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Martha E. Thompson

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Martha E. Thompson¹

Abstract

The purpose of self-defense training is to expand people's options, yet it is often framed as a solely physical, and limiting, response to violence. I draw on my own experience as a self-defense instructor and that of others in the self-defense movement to argue that an empowerment approach to self-defense training contributes to the anti-violence movement in multiple ways: providing a pathway to increase women's and girls' safety and their potential for becoming powerful and effective social change agents right now, providing an informed and embodied understanding of violence, and offering comprehensive options to recognize, prevent, and interrupt violence.

Keywords

anti-violence movement, empowerment, self-defense training

Over 40 years ago, Pascalé, Moon, and Tanner (1970) stressed the importance of women and girls learning self-defense for their own safety and for developing their full potential. Indeed, self-defense training was considered in the 1970s to be integral to stopping rape and ending men's societal power over women (Matthews, 1994; Searles & Berger, 1987). However, as government and social service agencies responded in the 1980s to feminist demands for rape victim services, social service professionals replaced feminist activists on the frontlines of anti-rape work (Martin, 2005; Matthews, 1994), shifting the work from "stopping rape to managing rape," and thus gradually marginalizing self-defense training in the movement (Matthews, 1994; Searles & Berger, 1987). At the same time, in response to the anti-rape movement bringing rape into public consciousness, police and martial artists, who had physical

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skills and knowledge but not necessarily a feminist perspective, began to offer women's self-defense programs—suggesting, perhaps, that feminist self-defense training is indistinguishable from other types of self-defense training. The failure to differentiate police and traditional martial arts self-defense programs from feminist or empowering self-defense training limits the ability of feminist self-defense organizations to be an integral part of the anti-violence movement. To date, feminist self-defense training continues to be misunderstood, and opponents argue that while self-defense may be useful to individual women, it still holds women responsible for stopping rape (see Filipovic, 2008).

Feminist research and commentary have addressed the challenges and rewards of self-defense training, providing insight into common themes within and across self-defense systems (Higginbotham, 2006; Kidder, Boell, & Moyer, 1983; Madden & Sokol, 1994, 1997; McCaughey, 1997; National Coalition Against Sexual Assault [NCASA], n.d.; Snortland, 2001; Stone, 2010). Scholars have documented how feminist self-defense contextualizes violence, avoids blaming women for victimization, enhances women's freedom, promotes self-worth, and provides opportunities for women and girls to talk about and reflect on their life experiences (Cermele, 2010; De Welde, 2003; Madden & Sokol, 1994; McCaughey, 1997; Senn, 2011). Despite this body of research, many feminist scholars, funding agencies, and people involved with gender violence as professionals remain skeptical of self-defense training. I believe that this skepticism stems in part from the lack of understanding of what distinguishes empowering self-defense training from other types of self-defense.

The purpose of this essay is to describe an *empowerment approach* to teaching self-defense. I draw upon my own observations and experiences as a self-defense instructor, conversations with 29 self-defense instructors associated with IMPACT International and the National Women's Martial Arts Federation (NWMAF), an examination of eight self-defense instructor certification documents from both organizations, and self-defense stories and experiences published on self-defense websites and Facebook pages. I argue that empowering self-defense training is distinct from other types of self-defense practice, noting four major themes that emerge in empowering self-defense training: placing violence in a social context, holding perpetrators responsible for violence, centering embodiment, and offering a comprehensive self-defense toolbox. My goal is to persuade activists, scholars, and practitioners to expand their understanding of self-defense, and to integrate *empowering self-defense training* fully into the anti-violence movement.

Violence in a Social Context

Images of rape abound in television and film; stories of rape make news headlines, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (2010) estimates that a forcible rape occurs every 6 minutes. An empowering self-defense course acknowledges the realities of rape while establishing rape as a social issue, not an individual misfortune or responsibility. Both IMPACT International and NWMAF emphasize the social roots of violence (IMPACT International, 2011; NWMAF, 2010). Underlying this understanding that violence is socially produced is the reality that people do not have equal access to

resources, opportunities, and power. These inequalities create a complex web of privilege and oppression that is socially justified as natural and inevitable.

