat appropriately:

> …It kind of took me into a place I didn't really want to go
> to because I was frightened, and so…in a good way it
> freaked me out. It kind of made me confront something that
> I didn't want to confront, and ultimately I did because
> that's where I went but there was a part of me that was
> really reluctant to break this sort of cocoon that I was in…
> There was an incident that I had to kind of cathartically get
> out [and] I remember leaving feeling like that was a fine,
> appropriate thing to do and that's the case, but I also felt
> like I started yelling I was going to kill this guy and what
> he did to me was not something that killing would be an
> appropriate response to!

Trauma may inhibit the ability to role-take (Mills and Kleinman 1988), so taking

the role of past selves allowed Chloe, Olivia, Madison, and Elizabeth, all from Program

One, to engage in "mastery experiences" that allowed them to regain their sense of

control over that event in accordance with Ozer and Bandura (1990). Agnew (2006),

among others, explains that lack of empathy, or affective perspective-taking, is a

contributing factor in aggressive behavior. The process of perspective-taking is also a key

to bridging the gap between aggressive and passive coping strategies. Several of the women specifically commented on their own predisposition toward aggression, and commented that their experiences in the class changed the way they interacted with others for the better.

Weitlauf, et al. (2000) found that women exhibited greater self-control and were less hostile after taking a women's self-defense course. A consequence of improved perspective-taking ability is reduced aggression and increased respect for the needs and rights of others, which explains one mechanism by which women's self-defense classes can reduce aggression, in addition to providing them with new verbal and behavioral tools. Noting her own tendency to be "pushy" and aggressive several times during her interview, Emily (Program One) commented on her improved perspective-taking ability and increased awareness of the rights and feelings of others: "I'm way more self-aware, um, not only of my own boundaries but of other people's boundaries, too." Her capacity for perspective-taking increased her ability to help a friend set boundaries, too. Referring to a male friend of hers, she explains:

> He needs to stick up for himself, like, he needs a Program One class. Even to me he needs to tell me 'no' sometimes, so I try to ask him, like, are you sure…are you sure you want to drive now? I know it's far, you know, if not, we can meet up next week. Are you sure you're okay with that? I'm always just trying to make sure that he's okay with it, that he's not doing something to try and please me or that doesn't work out for him. So for him, I try to be more aware.

The impact on Emily (Program One) extended into several facets of her life, including work and family. It has made her a better manager by helping her to respect her

employees' personal time by not giving them last minute assignments and her family has

benefitted from her increased empathy, as well:

> So even with my parents, like where we would, before
> Program One, we would all just argue, and I would bully,
> um, the argument and sometimes use guilt even, or anger or
> fear or whatever it was, to get my point across. I think
> now…I try to be more respectful and say, 'okay, I
> understand where you're coming from, let's talk about it,
> maybe we need to seek out a third party's help….I try to be
> more respectful, more aware versus just bullying my way
> into what I want, you know, or what I think should happen.

Emily (Program One) goes on to explain how taking the role of the defender and

the observer along with listening to the narratives of the other women in the class

affected her and how the experience acted as a mechanism towards increasing her

empathy:

> You go through the experience with so many different,
> diverse women you never would have come into contact
> with had you not done something like that….to watch all
> these other women and, you know, battle their own issues,
> and you're there supporting them, um, it's just really
> incredible….I think I'm still most impressed by is when
> somebody, you know, battles their inner mugger. When
> you get to do the custom fight and somebody gets to battle
> their inner mugger I, like, break down and cry every time,
> just like, not only are they so in touch with themselves,
> they know what that inner mugger is, but they can stand up
> in front of their fears and say, "This is what it is,: which is
> hard, because it's what I'm most scared of….It's just such a
> powerful experience to watch somebody go through….I
> didn't realize that, um, you know, women, or even men,
> who have a problem with abuse in their life, like, how later
> on it was going to impact them….It's just ironic that I
> never applied anything I was saying, like even stuff about
> my niece – like how going through not having her mother
> there, the fear of abandonment, you know?

