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BODILY LIMITS TO AUTONOMY:

EMOTION, ATTITUDE, AND SELF-DEFENSE

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Many of us took pride in never feeling violent, never hitting. We had not thought deeply about our relationships to inflicting physical pain. Some of us expressed terror and awe when confronted with physical strength on the part of others. For us, the healing process included the need to learn how to use physical force constructively, to remove the terror—the dread.

—bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*

1. INTRODUCTION

Feminist theories of autonomy acknowledge the complexities of cultivating and expressing autonomy under oppressive social structures. A prominent concern of these theories is that unreflectively endorsing oppressive social norms, beliefs, and values undercuts autonomy. Less attention has been paid to constraints on women's autonomy that are encoded in the body, what I will refer to as *bodily encoded* limits to autonomy. For instance, some physically restrictive postures and movements exemplify or express a femininity of compliance or passivity. Such bodily encoded limits to autonomy are not only worrisome in themselves, they are troubling in light of the prevalence of violence against women. Attitudes of compliance and passivity lessen the likelihood of active prevention or resistance against personal violence (Bart 1985). Moreover, often

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after experiencing personal violence, a sense of physical powerlessness, low self-esteem, self-blame, or shame further restrict agency (Penn and Nardos 2003).

Susan Brison (1999) has suggested self-defense training as a concrete means of developing autonomy in the aftermath of violence. However, she warns that self-defense is not a panacea. Quoting C. H. Sparks and Bat-Ami Bar On (1985), she asserts: "self-defense tactics are 'stopgap measures which fail to link an attack against one victim with attacks on others.' And . . . 'knowledge that one can fight if attacked is also a very different kind of security from enjoying a certainty that one will not be attacked at all'" (Brison 1999, 220–21). Is self-defense simply a stopgap measure? What kind of security might it offer? And how might it promote autonomy? Although Brison's account helps to motivate these questions, it insufficiently explores the potential self-defense training offers in answer to them.

If self-defense training were simply a stopgap measure, then it would function as a temporary solution for the problem of violence against women. But I hold out for a view of self-defense training as much more than a stopgap, for two reasons. First, self-defense training is valuable for women because it provides a security that one can avoid or counter personal violence directed toward oneself. Second, self-defense training is a source of self-confidence. For women living within a social network working to undermine their self-trust and self-esteem, it is important to cultivate self-confidence, particularly since elements of that network involve threatening displays of aggression or superiority. Self-defense training in my account is not simply a route to recovery in the wake of personal violence. Instead, and primarily, it is the development of skills aimed at preventing personal violence. My aim is to show that the development of self-defense skills functions as a means of overcoming bodily encoded limits to autonomy. Through this discussion, I hope to broaden our understanding of the embodied nature of autonomy by illuminating the connection between bodily training and responses such as self-confidence, self-trust, and self-esteem.

2. RESTRICTED SITE: THE BODY

Traditionally, autonomy theorists have upheld the view that autonomous action proceeds from beliefs, values, or desires that are "wholeheartedly endorsed" or otherwise reflective of one's "true self" or "real self."¹ Such theories lack reflective

1. Following Frankfurt's (1971) view or its Kantian precursor. For an overview see Wolf (1993).

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attention to the self's historical and social context because they consider individuals to be independent and self-defining. Persons are autonomous if their actions proceed from wholeheartedly endorsed values; otherwise, they are not. In contrast, feminist autonomy theorists tend to view the self as inherently relational. This relational self is connected to other selves socially and historically and develops autonomy in and through relationships of dependence and interdependence.² Autonomy becomes a complex matter for the feminist autonomy theorist, who recognizes that it is not unusual for persons to act on the basis of internalized social norms and values not endorsed as "one's own," which may constrain autonomy to different degrees. Diana Meyers's (1987; 1989; 2004a) account of autonomy is notably instructive here.