Within an empowerment approach, self-defense instructors reinforce the idea that violence is a social issue, not an individual problem, by creating opportunities for class participants to know that they are not alone in their experiences. Some instructors accomplish this by sharing statistics or their own stories, while other instructors create space for participants to share their personal stories. For many people, being part of a supportive group is transformative. Danuta (2012) said, “[My self-defense course] connected me spiritually with all the other women in the group and gave me courage, a sense of belonging and empowerment.”

While creating connections among class participants is a key component of an empowering self-defense program, so is addressing diversity in individual and group experience, particularly with respect to grounding violence in a social, rather than an individual, context. IMPACT International and NWMFAF highlight the importance of recognizing ways in which gender violence intersects with other systems of violence and oppression, resulting in differences in experiences of violence for individuals based on gender, race, class, sexuality, age, national origin, and ability (IMPACT International, 2011; O’Brien, Thompson, & Lanoue, n.d.). Applicants for NWMFAF certification are encouraged to refer to materials that support teaching across cultures (Trembath, 2008), and are required to reflect upon their experiences in teaching a diversity of students and how they strive to expand their students’ understandings of varied ways people are targeted.

The Accountability of Perpetrators, Not Victims

Because victims of rape and sexual assault are commonly blamed for the violence they experience, self-defense instructors are diligent in giving women and girls options for safety, while holding perpetrators responsible for violence and supporting decisions each woman has made for her survival. Following NCASA (n.d.) guidelines, NWMFAF clearly states its position on perpetrators being responsible for violence:

Women do not ask for, cause, invite, or deserve to be assaulted. Women and men sometimes exercise poor judgment about safety behavior, but that does not make them responsible for the attack. Attackers are responsible for their attacks and their use of violence to overpower and abuse another human being. (Gregory, Johnson Van Wright, & Wanamaker, n.d., p. 3)

Creating a nonjudgmental classroom climate is critical to challenging victim blaming. IMPACT International addresses the importance of creating a nonjudgmental learning environment:

IMPACT instructors foster an atmosphere conducive to learning by conveying personal warmth, setting a positive tone, and facilitating group cohesion and dynamics while normalizing students’ responses, acknowledging diversity, and valuing all emotional responses without judgment. (IMPACT International, 2011, p. 1)

Self-defense instructors note that it is critical to clarify that individuals' feelings of responsibility for the violence perpetrated against them, whether from not knowing how to respond to violence, or even wishing one had done something differently, do not mean that responsibility lies with victims rather than perpetrators. In teaching self-defense, instructors clarify that self-defense instruction can offer new skills that students may not have had during a previous assault. Furthermore, instructors can acknowledge that regretting what happened, or even regretting one's own actions, does not mean that one was responsible for the assault. One instructor mentioned that distinguishing regret and blame gives people the opportunity to experience self-determination and agency: "I talk about there being a difference between regret and blame. When we take away regret, we lose credibility. There are things we may regret. Women want to have agency—this is behind some of what is self-blame."

In fact, women who have been raped often report that taking a self-defense course helped them release feelings of self-blame and find hope because, once they acquired self-defense skills, they recognized that they had not previously had the tools to defend themselves but now they do. A self-defense student reflected on her past and future:

I often look back to that day and think, what could I have done differently? Maybe the right answer is nothing. Simply because I am here to look back. I will never know. What I do know is that [my self-defense course] has handed me a priceless toolbox of options for the future. That's all that matters. I have a future. (Anonymous, 2012)

Centrality of Embodiment

The centrality of physical movement and tools in feminist self-defense courses is based on an understanding that when living in a violent society, everyone—regardless of their relationship to power—incorporates to varying degrees the presence and potential of violence into their sense of self, their feelings, and their bodies. For women and girls, embodied vulnerability may be a result of gender expectations that limit their physical activity and heighten attention to their appearance.