Emily's reference to battling their "inner mugger" can be thought of as mind action directed towards thwarting internalized negative self-perceptions. Insofar as negative self-perceptions created by internalized gender oppression and previous victimization experiences affect how situations are defined and determine subsequent behavior (Mead 1934), taking on the role of the other women battling their "internal mugger" brought to light unrealized past incidents of victimization and helped create a powerful empathetic connection to her previously unacknowledged self of the past.

Natalie (Program Two) vacillated between telling me how confident and passive she was and comments like "there goes the jugular, there goes the nose, there goes the temples…poke in the eye," "I'm not going to get aggressive unless someone, someone attacks me or insults me personally," and "if you're cruel to me I may roll my eyes at you and snap at you, but lay a finger on me and you'll be in one piece." Insofar as this use of language indicates a propensity for aggression, Natalie was not affected as deeply by taking the course as the other women interviewed. This may be due to different course content, or it may be an indicator of maturity. Exhibiting a lack of self-awareness, which is a necessary component for perspective-taking ability (Gendolla and Wicklund 2009), Natalie (Program Two) stated that she realized that anyone can be a victim, but her narrative of the perspective she gained is devoid of perspective-taking: and yet, she also seemed inherently to understand why this is so:

> Because just being a woman and learning about what
> happens to women, the stories about what happens to
> women, it gave me more confidence with the students
> sharing stories and the teacher sharing stories, um, knowing
> these moves and knowing that just by knowing these vital
> points…I think that it would have made more of an impact

on someone who's been through sexual assault [or] who's been raped, or something….Because I feel like in order to get something out of it, I have to be able to, to make a connection, so I'll just really sit there and resonate with it.

The contrasting perspectives illustrated by Emily (Program One) and Natalie (Program Two) parallel Scully's (1988) findings related to the perspective-taking abilities of convicted rapists, where those who denied they had committed an act of rape lacked self-awareness and were completely unable to take the role of the other. Similarly, Emily (Program One), demonstrated self-awareness and having admitted to her own aggressiveness, found the ability to role-take, whereas Natalie (Program Two), who denied her own propensity for aggression by telling me she was "more passive" and "usually mellow, easy going," indicated that she somehow was unable to connect with the material in the class.

Numerous sources cite the importance of perspective-taking in interaction to arriving at shared meaning. The more people come to understand the perspective of another, the more likely they are to behave in supportive ways and less disruptively (Cast 2004). Therefore, by extension, more generally supportive behavior of others can be created in the taking of a women's self-defense class, and in fact, this behavior is encouraged by some programs as a show of solidarity. Several of the women specifically mention bystander behavior and situations where they intervened as a show of support for other women in potentially dangerous situations. Lily (Program Three) uses her new perspective to help a friend through a difficult and potentially dangerous situation. Talking about a friend of hers who had been raped and beaten in college, she says,

>She moved out here with nobody and, uh, anyways, she
>calls me every Friday night and sometimes it's exhausting.
>I talk to her because she's in a domestic violence situation
>and though he doesn't hit her, he makes her feel terrible
>and does nothing to empower her. Just knowing her
>background it's a strain to the heart, um, and sometimes I
>don't want to pick up the phone Friday night…[and it made
>me] realize how many women there are like that.

It is clear that the perspective-taking aspects of participating in a women's self-defense are powerful. Taking the perspectives of the other and of self impacted their relationships with their friends and families, and through their narratives they described the positive impact this and other aspects of the class had on their interactions at work and in public spaces. From the perspective of both aggressor and victim, "when habitualized patterns of interaction prove inadequate for guiding joint acts to successful completion, conduct must be realigned through perspective-taking" (Schwalbe 1988:426), and in this way, it appears that women's self-defense classes have the propensity for effecting positive changes in social interaction. Through perspective-taking the women developed perceptions of themselves as worth defending, powerful and competent. Thus, having considered perspective-taking, as well as the context of the situation separately from the social actors within it, this analysis turns to perceptions of self, which includes self-efficacy and its component parts as they relate to social interaction.