Meyers's account widens the idea of autonomy beyond its traditional boundaries through conceiving of autonomy on a continuum. Autonomy progresses through the development of autonomy competencies: coordinated skills of introspection, imagination, reasoning, and volition (1987, 627; 2004a, 10). To the degree that one exercises autonomy competencies, one is autonomous. So, even persons lacking self-determination in many aspects of their lives may not thereby lack autonomy, not if they act autonomously within certain pockets of their lives. For instance, a woman who has not reflected upon her traditional feminine roles may exercise autonomy in deciding to be a stay-at-home mother, even if she lacks the wider autonomy we would attribute to her were she to have reflectively chosen her life plan.

Meyers argues that autonomous selves are relational selves who learn to become autonomous through concrete interactions with others, emphasizing that selves are socially constituted, embodied beings situated within historical and social frameworks (1989, 189–202). Nevertheless, earlier formations of her theory privilege psychological competencies—those cognitive and imaginative skills permitting critical reflection on one's beliefs, values, or preferences—suggesting that autonomy proceeds to a degree correlative to one's ongoing process of critical self-reflection. But, as Meyers recognizes in her later work (2004a; 2005), if the relational self must be understood as an embodied self to form and maintain its relationships and learn skills from others, then it matters to the development of autonomy that the self is embodied. We might wonder if the body matters even more directly to the development of autonomy. Is there some sense in which we can describe autonomy as itself *embodied*?

2. See, for instance, Code (1991), Whitbeck (1983) and Baier (1985).

One way to recognize the embodied nature of autonomy is to acknowledge the body as a site for suffering *constraints* on autonomy. Before turning to Meyers's later work, let me expand on how oppressive social norms and ideals of femininity can restrict autonomy through the body. First, a prominent element of traditional Western feminine ideals is the expectation that women and girls should take up as little physical space as possible (Frye 1983). Elbows are tucked in, ankles or knees are crossed or firmly pressed together, arms and hands are often folded together. Women are encouraged to view the body as, in Iris Marion Young's (2005) words, a "fragile encumbrance." Feminine socialization trains women to view the body as an object of appreciation rather than an instrument one might *use* to effect action in the world (34). Limited physicality undermines autonomy by reducing or removing the possibility of certain forms of self-expression. One's body represents to others how one values oneself; thus restrictions of bodily expression may undermine self-appreciation. Wilting, passive physical postures and movements represent a devaluing of oneself as unworthy of equal status and standing before others (Bartky 1990). As Marilyn Frye perceptively notes, feminine ideals are reflected in "a network of behaviors through which we constantly announce to others our membership in a lower caste and our unwillingness and/or inability to defend our bodily or moral integrity. It is degrading and a pattern of degradation" (1983, 16). Persons limiting their physical presence in and movement through the world in degrading ways thus appear to undermine the very possibility of their own self-appreciation.

Second, endorsing feminine ideals can limit one's capacity to act by literally weakening the body. Naomi Wolf's (1991) account of the Beauty Myth shows how girls and women often suffer depleted bodily energy through trying to achieve ideals of Western feminine beauty. Perceived body image is a common barometer of self-esteem and self-worth for women and girls (Castillo 1996). Thus it is no surprise that empirical studies have shown correlations between eating disorders and low self-esteem and dissatisfaction with bodily appearance (Button et al. 1997). In addition, those attempting to achieve an ideal of thinness often experience a lack of energy directly related to dieting or exercising excessively. Passivity, lack of energy, and low self-esteem work together to limit the freedom and vitality of one's bodily expression. Such limits suggest a familiar theme: that to be feminine is to be acquiescent. The acquiescent possess a reduced ability to act and thus a diminished resistance to socially and politically oppressive forces. Hence, I doubt Wolf is exaggerating matters in asserting that the Beauty Myth "is not an obsession about beauty, it is an obsession about female obedience" (1991, 187).

