

Factors Influencing Women's Achievement in Taekwondo Competition

I had the sense of well-being which comes from regular, strenuous exercise. I developed an agility in my movements and a resistance to fatigue and stress...I began to feel like a person to be reckoned with, strong and competent. I began to feel powerful, emotionally and physically.¹

—Linda Pearson

Introduction

The words “women” and “sport” when mentioned together elicit very mixed reactions and yield intriguing and complex questions. Historically, the roles, opportunities, and privileges for women in sports have been minimal, if not non-existent. Although Taekwondo became a sanctioned competitive sport for men during the World Championship in 1973, it was not until 1987 that women gained the privilege to compete at the same level. Research on psychological profiles of athletes and non-athletes have demonstrated that there are differences in many personality traits between the two groups. Among the traits that appear more frequently in athletes than non-athletes are independence, dominance, extroversion, self-sufficiency, assertiveness, competitiveness, and aggression.² Society's characterization of sports has traditionally been linked to the language of masculinity, and the combative nature of Taekwondo sparring has made it even more difficult for society to frame the discussion of sports in a manner inclusive of female athletes. The close association of those “masculine traits” to athletic achievement serves to further alienate women from the shaping and discussion of sports in general. Academic investigations of many aspects of sports psychology

¹ Linda Pearson, author of “Learning to Be a Survivor: The Liberating Art of Taekwondo” cited in *Women and Sport: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, D. Margaret Costa Ed., Human Kinetics (Champaign, IL: 1994), page 255.

² Cox, Richard H., *Sports Psychology: Concepts and Applications*, Wm. C. Brown Publishers (Dubuque: 1990), pp. 30-31.

have concentrated on the use of male subjects, providing results that are inadequate to fully describe the experiences of women in athletic situations.

Gender Disparity and Sports Achievement

Despite a lack of specific studies devoted to martial arts, other studies have analyzed sports in terms that can be applied to understand and analyze women's participation and subsequent achievement in Taekwondo competition. It is thought that aggression plays a significant role in athletic performance. Recent studies describing the nature of aggression contributing to competitive success revealed that the levels of aggression between male and female athletes are comparable, but differed with regards to the mechanisms that provoke and legitimize it.

Numerous studies have investigated the different ways in which men and women display aggression in sports and revealed little difference in aggression responses between the two sexes. However, the studies also suggested that these responses are dependent upon the circumstances of provocation. There are no differences in the display of aggression between males and females in situations where aggressive behavior is deemed appropriate, suggesting that the differences between the sexes are due to the situation and not to innate qualities. On the other hand, there is a decreased tendency for women to display aggression in unprovoked circumstances where aggressive behavior is considered less acceptable.

In addition, sports psychologists recognize the concept of self-efficacy as an important factor in determining women's achievements in sports. Women respond differently to feedback that is ambiguous or unclear, thus affecting their self-appraisal. Other factors contributing to differences in male and female aggression can be explained in terms of the social learning theory, which emphasizes the impact of positive and negative reinforcement of aggressive behavior during childhood and the consequences of these experiences. Investigations into the differences between male and female aggression can ultimately shed light onto understanding

women's achievements in Taekwondo. It is hoped that this increased focus and understanding will, in turn, increase women's participation in sports such as Taekwondo sparring .

The role of aggression is further magnified in Taekwondo sparring because of its combative nature. In a competition setting athletes come into close physical contact with each other, resulting in confrontational exchange and possible direct physical injury. The link of aggression with athletic performance is even more relevant in Taekwondo sparring where athletes are driven to deliver kicks and punches with a considerable degree of force to their opponent. Society frequently associates such forceful and combative displays as natural, biologically determined male behavior. If we accept aggression as a trait contributing to athletic performance, then the assumption of biologically endowed male aggression would give men an advantage over women in Taekwondo. Therefore, recent scholarship has sought to disprove this imperative.