Perceptions of Self

Whereas situational awareness was conceptualized as an external focus on the environment, self-efficacy, or the perception of one's own competence, is the internal impetus that directs a person's behavior both with others as well as within the physical

environment. It is made up of the related processes of motivation, emotion, and cognition (Bandura 1989), and it is informed by previous knowledge and experiences and perceptions of one's own ability to meet the expectations of performing a given task (Smith and Hancock 1995).

Of the women interviewed, the majority of them spoke of themselves in a manner that illustrated they had found a new, empowered self. Their awareness of their own physical presence, their confidence and their perceptions of self-efficacy had improved as a result of having participated in the course. This finding agrees with numerous studies including Ozer and Bandura (1990), but it was a desire for improving their perceptions of self that also provided the women with the motivation to take the course. Relating the negative self-perceptions that brought many of them to enroll in the class, Elizabeth (Program One) illustrates how her lack of self-efficacy was causing her to cope with potentially dangerous situations using avoidance strategies:

> …I definitely felt a lack of confidence in myself physically and, uh, I didn't feel like I knew what to do if I were attacked, and I thought, "that's a problem," because I could be attacked, and it took me a long time to get to the point where I was willing to consider that it could actually happen. You know, I haven't had a serious attack but I've had some not so serious attacks and, um, I just always sort of stuck my head in the sand and hoped it would never happen. I don't know why, but for no particular reason, I just became more aware that I was sort of letting myself down by taking that attitude.

Women's self-perceptions of their competence to protect themselves appear to be rooted, in their physical skills. Contrary to Hollander's (2010) findings, 13 of the 18 women in this study told me they took their course to learn physical self-defense skills,

and four of them because they wanted to learn both verbal and physical self-defense

skills, not an unreasonable desire in light of the inverse relationship of proficiency in

physical self-defense to perceived vulnerability (Ozer and Bandura 1990). Two of the

women explain this relationship:

> I feel much more comfortable, you know, being alone. Like
> if I'm going for a walk. Before I'd be like really nervous,
> sometimes especially with it being kind of darker. Now I
> feel more comfortable, um, knowing that, okay, if
> somebody approached me like I could defend myself….
> (Abigail, Program Two)

> I have more confidence now, because I feel like if – God
> forbid – if I'm attacked, at least in my muscle memory I
> know what to do. I have some, some clue how to respond to
> that situation even though it might not be perfect….now I
> feel like I have a fighting chance….I feel much more
> confident that if somebody grabbed me I would have some
> instinct to shout…I would be able to kick effectively…I
> can respond in some way and that's a really powerful
> feeling for me. (Elizabeth, Program One)

The relationship of gaining new physical defense skills to their feelings of self-

efficacy is also in accordance with the greater sense of freedom and mobility suggested

by Ozer and Bandura's (1990) findings. For Elizabeth (Program One), learning the

physical techniques was not only the "gateway" to her feelings of self-efficacy, though:

> …growing up a woman in this culture I think you are, um,
> acquire a sense of yourself that doesn't include your
> physicality very well, especially when it comes to using
> your body to protect yourself in an aggressive way.

Elizabeth clearly understands how gender socialization is an obstacle with respect

to women defending themselves physically. Women who have been socialized to feel

uncomfortable with athleticism and violence, learning physical self-defense skills

changes their perceptions of the way it feels to be inside their bodies (McCaughey 1997)

and given the link between physical embodiment and internal affective states, perceptions

of self-efficacy would necessarily be positively affected by a new sense of entitled

physicality. Clearly, taking the course did change the way the women felt both internally

and the way they projected themselves externally, and though they each use different

language to describe these changes in their bearing, it is clear that they have become

aware of the transformation:

> I generally after taking the self-defense class just had
> a…feeling that I had the right to be there and take up space.
> (Elizabeth, Program One)
>
> I guess I kind of walk with my head held higher. (Emma,
> Program Two)
>
> I think I emit a different energy now….I just walk and talk
> differently. I'm kind of more aware of myself. (Lily,
> Program Three)