Third, a culture of violence against women and girls creates an environment that entrenches female passivity. Learning that one's responses for coping with or preventing personal violence are generally ineffective, persons can become passive and accepting of abuse; doing nothing becomes a defensive response. Lacking the motivation to prevent or resist harm to oneself is associated with feelings of helplessness, depression, and low self-esteem (Penn and Nardos 2003, 148–50). Furthermore, the threat of personal violence may be internalized in conjunction with imperatives of femininity such that women become unaware of the ways in which their own actions support a culture of female passivity and oppression. So in sum, women's bodies are a common site of bodily encoded constraints that limit autonomy.

In her more recent work, Meyers argues that emancipating women from oppressive ideals encoded in the body cannot occur unless women treat their bodies as repositories of meaning, learning to understand which meanings deposited in the body are pernicious so as to purge the body of them (2004a, 89). Through personal transformation of the body, such as changing beauty rituals, altering bodily looks, or using the body in new ways through dance or self-defense, women can reconfigure their "psycho-corporeal identity" (85). Since the body is an important site of agency and identity, "psycho-corporeal identity" is tightly tied to "psycho-corporeal agency" for Meyers. While I do not aim to provide a comprehensive account here, I endorse the view that physiological and psychological capacities each enable autonomous action, often in ways affecting one another. Consider, for example, Susan Brison's (1999) view that personal transformation in the aftermath of trauma needs to involve changing more than cognitive beliefs. Responses such as fearfulness, helplessness, anxiety, depression, tendency to self-blame, or an inability to get angry can each restrict action in the face of dangerous settings or situations. Physically retraining one's responses so that one can get angry or act defiantly to protect oneself can thus be an important step in the recovery of diminished or lost autonomy.

While I agree that personal transformation may prove to be an important source of expanding women's autonomy, a deeper explanation of how bodily encoded limits to autonomy could be addressed through such practices is needed. In what follows, I plan to construct an account of how training the body through self-defense practice might overcome bodily restrictions to autonomy. Although Meyers (2004a) appeals to Brison in endorsing self-defense as a route to personal transformation, neither offers much of an explanation as to how it might expand autonomy. I hope to show that self-defense training provides

a means of developing those emotional and attitudinal responses essential to women's development of autonomy under threat of personal violence.

3. SELF-DEFENSE AND AUTONOMY COMPETENCIES

Persons who are oppressed face systematic limitations, barriers, and harms (Frye 1983). Women are oppressed by virtue of belonging to a worldwide group of persons who are routinely targeted by personal violence.³ Violence and the threat of violence are among the most severe modes of oppression that affect women as a group. This particular form of oppression is inextricably tied to other systems of domination. Those who resist oppression and resolve to act despite or because of oppression risk severe reprisals. In the case of threat of personal violence, resisting oppressive practices can be prohibitively intimidating. Nevertheless, resistance is essential to autonomous action in oppressive contexts. To possess autonomy more fully over one's life, Meyers asserts that persons must "be *ready to resist* the unwarranted demands of other individuals along with conformist societal pressures, and . . . *be resolved* to carry out their own plans" (1987, 627; emphasis mine). The following analysis of the skills acquired through self-defense training reveals that it develops the critical autonomy competencies of resistance and resolve; thus self-defense is one concrete means for fostering autonomy under threat of personal violence.

Personal violence encompasses many forms, including physical, emotional, sexual, and financial abuse.⁴ The immediate aim of self-defense is to prevent physical or sexual harms to the self, so in speaking of self-defense as a response to personal violence I will refer to this narrower domain of harm. Oppressed persons who are attuned to a heightened threat of personal violence, as women are, have an awareness of the frequency with which others' intimidating or threatening postures, words, or actions may turn into assaults against their bodies. Accordingly, women often have a set of techniques aimed at avoiding or withstanding assault. We see women engage in evasive actions as part of a daily routine. Such actions include: strategically parking cars or planning walking and bus routes; arranging companions for traveling; attending to type and style of clothing and shoes; and purchasing security alarms or systems, guns, pepper

3. Amnesty International (2006) has accrued data from over fifty independent world surveys on violence against women indicating that, on average, *one in three* women worldwide will experience personal violence in her lifetime.