Biology

The role of sex hormones in influencing aggressive behavior has often been cited as a biological justification superior athletic performance of males. While animal studies have suggested that injections of male androgen hormones could induce aggressive behavior in animals of both sexes, human studies conducted by Money and Erhardt on individuals with hermaphroditic syndromes cast doubt on the appropriateness of extrapolating animal research onto people. The human studies involved genetically female individuals who exhibited abnormally high levels of male hormones. Although the elevated levels of male hormones caused profound anatomical changes such as the development of male appearing genitalia, they had no effect on aggressive tendencies when compared to hormonally balanced female subjects. These findings forced Money and Erhardt to conclude that as far as humans were concerned, "This lack of predisposition to aggressive attack suggests that aggressiveness, per se, is the wrong variable on which to expect gender dimorphic behavior, despite popular

stereotypes to the contrary.” (The Sporting Woman, pp.59) The biological basis of increased male aggressive behavior is therefore unsubstantiated and inadequate to explain observed differences in the athletic performance of men and women.

Learned Behaviors: The Social Learning Theory Argument

A more convincing argument is that men and women are ultimately socialized along different paths, which results in a final disparity of aggressive tendencies. This social learning theory predicts that certain behaviors, such as aggression, can be amplified through modeling, imitation and positive reinforcement. Proponents of the theory argue that individuals behave aggressively because they have learned to do so, and not because of biological instinct. This theory could be used to explore the ways through which aggressive behavior is acquired. The theory predicts “that any individual who is exposed to aggressive models and who is positively reinforced for demonstrating those aggressive behaviors will probably act aggressively.” (cf., Bandura, 1965) Observed differences in male and female aggression can thus be explained by the divergent role modeling forces experienced during childhood socialization.

Bandura, one of the many proponents of this theory, demonstrates in his studies the impact of social learning on aggression. In these studies, children observed an adult model acting either aggressively or nonaggressively toward a doll and then were given the opportunity to play with the doll. The results showed that children who watched the aggressive model exhibited more aggression toward the doll than children who observed the passive model. Bandura’s study also tested the effectiveness of reinforcement in aggressive behavior by equipping the doll with eyes that lit up whenever it was punched. (Sport Psychology, pp.281) Children behaved more aggressively when the doll seemed to provide positive reinforcement for aggressive acts. Bandura’s study strongly correlates social learning theory with the development and augmentation of aggressive behavior.

Although research on the social learning theory and its impact on aggressive behavior

was conducted in non-athletic settings, the results are easily applicable to an athletic context.

Diane Gill observes:

Clearly aggressive behaviors are prevalent in sports and are reinforced in both direct and indirect ways (e.g., young players often are coached to engage in varied aggressive behaviors; top athletes display aggressive behaviors and serve as models). Moreover, it is just as clear that these reinforcements and inducements for aggressive behavior in sports are stronger for males than for females.³

Gill's explanation amplifies the role sport socialization plays in the disparity of aggressive behavior between male and female athletes. Sport socialization for males is continuous with appropriate sex-role socialization. Traits like independence, competitiveness, and aggression, which are identified as advantageous athletic characteristics, are also congruent with what society deems as socially appropriate male attributes. On the other hand, sport socialization for females is contrary to many of the popularly held myths of appropriate female social behavior, and the advantageous athletic characteristics are thus not as frequently encouraged.

Competitive sport situations encourage some aggressive behaviors for both males and females, but parents and coaches are more likely to encourage aggressive play among boys than girls. Thus any observed gender influences on aggressive behavior in sports likely are related to the immediate situation and previous social experiences of the participants rather than to underlying biologically based sex differences.⁴

While studies have shown that females are equally likely to exhibit aggression as males,

³ Gill, Diane L., "Psychological Perspectives on Women in Sport and Exercise," article in *Women and Sport: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, D. Margaret Costa ed., Human Kinetics (Champaign, IL: 1994), pp.255.

⁴ Ibid, pp.255.

females have a tendency to “display aggression only in situations which make aggressive behavior an acceptable and legitimate situational response for females”. (The Sporting Woman, pp.59)

Behaviors that are viewed as less sex-appropriate for females, such as aggression, are allowed to be displayed only in specific situations. Socialization has played the major role in defining the scope of what situations constitute a legitimate arena for aggressive display in females. Athletic context aside, social learning has historically taught women to view aggression as a primarily male trait, yet situational cues appear highly influential. Situational variables are the basis by which women judge the legitimacy of aggressive display. Frodi (1977), in his survey of the literature, confirmed that there was insufficient support for the belief that males are naturally more aggressive than females. Again, Gill writes:

Rather, gender differences are inconsistent and related to other factors such as justification, sex of the instigator, and situational cues. In a more recent meta-analysis, Eagley and Steffin (1986) concluded that males are somewhat more aggressive than females on average, but added that sex differences are inconsistent and related to methodological aspects of the studies, including type of aggressive behavior and perceived consequences. Most current explanations of aggressive behavior emphasize learning and social situational factors rather than biological sex differences.⁵

A woman's response to situational factors as defined by social learning determines the legitimacy of an aggressive response. Susan Birrell further investigated women's response by manipulating the situational cues toward settings that are more given to aggressive display, revealing that women possess the same capacity for aggression as do men.