Though nearly all the women interviewed for this study took the course to learn

physical self-defense skills, clearly their perceptions of self as competent agents in

control of their interactions improved overall. Recalling the numerous examples earlier in

the analysis of situational awareness that related to fears of stranger assaults and the risks

the women perceived in their environments, some of the women's descriptions of their

newly acquired positive self-perceptions were somewhat contradictory, which may

indicate that their perspectives are still in a state of flux. For example, Emma (Program

Two), who not only stated that she doesn't let people get close to her because before you

know it, you can "get too close and all of a sudden they're pulling you into their cars,"

describes how, in addition to "walking with [her] head held higher," her self-perceptions

have changed as a result of taking her class:

> Just walking around, just anywhere I feel, I guess, more
> confident….I'm more comfortable with someone sitting
> next to me, um, especially a male….[and] just being closer
> to other people….like I said, the class did make me feel, I
> guess, more bad ass….(Emma, Program Two)

Just as situational awareness is affected by continuing challenges to perspectives,

so is self-efficacy (Bandura 1989). The contradiction of the women's fear of stranger

assaults versus the perceptions of their ability to defend themselves against such assaults

may simply be related to differences in the rate at which they process different aspects of

their perspectives. Because people tend to self-select into activities and environments in

which they feel competent and capable (Bandura 1989; Ozer and Bandura 1990), the

following statements illustrate more clearly the contradictory nature of self-efficacy,

situational awareness and the sense of danger related to stranger assaults. Although they

both feel more confident, they each qualify their statements by noting that they avoid

being foolhardy:

> Overall, I feel more confident, you know, especially like
> being around my neighborhood. I walk a lot more places
> now than I ever did before. I still try to not be out late at
> night by myself, I mean, I'm not stupid (laughs). (Emily,
> Program One)

> I feel more confident now….If I go to the mall at night or
> whatever and I'm walking back to the car, um, well, before
> I never even would really go to the mall at night and be by
> myself and walk to the car, and now I feel a little more
> comfortable doing that. You know, I'm still safe and park
> as close as I can or near one of those call things or
> whatever…. (Chloe, Program One)

Their use of qualifiers in this case, however, also demonstrates a move toward more rational risk assessment in their situational awareness as a result of their newly acquired physical self-defense skills. With regard to their personal interactions with others, their improved perceptions of self-efficacy also translated into a willingness to set firmer verbal boundaries, again consistent with Ozer and Bandura's (1990) findings.

> I think that it's that I'm firmer in saying what it is that I want. Uh, because before I would kind of, I had a tendency to say things in a more of a wishy-washy manner, and I'm better at being more direct like just saying yes or no. (Hailey, Program Three)

> I think I just feel very confident and very grounded with that knowledge, you know, that if someone does step over a line that I can just look them in the eye and very calmly say it one time and then if they continue to, uh, be either clueless or aggressive, to know that, no, you do have to say it, you more authoritatively…. (Sophia, Program Three)

In general, the women believed themselves to be more confident with regard to verbal boundary setting, their physical bearing, and their ability to physically defend themselves if it became necessary, and for the most part, felt a greater sense of personal safety.

> I feel more secure as a person…. (Elizabeth, Program One)

> I do feel more confident around men now, and…not as afraid as before. I feel confident now that if anything happened, you know, if someone crossed my boundaries that I would not fold and not do anything. (Chloe, Program One)

> I think that in some ways maybe I come across as a little more assertive….it's turned out I have a little more strength…. I'm much more observant….I think I have emotionally, a little more space, or value for myself….I'm kind of more aware of myself. (Lily, Program Three)

While women's self-defense classes are designed around teaching new, active coping strategies for their personal safety, it is the process of learning those social skills that empowers women to enact them. Elizabeth (Program One) summarizes how the changes in self-perception and physical bearing brought about through the process affect social interaction generally:

> … I left there feeling more like, you know, I stood taller, I had more confidence, I felt stronger, more capable, and I think that communicates among people, you know, as animals register each other's weaknesses and strengths.
> (Elizabeth, Program One)

Clearly, what women learn in self-defense classes changes the dynamics of social interaction from multiple points in the cycle, and the process of learning and mastering new verbal and physical strategies transforms their interactions with others, their perceptions of themselves, and their relationship to the world around them. In this way, social interaction is a system that can be affected at multiple insertion points. By providing the women with new knowledge and new skills, they can construct updated perspectives that allow them to exert greater agency through self-efficacy (Bandura 1989), perspective-taking (Schwalbe 1988), and situational awareness (Smith and Hancock 1995).

Chapter 5

DISCUSSION

This study explored how women's social interactions are affected after taking a women's self-defense course. Clearly, taking a women's self-defense course improved the women's daily lives and the personal transformations they experienced extended into their interactions with family, friends, at work, and in public spaces. Learning affected the social interaction process with respect to their situational awareness, their perspective-taking ability, and their perceptions of self as physically and emotionally competent and capable of defending themselves. In combination with their newly learned verbal and physical skills, these three elements of the social interaction process are keys to enacting appropriate responses in situations involving personal safety because they factor into the definition of any situation. In this way, taking a women's self-defense course positively affects women's social interactions by making them more aware of their surroundings with respect to their personal safety, by generating greater empathy for others, and by engendering more positive perceptions of themselves.

All of these, along with newly acquired verbal and physical skills, serve to promote mutual respect and to create more positive and assertive social interactions for women and the others with whom they engage in their daily lives. Previous studies have demonstrated the positive impact of taking a self-defense course on women's positive self-perceptions as they relate to enhanced self-efficacy and self-esteem, reduced avoidance coping, anxiety and fear, and greater assertiveness (Brecklin 2008). A previous study has also asserted reduced hostility and aggressiveness in women after taking a self-

defense course (Weitlauf et al. 2000). Unique to this study is the aspect of perspective-taking, a finding which suggests that the taking of multiple perspectives during a women's self-defense course is an important factor in counteracting maladaptive aggressive and avoidant threat responses.

This perspective-taking experience appears to directly affect women in two ways. First, it allows women with a tendency to react aggressively in fearful situations to ameliorate their responses. Second, it offers an opportunity for women who have been victimized to re-take their role in a traumatic situation in order to master it. In this way it is easy to imagine women's self-defense as a potential rehabilitative tool for women who employ coping strategies at both ends of the response continuum. Furthermore, the perspective-taking that takes place in a women's self-defense course clearly demonstrates the potential for enhancing those skills in aggressive responders who are deficient in empathy.

Perspective-taking had the effect of restoring the power balance in many of the women's relationships and encouraging more supportive behaviors. Survivor narratives played a large part in increasing the propensity for affective perspective-taking among women who tended to be more aggressive in their responses to others. The process of perspective-taking, then, is an important contribution of self-defense training not only to survivors, but also to women more generally in light of the connection of perspective-taking to power (Schwalbe 1988) and to aggressive and violent behavior (Agnew 2006).

Awareness of the situational context contributes to a woman's definition of a social encounter within it as either threatening or benign (Fairchild 2010), but previous

experiences also shape the relative effort given to situational awareness. The context in which previous threatening encounters occurred further directs situational awareness in similar environments. Being aware of potential avenues for escape, available options for assistance from others, and vigilance allows women to assess and manage risk within certain environmental contexts. This allos them to exercise greater agency in their lives with respect to accommodating their routines for their personal safety.

Situational awareness is, however, moderated by perceptions of self as competent and able to manage a threatening situation. "People who believe they can exercise control over potential threats do not conjure up apprehensive cognitions and, hence, are not perturbed by them. But those who believe they cannot manage threats experience high levels of anxiety arousal. They tend to dwell on their coping deficiencies and view many aspects of their environment as hazardous" (Ozer and Bandura 1990:473). The women frequently referred to their augmented positive perceptions of self as powerful, in control, and capable of resistance within the context of their situational awareness, clearly establishing the link that provides women with the motivation and courage to enact assertive responses in response to threatening situations.