4. I appeal here to the classification of personal violence outlined in VAWD (2004).

spray, whistles, or guard dogs. These preparations aim to prevent harm to the self, but they do not constitute self-defense as I discuss it in this paper. Guns, tasers, pepper spray, or guard dogs may be *used* in self-defense, but their use does not cultivate what I shall call "the skills of self-defense." The skills of self-defense are cultivated through the development of coordinated sets of cognitive and physiological skills permitting one to defend oneself against harm.⁵ Self-defense training is the endeavor to acquire and improve such skills.

Self-defense training cultivates interdependent skills acquired through repeated training over time.⁶ These skills divide into two sorts. Most obviously, a repertoire of *physical* abilities and techniques is needed to prevent personal violence. Learning blocks, escape moves, strikes, kicks, punches, grappling, locks, and throws all count as the sorts of physical skills one might learn in self-defense training. Additionally, an importantly related set of *reactive* skills is acquired during self-defense training, those attitudes and emotional dispositions suited to successfully executing physical self-defense techniques. Physical and psychological competencies work together in producing accurately placed, well-timed responses reliant upon appropriate motivation. We might envision the complementary nature of both sorts of competencies through picturing a traditional martial arts class, which at its best trains students in physical techniques practiced with respect, confidence, pride without arrogance, tranquility of mind, and resolution of purpose. Self-defense classes abstracted from their martial art background including such elements of training will also qualify as developing self-defense skills.⁷

Self-defense training furthers the exercise and development of the capacities of resistance and resolve. It does so through developing a confidence in one's ability to protect and defend oneself that is rooted in the body in two sorts of ways, each correlating to the set of self-defense skills outlined above. First, confidence in the physical skills needed to defend oneself is gained through the process of learning to defend oneself, plus the subsequent testing and retesting of those skills. This self-confidence is borne out of bodily experience. Either

5. Of course, some of these actions might be most effective if one becomes skilled in doing them, and one might become effectively skilled in several of these sorts of actions. But skills such as setting an alarm, training a guard dog, or planning a walking route need not be skills that are developed in coordination with one another.

6. For the purposes of this paper I assume that traditional martial arts training is empty-hand training, which trains the practitioner in self-defense through using the body alone.

7. Taking a few classes in self-defense will not produce a person skilled in self-defense, but neither need one train for years in order to be skilled. One may be said to possess this skill when one is judged by senior experts as capable of defending oneself in training exercises and tests.

one can escape a tight grip on one's wrist or one cannot; repeated success entails self-confidence in that technique. Success in many different sorts of techniques and responses will generate a broader sense of self-confidence in one's self-defense skills on the whole. Second, training in self-defense develops confidence in one's emotional and cognitive reactions to threats of personal violence. Physical training succeeds well or poorly according to the emotional and cognitive responses of the practitioner. The body concretely reflects those responses. Those who become frightened or startled, or who fail to move due to hesitation or uncertainty, lose the timing essential to successfully executing self-defense techniques. Attackers will not wait while one overcomes one's initial responses or contemplates what to do.

It is thus essential to self-defense training that emotional and attitudinal competencies are trained in conjunction with physical competencies. These components of self-defense training are distinct, but they are developed concomitantly—indeed, it is typically the aim of this training to develop such physiological and psychological elements together. Through self-defense training one develops confidence not only that one can execute specific physical techniques but that one will also possess the motivational wherewithal to successfully perform those techniques, even under pressing circumstances. The self-confidence produced through self-defense training is a significant source of the resolve to act to defend oneself and of the motivation to resist threats to the self. Since both resistance and resolve are key autonomy competencies, the self-confidence produced through self-defense training promotes autonomy.

4. SELF-DEFENSE AND SELF-APPRECIATION

A number of feminist theorists have recently offered analyses of the importance of positive self-regarding attitudes to women's agency. The discussion above has shown that self-defense training fosters self-confidence. I shall now expand my analysis to consider the contribution of this training and the self-confidence it furthers to other attitudes of self-appreciation, the cultivation of which support the flourishing of autonomy. I aim to show how my account is able to both accommodate and enrich recent feminist reflection on the nature and importance of self-regard. Autonomy is a function not only of the capacity to choose freely and to act on those choices, it is also a function of the ability to do so as a person situated within concrete relational contexts, contexts that may undermine or enhance choice and action. Hence, my account more

widely shows how self-defense training improves the prospect for autonomy, understood both in its traditional and relational senses.