Empowering self-defense training is rooted in an understanding that many women have been told repeatedly that men are physically superior, and if a man is committed to rape, he will be successful regardless of the tools she has. Finding the power in one's body and learning physical self-defense belies what women have been told about men's invincibility. Therefore, it is critical that self-defense training increases women's ability to resist rape and sexual assault. In its simplest form, that means self-defense instructors teach effective physical self-defense and create opportunities for practice. Empowering self-defense training means a focus on the centrality of the physical body. When women learn how to use strong parts of their bodies (e.g., elbows, knees, feet) to strike targets (e.g., eyes, nose, groin) that are vulnerable on anyone, regardless of height, body mass, or strength, they dismantle ideas about men's invincibility and challenge the inevitability of rape.

For women dissociated from their bodies, the physical movement in self-defense training gives them opportunities to transform the vulnerability they may have embodied as a result of assault, and connect with their bodies in a powerful way. Comments

from instructors underscore their understanding of the ways in which women's bodies are affected by assault, and how self-defense can shift these effects in a fundamentally corporeal way:

Self-defense gives people some of those pieces that they can't get anywhere else. Self-defense gets you moving through some of what is residual in the body—you are unlikely to get it somewhere else unless you are working with someone in physiologically based therapy.

[When you've been assaulted,] the physical is very critical. Self-defense is a way to get your full self back.

The centrality of embodiment persists beyond self-defense courses. Women who have had self-defense training and are later attacked often say their bodies knew what to do. For instance, 2 years after she took a self-defense course, Megan (2011) was attacked on her way home from school:

I remembered everything I was taught and just acted. I got in a lot of kicks. A woman on the second floor of an apartment saw him grab me and immediately called the police. Before I knew it the guy was cuffed and in the back of the squad car. He's looking at 10 years for aggravated assault with a weapon (the cop found a knife and a rope in his coat). IMPACT just may have saved my life.

A Comprehensive Self-Defense Toolbox

Strikes and kicks are what people typically see in film and television as self-defense. The desire to learn physical self-defense tools is often what brings women to self-defense classes and creates enthusiasm. Indeed, a key characteristic of IMPACT programs is for students to learn to use full-force physical techniques (IMPACT International, n.d.). NWMAF also highlights the importance of physical self-defense skills by requiring certified instructors to know how to teach defense against various attacks (grabs, punching, kicking, armed, multiple), and to provide opportunities for students to learn and practice physical skills (Gregory, Johnson Van Wright, & Wanamaker, n.d.; O'Brien et al., n.d.).

Physical self-defense, however, goes beyond strikes and kicks to include stance, breathing, body language, and moving to safety. Physical self-defense includes attention to the larger environment as well as attention to people's physical abilities. Because of this, one of the most important lessons in an empowering self-defense course is that strikes and kicks are tools of last resort. "The end of self-defense training is paradoxical, for it aims to produce skilled persons capable of self-defense so that they have no need of using self-defense: its ideal is the path of non-violence" (Burrow, 2009, p. 139). The idea of self-defense training as preparing people for nonviolence is often overlooked. A student reported a friend's surprise when he defused a potentially volatile situation without kicking or striking (IMPACT Boston, n.d.):

When a man grabbed my friend's arm, I calmly but firmly told him, "My friend and I will be leaving now." He gave us a look, but didn't get in our way as we walked off and got into my car. Once there, my friend turned to me and said, "What was that all about? I thought you took all these self-defense classes. What's the point if you're not going to use it?" I laughed and said, "I did use it. I was able to stay calm and assess the situation. I saw that we had a possible escape from what could be a bad situation without escalating it. Only go physical if it is your only option. It wasn't our only option."