Although males demonstrate more aggression than females in *unprovoked* situations, there are no sex differences in aggressive behavior in *provoked*

⁵ Ibid, pp.255.

situations. This finding strongly suggests that while females choose not to act aggressively in neutral situations, they interpret aggression as an appropriate and justifiable response to provocation.⁶

Birrell asserts that women can exhibit the same levels or frequency of aggression as men if they evaluate the situational cues as appropriate and legitimate circumstances for aggressive display. The sporting arena could be perceived as a circumstance in which women could legitimately exhibit traits that are demanded by high-level competitive sport participation such as dominance, competitiveness and aggression, without being confronted with masculine stereotypes. Despite the intimate link between competitive sports and aggression, socially legitimate aggressive responses in sports does not apply or justify aggression in other non-sporting social contexts. Birrell observed in 1983, "Aggression in sport is not truly comparable to aggression in other social settings, because it is both legal and normative behavior, that is, it is an acceptable and expected feature of that particular social situation."

Aggression and Taekwondo

In competitive sports such as Taekwondo, where aggression is prevalent and reinforced in both males and females, the propensity for female athletes to display aggression is amplified. The legitimization of female aggression further magnified by the encouragement of coaches, female role models and family members is consequential in that it maximizes athletic potential. Socialization of female athletes to subdue aggressive tendencies may be reversed when females become highly involved in sports. The sporting context provides a relief from the confining social constraints placed on women's behavior by encouraging and providing a space for the amplification and legitimization of otherwise discouraged traits. This may account for the suggestion that female athletes are equally as aggressive as male athletes because "they see the situation as permitting females to behave aggressively" and that they have been socialized

⁶ Birrell, Susan, "The Psychological Dimensions of Female Athletic Participation" cited in *The Sporting Woman*, Boutilier, Mary A. Ed., Human Kinetics Publishers (Champaign, IL:1983), page 57.

along the same lines as males.

Taekwondo competition encourages athletes to focus on forceful kicks and strikes to an opponent's scoring zones. The emphasis placed on points being rewarded when a technique is powerfully and accurately delivered can be considered a legitimate cause for exhibiting aggressive behavior. Because of Taekwondo's combative nature, athletes are able to freely express their aggressive tendencies. Female athletes in particular, are allowed to legitimize stereotypic male behaviors such as aggression and direct it in a manner conducive to enhancing athletic performance. Women who excel at Taekwondo competition may have benefited from a type of social learning in which aggressive behavior was encouraged and the traditional limitations placed on women were overturned. Female athletes would then be less contained by typical sex-role socialization and are thus able to excel to their full potential. Therefore, it is necessary to recognize the importance of sport socialization and situational legitimacy when evaluating the potential and achievement of female athletes.

Self-Confidence

Extensive psychological studies have addressed the issue of competent performance and achievement. One theory in particular explores achievement in terms of "an individual's belief that he or she is competent and can succeed at a particular task." Bandura termed this notion *self-efficacy* and suggested that achievement levels can be influenced by one's own assessment of confidence. Bandura's theory proposes that self-efficacy is "fundamental to competent performance" and that an increase in self-efficacy will naturally bolster an increase in self-confidence. The level of self-efficacy also determines whether an individual will confront or avoid an achievement situation.

Although Bandura's theory is limited to the general discipline of psychology, its underlying concepts can be applied to sport situations and explain possible factors in Taekwondo achievement. When applied to women athletes, Bandura's concept of self-efficacy is

related to self-confidence and self-perception. Confidence grows from having or observing successful experiences. Self-perception of women martial artists can be substantially affected by the way society judges the appropriateness of their activity. A particular subset of society including immediate friends, coaches, and family members prove to be particularly influential in an athlete's assessment of self-worth. Together, the improvement of women's achievement in Taekwondo revolves around increasing a female athlete's sense of self-efficacy by redefining social legitimacy and constructing a sport in which women can feel confident and welcomed as active participants.