In an importantly generative work on the concept of self-trust, Trudy Govier draws parallels between self-trust and the trust we have in others. One trusts oneself if one can expect behavior that is not harmful to oneself, that proceeds from favorable motives, and that reflects one's sense of what it means to be a good person. Self-trust involves one's willingness to rely or depend upon oneself, to regard oneself as well-intentioned and competent to make and act on judgments or decisions. Moreover, one regards oneself in this sort of positive light even in the face of others' superficial evidence or criticism (Govier 1993, 105–6). Indeed, self-trust seems to reveal itself just at those times others challenge or question us. "And, that is often: other people, the social world, and the physical world challenge us in many ways, and we have to act. We have to make judgments about what is going on, make decisions and implement them, and do this ourselves. If we are insecure in our sense of our own values, motives, and capacities, we cannot think and act effectively" (106). With Govier's description of self-trust in mind, we can understand how the self-confidence I have discussed is integral to self-trust: to doubt oneself is to question one's competence. Self-doubt, whether through doubting one's capacities or one's resolution to act, entails that one does not trust oneself to act.

Carolyn McLeod (2002) and Karen Jones (1996) argue that self-trust is an attitude toward one's motives for action; recognizing the risk of self-sabotage, self-trusting people are nevertheless optimistic about their own motives. This point is worth expanding. Self-trust varies in degree according to context: we may be confident that we are competent in certain areas, but doubt our competence in others. The self-confidence produced through self-defense training produces self-trust—one trusts that one's emotional, attitudinal, and physical responses will come together to enable one to defend oneself when required. This self-confidence arguably supports an optimism, not just about one's motives or ability to act, but about how one will act if challenged by others. Thus we can see close links between self-trust and self-confidence and how self-defense training fosters both. Since both Jones and McLeod are concerned to *contrast* self-trust to self-confidence, each misses this importance of self-confidence to self-trust.

Govier's account provides further links between self-trust and self-esteem. She draws a picture of the self-esteem essential to self-trust as consisting of basic self-acceptance, a noncomparative, internally held view that one is

fundamentally a worthy and adequate person (Govier 1993, 113). Autonomous persons have the sort of basal self-esteem that affords them a resiliency of the self against the claims of others, a resiliency that is evident in those who trust themselves. Similarly, Govier explains that self-esteem is essential to the autonomy that is often revealed in one's self-trust: "Should one be in a context in which others ignore or insult one, treat one as inadequate, incompetent, or unworthy, strong trust in oneself will be a major source for resistance and emergence. We allude to such self-trust when we speak of 'inner strength' and 'inner emergence'" (114). This inner strength seems to be present in those possessing autonomy competencies of resistance and resolve; indeed, the willingness to resist and the resolve to act may just *be* this inner strength. Through cultivating self-trust, self-defense training fosters the self-esteem and self-respect essential to the autonomy competencies of resistance and resolve. Resiliency on Govier's account appears to be a resiliency of the self to psychological threats such as insults or offences to one's standing in the moral community. But, as we saw earlier, autonomy may be undermined in concrete, bodily encoded ways associated with oppressive ideals of femininity. Women thus need to develop their capacities to resist and resolve to act both despite and *because of* these bodily encoded limits to autonomy.

Finally, Govier's view that self-esteem is required for autonomy can be paralleled to Paul Benson's view that self-worth is integral to autonomy. Autonomous persons regard themselves not only as able to respond to the various expectations others may have of them, but *worthy* of responding to others' expectations. Benson argues that lack of self-worth is evidenced when we do not regard ourselves as competent to answer for our conduct in light of others' expectations and demands (Benson 1994, 660). We should be careful, however, to distinguish a felt competence to answer to others from a felt obligation to do so. Self-worth includes considering oneself worthy to respond to inappropriate expectations as one deems fit. So, for example, a person confronting another with an aggressive expectation of sexual compliance deserves a rejection of that expectation. This rejection evidences self-worth, particularly if it stands alone without justification or explanation. Such rejections demonstrate trust that one's responses are appropriate.