Strengths and limitations

Drawing interview subjects from three distinct women's self-defense programs allowed for a greater range of responses from women across a diverse range of experiences and lifestyles, providing narratives along a broad spectrum of social interactions. Because the interviews were conducted within a month of completing their courses, the women only had a limited time span in which to enact their newly acquired

strategies and skills, and not all of them felt they had encountered an opportunity that required using them. Furthermore, because perspectives must be challenged in order to be transformed and internalized, the short time frame between course completion and the interview may not have been sufficient.

Suggestions for future research and pedagogy

The ability for women's self-defense courses to provide therapeutic benefits for survivors of sexual assault has been well demonstrated in numerous studies, but the potential for women's self-defense programs to also extend therapeutic and rehabilitative benefits to aggressive and violent women needs further study. The impact of mutual affective perspective-taking within the women's self-defense environment suggests that it can also benefit women who respond to threat with aggression and violence, and that there is a great deal they can learn from training with survivors. The results further suggest that purposefully incorporating more affective perspective-taking opportunities in women's self-defense courses can also increase the benefits for survivors. Specifically, narratives have been shown to have therapeutic benefits for the women who tell them (Campbell and Adams 2009; Cermele 2010), but the findings of this study indicated they can also provide affective perspective-taking opportunities for other women, including those who respond inappropriately to threatening situations with aggression and violence.

However, the ability of women's self-defense courses to stimulate affective perspective-taking may not be equal in all programs. In fact, during the course of the interviews, it became apparent that the program that most influenced affective perspective-taking was Program One which includes scenario-based adrenal response

training with a padded attacker. That is not to say that the other two programs did not instill increased perspective-taking ability, but the effect did not seem as powerful. This suggests a need for additional research into the different components of women's self-defense curricula and their effect on the various aspects of perspective-taking.

APPENDIX A

Human Subjects Review

Protocol Number 10-11- _ _ _

(Assigned by Office of Research)

**Request for Review by the Sacramento State
Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects** (Revised 09/2010)

Submit 11 copies of this form and any attachments to the Office of Research Administration,
Hornet Bookstore, Suite 3400, mail code 6111. Please **type** your responses or use a word processor.
Handwritten forms will be returned without review.

Project Title:
Women's Self-Defense and Social Interaction

Funding Agency (if any):
N/A

Name(s) and affiliation(s) of Researchers: *Silke Schulz, CSUS, Department of Sociology*

Mailing address (or Department and campus mail code): *Kevin Wehr, Department of Sociology,* 6005

916.261.9444. *indomitable.woman.warrior@gmail.com*   *May 1, 2011*
Telephone and e-mail address for researcher   Anticipated starting date

Kevin Wehr   *kwehr@csus.edu*
Name of faculty sponsor (for student research)   E-mail address of sponsor

1.   Who will participate in this research as subjects (e.g., how many people, from what source, using what criteria for inclusion or exclusion)? How will you recruit their

participation (e.g., what inducements, if any, will be offered)? How will you avoid any conflict of interest as a researcher?

The subjects of this study will be women 18 years and older who enroll in a women's self-defense course and who consent to being interviewed within one month after its concluding session. There are no inducements to participate in this research study.

Three different courses will be chosen and will be required to adhere to the philosophical points stipulated by National Coalition Against Sexual Assault (NCASA) guidelines for choosing a women's self-defense course. All of the courses chosen incorporate a verbal boundary setting and assertiveness component.

The courses chosen for this study include:
- *Program One: this course was chosen because it incorporates adrenal stress response training using a padded attacker. Furthermore, the expense of taking this course expands the socioeconomic variables available for the study*
- *Program Two: this university course is also included because it, too, enhances the socioeconomic variables available for the study.*
- *Program Three: this program was chosen because it is free to all women and is a program sponsored by an urban police department.*

A minimum of five to ten women from each course will be interviewed, and I will travel as needed to complete the interviews. The women will be selected on the bases of their participation in the chosen courses and their willingness to participate in the study, and because they will self-select into the study, none will be excluded.