Bandura understood that self-confidence grows with the completion of each successful experience. The growing popularity of Taekwondo combined with the increase in officially sanctioned arenas for competitive participation contributes to an overall increase in the opportunities for women to engage in successful, confidence building experiences. Even observing examples of success from role models can influence a person's level of confidence. These role models can play an integral role in the socialization of acceptable avenues of pursuit, by actively encouraging or passively demonstrating the legitimacy of the endeavor. Conversely, observing examples of failure can act to diminish a person's confidence in the appropriateness of the activity, or the potential success of the outcome. Cox identified the quality and quantity of feedback as critical in assembling a sense of self-confidence. Females provided with clear feedback regarding their performance will exhibit as much self confidence as men. However, if the feedback is unclear and ambiguous, women tend to have lower opinions of their abilities and to respond with lower levels of self-confidence than men.⁷ Athletic scholarship has revealed that women's self-confidence is adversely affected by several variables that are gender specific and situational in nature.

In her review of the self-confidence literature, Lenney (1977) concluded that gender differences in confidence are more likely to occur in achievement situations that (a) involve tasks perceived as masculine, (b)

provide only ambiguous feedback or ability information, and (c) emphasize social comparison evaluation...Most of the earlier research used tasks traditionally seen as masculine. When tasks considered appropriate for females were used, gender differences typically disappear...Lenney's research confirmed that clear evaluation guidelines reduced gender differences in self-confidence.⁸

Lenney (1977) affirmed the equality of men and women in terms of self-confidence, but clearly a female athlete's perception of self can be impacted by society's judgment of the appropriateness of the activity for women. When applied to activities such as Taekwondo sparring, society's association of martial arts with masculinity can negatively affect women's self-perception of their ability to excel. Combined with a lack of clear feedback or encouragement, society's negative impression of women's participation in Taekwondo can seriously compromise their self-confidence.

Conclusion

Taekwondo has already taken great strides in legitimizing women's participation by adopting competitive regulations that encourage the reliance on a skill set that downplay the brutality and violence that society normally attributes to combative sports. The best examples of Taekwondo sparring place an emphasis on skill, agility, and speed in favor of the application of brute force. In addition, in the process of developing competitive rules, Taekwondo has fostered an environment more conducive to displaying traits that men and women share. The point system in Taekwondo sparring rewards skillful delivery of techniques in favor of an indiscriminate and uncontrolled assault. The sparring arena operates under rules that enhance women's self-perception of their ability to perform and achieve under the same criteria as men.

In the last few decades, women athletes have gained social acceptance as legitimate participants in a setting once associated only with masculinity. Recent scholarship has led

⁸ Gill, Diane L., "Psychological Perspectives on Women in Sport and Exercise," article in *Women and Sport: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, D. Margaret Costa ed., Human Kinetics (Champaign, IL: 1994), pp. 265.

psychologists to redefine the mechanisms of aggression to be inclusive of women athletes and challenge society to accept sport as a valid context for their aggressive behavior. Taekwondo has been reshaped to promote a gender neutral skill set in which both men and women can equally apply and realize their abilities. The sanction of Taekwondo into the 2000 Olympic Games represents an international acknowledgment of the progress it has made to be inclusive of women participants.

Bibliography

Boutilier, Mary A., *The Sporting Woman*, Human Kinetics Publishers (Champaign: 1983)

Costa, D. Margaret, *Women and Sport: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Human Kinetics Publishers (Champaign: 1994)

Cox, Richard H., *Sport Psychology: Concepts and Applications*, Wm. C. Brown Publishers (Dubuque: 1980)

Hargreaves, David J. ed., *The Psychology of Sex Roles*, Hemisphere Publishing Corporation (New York: 1987)

Lenskyj, Helen, *Women, Sport and Physical Activity: Research and Bibliography*, Minister of Supply and Services (Canada: 1988)

Oglesby, Carole A., *Women and Sport: From Myth to Reality*, Lea & Febiger (Philadelphia: 1978)

Parkhouse, Bonnie L., *Women Who Win: Exercising Your Rights in Sport*, Prentice-Hall Inc. (Englewood Cliffs: 1980)