Often women face inappropriate expectations that effectively undermine their autonomy—ideals and expectations such as passivity, servility, or docility endorsed by traditional standards of femininity like those captured in the Beauty Myth. These expectations inappropriately foster the oppression of women, particularly through encouraging women to submit to personal

violence rather than to act against it.⁸ Self-defense training provides a concrete way of overcoming bodily encoded limits to freedom associated with those ideals. When women act against these ideals through self-defense training they enhance their autonomy by fostering their abilities, physical and emotional, to reject certain expectations as inappropriate and so assert their self-worth.

Bodily intactness and wholeness, what we might call *bodily integrity*, is an essential component of protecting and defending self-worth.⁹ Those who live under oppression are familiar with the ease with which an individual may override another's bodily integrity through acts of personal violence aimed at dominating the other. Cultivating the ability to protect oneself indicates one's resolve to uphold one's commitments in the face of the threat of personal violence that accompanies women's oppression. *Personal* violence against women is not, however, simply a *personal* matter; it is deeply woven into systems of oppression operating in society. Self-defense training is not a means of changing those oppressive systems but of changing women's possibility for autonomy as persons living under those systems. Until those systems are eliminated, self-defense training provides a concrete means of protecting and fostering women's autonomy under threat of personal violence.

Self-defense training is, of course, not the only means of increasing resistance and resolve in contexts of oppression. Physical strength or athletic training provide sources of physically countering or resisting others, while intellectual skills such as reasoning, argumentation, and persuasion provide other sources of resistance and resolve.¹⁰ So too, emotions such as courage, trust, or anger may each supply key bases for the resistance and resolve essential to autonomy.¹¹ Yet self-defense training differs from these other avenues of autonomy development. Self-defense training introduces an important element in virtue of learning to defend one's self from possible harm. This training implicitly develops the attitude that what one is defending is *worth* defending. Thus, undertaking this training expresses one's value of oneself, seen in its development of self-worth, self-trust, self-esteem, and self-respect.

8. Another way is through encouraging women not to see personal violence as personal violence but to redescribe it in seemingly innocuous ways: sexual assaults can be said to be "sexual advances," for instance.

9. I say more about the relation of self-defense to the notion of integrity in my paper "Protecting One's Commitments: Emotion, Integrity, and Self-Defence" (in progress).

10. Thanks to Carolyn McLeod for pointing out the relevance of these skills.

11. Sometimes resistance and resolve are required to develop those emotional skills. Learning to trust one's emotional responses or recovering one's ability to become angry may call for one to resist others' interpretations of one's emotions or to resolve to separate oneself from dominant groups (Burrow 2005).

5. AUTONOMY UNDER THREAT OF PERSONAL VIOLENCE

In this section, I consider four different responses to my view that self-defense skills provide an important resource for furthering autonomy for women as a group under threat of personal violence. First, one might object to the whole idea of learning self-defense with the claim that it takes less time and effort to learn how to use a gun, which is perhaps an even better form of defending oneself. Aside from legal or moral considerations against gun ownership, I see two practical reasons to reject that view of self-defense. The first is that the attacker may use that weapon against the defender. The second reason is that if the weapon is taken away, and if it is the only way one has to defend oneself, the defender is left without any defense. Of course, one could learn supporting skills of self-defense training to prevent both of the above possibilities of harm. But given the potential for further harm by carrying a weapon, it is in one's best interest to learn traditional self-defense instead.¹²