As an objective researcher, I have no stake in the outcome of this study and have no conflict of interest with any of the instructors of the self-defense courses.

2. How will informed consent be obtained from the subjects? Attach a copy of the consent form you will use. If a signed written consent will not be obtained, explain what you will do instead and why. (See Appendix C in *Policies and Procedures* for examples of consent forms, an example of an assent form for children, and a list of consent form requirements. Also see the section on *Informed Consent* in *Policies and Procedures*.)

With the consent of the instructor(s), I will meet with the students during one of the classes. At that time, I will explain the interview and research process. During this meeting I will ask any volunteers to meet with me after class where I will ask them to sign a consent form and establish a time and place for the first interview. I will

also inform them of any potential risks and benefits and how confidentiality will be maintained prior to their first interview.

A copy of the consent form to be used is attached hereto.

3.   How will the subjects' rights to privacy and safety be protected? (See the section on *Level of Risk* in *Policies and Procedures*. For online surveys, also answer the checklist questions at the end of Appendix B in *Policies and Procedures*.)

Participation in the program is voluntary. All interview transcripts and recordings will be held strictly confidential. Any person or group named will be assigned a fictitious name in records and field notes. After the research project is completed, all records will be destroyed, but until that time they will be stored in a secure location.

4.   Summarize the study's purpose, design, and procedures. (Do not attach lengthy grant proposals, etc.)

The purpose of this study is to find out how taking a self-defense course affects or transforms the nature of women's social interactions with others. The subjects who consent will be interviewed within one month after completing the course. The interviews, which may last up to an hour, will be semi-structured and semi-structured and all information to be provided will be completely voluntary on the part of the subject.

Given the overlapping risk factors for both criminal victimization and offending, as well as the evidence that martial arts training can be therapeutic and reduce aggression and fear and that self-defense classes can help increase assertiveness and reduce victimization in women, this study hopes to establish that self-defense training for women can be as therapeutic for women who tend towards aggressive or violent responses in fearful situations as those who interact with others passively. This study will rely on the content analysis of women's voluntary self-reports of their social interactions with others in order to determine their style of interaction and how it was transformed by taking the women's self-defense course.

From the content analysis of a broader research question, Hollander (2004) found, among other things, that taking a self-defense class affected the social interactions of women from two distinct perspectives: interactions with strangers and interactions with acquaintances with respect to awareness of personal safety and their ability to be assertive. All interviews will begin with a standardized set of demographic questions which will include, age, race, occupation, sexual orientation, education, marital status, children in the home and income. Though not

intended to serve specifically as causal variables, there is great potential for discovering specific patterns between the demographic data and the transformation of social interaction of the women interviewed.

5.   Describe the content of any tests, questionnaires, interviews, etc. in the research. Attach copies of the questions. What risk of discomfort or harm, if any, is involved in their use?

The questions may be found in Appendix I, which is attached hereto. The nature of qualitative interviewing does not lend itself well to standardization, but the standardized questions will serve as the foundation for all interviews. Follow-up questions may be required for clarification of concepts.

Qualitative interviewing is necessarily guided by the subject's responses, and because it is semi-structured and probative in nature, both interviewer and interviewee may find the experience stressful (Warren 2002). There is some potential that some of the women may have enrolled in the course due to a history of victimization, and because some may choose to recall past traumatic events, they may incur some psychological discomfort. However, the women who will be interviewed will be informed that they may decline to answer any question and they will be provided with a toll free number for counseling should they feel they need it. For these reasons, this study will place participants at minimal risk.

6.   Describe any physical procedures in the research. What risk of discomfort or harm, if any, is involved in their use? (The committee will seek review and recommendation from a qualified on-campus medical professional for any medical procedures.)