When participants are connected to their bodies, instructors can build on this body knowledge and confidence to introduce them to tools and strategies that will allow them to identify and interrupt violence earlier and more peacefully. One instructor addressed how physical movement is connected to the mind and emotions: "Self-defense is reclaiming our body, feeling grounded in the here and now, feeling powerful. In general, movement helps bring out the voice and leads to greater abilities to identify the issues and to have feelings about them." Similarly, self-defense student Ashley (2011) expressed how her physical confidence connects to the valuable verbal skills she developed:

I feel like I've been given permission to speak after a lifetime of being told to be polite to strangers and just ignore people that bother you. I finally feel free to verbally take back my space. And I can do this because I know I can back myself up.

The toolbox, then, consists of more than a range of physical techniques. In empowering self-defense training, participants learn verbal strategies as well as physical skills to deal with inappropriate behavior by people they know as well as by strangers. Students receive training and experience in a continuum of verbal skills, including assertiveness, de-escalation, and confrontation. In addition, NWMAF and IMPACT International highlight the importance of certified instructors teaching their students how to project consistency between their body language, voice, and the content of their communication; control emotions; and speak up against violence (IMPACT International, n.d.; O'Brien et al., n.d.).

Self-defense instructors emphasize that a comprehensive toolbox can increase personal safety and the ability to intervene on behalf of others. As part of the toolbox, self-defense students increase their knowledge about risks of violence, learn to recognize danger signals prior to an actual attack, and practice an array of strategies to increase their safety. When women learn to recognize danger signals, they are able to act earlier by removing themselves from a situation or by setting clear boundaries. One instructor reminds her students that "the greatest weapon is between our ears—thoughts about strategy, attitude, and options. Not just kicking and punching—those are last resort."

Self-defense training provides women with a range of choices and opportunities to interrupt potentially harmful situations before they become violent (Brecklin & Ullman, 2005). A self-defense instructor commented on the gift of having a comprehensive self-defense toolbox: "I know that I have all these other tools. I don't have to wait to gouge out someone's eyes. There's hope in all these other options."

Conclusion

Key characteristics of empowering self-defense training are placing violence in a social context, shifting blame and responsibility from the victims to the perpetrators, centering embodiment, and offering a comprehensive self-defense toolbox. This approach places rape and sexual assault within a socio-political context of violence, actively dismisses narratives that blame victims, highlights the centrality of the body in resisting violence, and provides a range of possible responses and outcomes, with an emphasis on expanding choices about how to deal with threats of violence.

Physical tools are indispensable to empowering self-defense because developing these tools simultaneously connects people with their bodies and dismantles myths about women's weaknesses and men's superior power. Women discover that regardless of their body type, athletic ability, or disability that they can use what they have to defend themselves from violence. As women learn physical tools and how to apply them, they come to recognize that no matter a person's height, weight, or strength, no one is invincible.

Empowering self-defense training has much to contribute to the anti-violence movement by expanding women's and girls' imagined possibilities to include a range of responses to violence. Empowering self-defense training is a pathway for women and girls to develop an analysis of violence, a deep connection to their bodies, and a comprehensive toolbox for becoming powerful agents of social change right now.

With confidence and tools to stand up for themselves, women and girls can immediately enhance their personal safety and improve the quality of their daily interactions with others. One self-defense instructor observed, "As people feel more secure about themselves, they can begin to work in their community and with other people and decide it is worth making larger changes; they don't just have to sit back and let things happen." Some women and girls may join in struggles for social justice in their communities and beyond. Whatever the scale of resistance, when women and girls have more options for dealing with violence in the here and now, they contribute to stopping violence and creating social justice.

Author's Note

The author has been involved with IMPACT (formerly Model Mugging) since 1988 and has been a member of the National Women's Martial Arts Federation (NWMAF) since 1991. She has participated in compiling, writing, and editing instructor certification documents in both organizations.

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