Second, self-defense training might only seem to work as a means of enhancing autonomy for those with the ability to undertake that training. A corollary of considering autonomy as a function of both bodily and psychological competencies is that it may appear to advantage those with developed abilities in both areas and thus support an implicit ableism. However, this response fails to appreciate the fact that the skills of self-defense are inherently adaptive to one's constitution as a part of being effective responses. Effective self-defense training develops an awareness of one's own best proficiencies. Some persons best defend themselves with their feet, others with their elbows, legs, knees, or hands, while others simply evade attacks. Those who are incapable of moving their bodies either directly or indirectly will be unable to develop physical skills of self-defense, just as those who are incapable of fairly complex cognition and judgment will be unable to develop the attitudinal and emotional skills required to react in a controlled and deliberate manner. Thus, while some might excel at developing an array of varying self-defense skills, others may possess little or no ability to do so.

The implication that those who are unable to acquire self-defense skills thereby necessarily possess a weakened autonomy is indeed ableist, but it is not entailed by my argument. I have not argued that *only* the skill of self-defense furthers autonomy. I have aimed to establish the narrower claim that acquiring

12. Martial arts training may, of course, include weapons training. However, martial arts weapons training only introduces the same two vulnerabilities outlined above if the practitioner does not also possess the ability to defend herself with empty hands.

self-defense skills is a valuable means of increasing one's degree of autonomy. Disability activists concerned about the implications of viewing self-defense as a means to autonomy would do well to consider the distressingly high rates at which women with disabilities experience personal violence. In Canada, 39 percent of women reported that they were sexually assaulted at least once in their lives, while 83 percent of women with disabilities made a similar report (AVAW 2002; VAWD 2004). Self-defense training for women with disabilities, far from undermining their autonomy, has the potential of benefitting those who need it the most.

Third, promoting self-defense skills as a means of furthering women's autonomy may seem elitist.¹³ While many martial arts and self-defense groups are nonprofit organizations, some do operate for profit. The worry is that training might be available only for the privileged few who can afford the time and money to engage in regular self-defense training. To prevent such inequality, self-defense training could be offered as part of a regular school curriculum. I am not the first to consider such an idea. As early as 1904, Tsuyoshi Chitose (2000) introduced martial arts training as part of the school curriculum in Japan with the aim of instilling attitudes of respect between persons in general and with a focus on practical self-defense for girls. In contemporary societies, teaching self-defense to girls in school will need careful consideration of the political structure of its implementation. As a rule, the threat of violence against girls and women varies depending on factors such as race, ability, sexual orientation, age, and cultural, educational, and economic status (Savary 1994; McIvor and Nahanee 1998; Jiwani 2000). If teaching self-defense does not address the needs of women and girls facing intersecting systems of oppression that support a culture of violence, then it will not meet the needs of all equally well. Relatedly, like teachers in general, instructors of self-defense must be aware of teaching practices that implicitly endorse biases, because children, in particular, may easily internalize oppressive norms and values. How self-defense will be taught thus requires careful attention to ensure that limitations to autonomy are not implicitly endorsed as part of the training.

If teaching self-defense to girls and young women were systematic, then it would not be merely a personal solution but instead would constitute a political move challenging oppressive patriarchal systems.¹⁴ So, widespread self-defense

13. Thanks to Susan Sherwin for stimulating exchanges concerning this worry.

14. My suggestion that self-defense classes can be offered in the public school system to obviate equality imbalances has since been suggested to me by audience members at Dalhousie University and also appears in Meyers (2004a).

training promises to weaken the social structures supporting violence against women. Of course, overturning the valorization of aggressive male stereotypes and the glamorization of male dominance over women might also undermine the prevalence of violence toward women. But until that happens, girls could be raised to subvert the system in one concretely attainable way, through learning self-defense. Some might object here that introducing self-defense training in schools could increase school violence, already a serious problem.