There are no physical procedures involved in this research.

7.   Describe any equipment or instruments and any drugs or pharmaceuticals that will be used in the research. What risk of discomfort or harm, if any, is involved in their use? (The committee will seek review and recommendation from a qualified on-campus medical professional for the use of any drugs or pharmaceuticals.)

The interviews will be recorded using a battery-operated digital voice recorder that is approximately 1"x4" in size. There is no other equipment or instruments, drugs or pharmaceuticals involved.

8.   Taking all aspects of this research into consideration, do you consider the study to

be "exempt," "no risk," "minimal risk," or "at risk?" Explain why. (See the section on *Level of Risk* in *Policies and Procedures*.)

Qualitative interviewing is necessarily guided by the subject's responses, and because it is semi-structured and probative in nature, both interviewer and interviewee may find the experience stressful (Warren 2002). There is some potential that some of the women may have enrolled in the course due to a history of victimization, and because some may choose to recall past traumatic events, they may incur some psychological discomfort. However, the women who will be interviewed will be informed that they may decline to answer any question. For these reasons, this study will place participants at minimal risk.

For protocols approved as "at risk", the researcher is required to file a quarterly report with the committee that describes the recruiting of subjects, progress on the research, interactions with the sponsor, and any adverse occurrences or changes in approved procedures. In addition, the committee reserves the right to monitor "at risk" research as it deems appropriate.

_____   _____

Signature of Researcher   Date

_____   _____

Signature of Faculty Sponsor   Date
(for student research)

Signature of your department or division chair confirms that he or she has had an opportunity to see your human subjects application.

_____   _____

Signature of Department/Division Chair   Date

Questions about the application procedures for human subjects approval may be directed to the Office of Research Administration, (916) 278-7565, or to any member of the committee. Questions about how to minimize risks should be directed to a committee member. Applicants are encouraged to contact a committee member whose professional field most closely corresponds to that of the researcher. See www.csus.edu/research/humansubjects/ for a list of committee members and the current year's due dates for submitting an application.

APPENDIX B

Consent Form

Consent to Participate in Research

You are being asked to participate in research which will be conducted by Silke Schulz, a graduate student in Sociology at California State University, Sacramento. The study will investigate the relationship of taking a women's self-defense course and the nature of social interactions with others.

First, you will be asked to complete a short demographic survey. Then, you will be asked to describe the nature or characteristics of your social interactions with others after completing your women's self-defense course in an semi-structured interview that may take up to an hour of your time. All information you provide is completely voluntary.

During the interview process, you may gain additional insight into factors that affect the way you interact with others or you may not derive any personal benefit from participating in this research. You may, however, experience some psychological discomfort depending upon your personal experiences. If you feel you need counseling, you may call 1-800-799-SAFE toll free. Because some of the interview questions may seem personal, and you should feel free to decline to answer any question or to discontinue the interview at any time. The interview will be tape recorded with your consent. You may request at any time during the course of this study to listen to any parts of your interview, and to request that any portion, or the entire interview, be stricken from the study. These requests may be done at any time during and/or after the interview, up until the submission of my final report. It is hoped that your narratives will benefit all women and the use of women's self-defense courses as broad-based intervention programs for women who are at risk for both violent offending as well as victimization.

All interview audio recordings and transcripts will be held strictly confidential and all names used in the final report will be changed. With your permission, the interviews will be audio taped. Those tapes will be destroyed as soon as the discussions have been transcribed, and in any event no later than one year after they were made. Until that time, they will be stored in a secure location.

You will not receive any compensation for participating in this study.

If you have any questions about this research, you may contact Silke Schulz at (916) 261-9444 or by e-mail at indomitable.woman.warrior@gmail.com. If necessary, you may also contact my thesis advisor, Kevin Wehr, at kwehr@csus.edu or (916) 278-4277.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. Your signature below indicates that you have read this page and agree to participate in this research project.

_____   _____
Signature   Date

Your signature below indicates your agreement to have the interview audio taped.

_____
Signature

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