This concern about school violence is a special case of a more general concern, which brings us to the fourth response. It might seem that self-defense encourages aggression in the individual, which has negative implications for the self and for society in general. It is a common feature of self-defense training that students are encouraged to get angry, to yell, and to attack other persons. So we might think that encouraging a system of self-defense broadly promotes aggressive attitudes, thereby supporting a culture of violence or aggression.¹⁵ While self-defense training may *begin* with emotions and attitudes such as anger and aggression, this is not the aim or ideal of traditional self-defense training. Initially, becoming angry or aggressive is a key point of training, particularly for women who have internalized feminine ideals of passivity and acquiescence. Getting angry, yelling, grabbing physical space around oneself, or otherwise being physically assertive are all instances of engagement with the world that girls and women have been socialized to avoid. Their bodies are unaccustomed to such actions. It is difficult to disrupt typical patterns of behavior, but in the case of self-defense training it is a requirement.¹⁶ Women who are adept at commanding their bodies to act in physically assertive ways and who have also developed the self-confidence to avoid conflict have attained a skill that is both central to self-defense training and inherently paradoxical. 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 nonviolence. While bell hooks (1989) is right to say that learning to use

15. Angry or aggressive attitudes can actually undermine the execution of self-defense techniques because strong emotional responses such as these are likely to impede the judgment and flexibility of responses required for effective self-defense. Here the aim is not to produce passionless persons, but to cultivate an ability to calm oneself in pressing moments of danger so as to allow self-defense techniques to be the most effective at the time they are needed the most.

16. Initially overcoming restrictive bodily behaviors must be within the command of students of self-defense if they are to progress. Imaginative practices of envisioning dangerous or discomfiting situations aids this endeavor, because imagining one's best responses in such situations increases one's actual ability to react appropriately in self-defense. Such effects of imaginative training on physical performance are commonly understood as key elements of athletic training, both by sport psychologists and athletes. For an overview of the literature, see Grouios (1992).

physical force is a way to remove the terror and dread of violence, it is also a greater source of pride that one is capable of using physical force but does *not* feel a need or desire to use it.

6. SECURITY AND SUBVERSIVENESS

I have aimed to show how the emotional, attitudinal, and physical competencies developed through self-defense training foster autonomy through promoting two required autonomy competencies, resistance and resolve. Self-defense training provides a concrete avenue for women to lift bodily encoded limits to autonomy: it frees women from typically encoded restrictions in posture, movement, or reactions; and it encourages women to claim their rightful physical presence and to defend it as reasonable. The degree to which one is confident in one's ability to defend oneself is closely related to increased autonomy. One cannot freely choose to draw boundaries on one's interactions with others if one does not consider it safe to leave, to disagree, or to otherwise reject others' demands of oneself. Learning self-defense supplies a certain degree of self-confidence, confidence in one's competency to protect oneself against personal violence in threatening situations. Self-defense training is, in effect, a socially subversive act. Being able to take a stand before others while living under social pressure to be passive and accepting—to possess self-confidence rather than to be dispirited or dissuaded by the possibility of personal violence—serves to exemplify how autonomy may thrive in spite of oppressive circumstances.

Self-defense training is not a panacea for the problem of violence against women and girls. It may ultimately do nothing to prevent the prevalence of attempted personal violence. But neither is it just a stopgap measure until the culture of violence against women is overthrown. Self-defense training provides a theoretically and practically significant opportunity for developing women's autonomy. Feminist theories of autonomy have shown us that autonomy is best understood in terms of degrees, proceeding according to the sorts of psychological competencies one possesses. My account shows how bodily and psychological competencies may work *together* to promote autonomy. Self-defense training produces self-confidence that fosters self-trust that both one's psychological and bodily competencies will come together to act as needed. Self-trust here widens one's possibilities for action in virtue of promoting associated attitudes of self-worth, self-esteem, and self-respect that are essential to autonomy. The interrelationship between psychological capacities and bodily

capacities is essential to recognize in a relational account of autonomy because its aim is to show that autonomy is not merely a function of one's capacity to choose, it is also a function of one's ability to form and exercise choices within contexts that often constrain choice and action. A culture of violence against women introduces constraints to autonomy that self-defense training is well suited to overcome through developing closely linked bodily and psychological capacities significant to the formation and exercise of choice.

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