

The importance of self-defense training for sexual violence prevention

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Feminism & Psychology

2016, Vol. 26(2) 207–226

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DOI: 10.1177/0959353516637393

fap.sagepub.com



Abstract

Women's self-defense training has been excluded from sexual violence prevention efforts for a variety of reasons, including concerns that it is ineffective, encourages victim blaming, neglects acquaintance assault, and does not target the underlying factors that facilitate sexual violence. In this article, I argue that these critiques are misguided, founded on (1) misunderstandings of self-defense training, (2) stereotypes about gender, and (3) individualistic assumptions about the impact of self-defense. Further, I assert that empowerment-based self-defense training helps to change the root conditions that allow violence against women to flourish. For all these reasons, and because recent research has built a case for its effectiveness, I argue that women's empowerment-based self-defense training should be part of any sexual violence prevention effort.

Keywords

self-defense, sexual assault, sexual violence prevention, violence against women, resistance, empowerment

Women's self-defense training aims to arm women with the skills to avoid, interrupt, and resist assault. This type of self-defense education grew out of the U.S. antirape movement and was central to radical feminist approaches to violence prevention in the 1970s and 1980s (Bateman, 1978; Gavey, 2005; Searles & Berger, 1987). Early second-wave feminists, aware of the pervasiveness of violence against women and critical of society's reluctance to address it, took their safety literally into their own hands, adapting martial arts techniques to suit women's needs; adding verbal, psychological, and emotional skills; and integrating a critical gender consciousness into their trainings (Bevacqua, 2000; Telsey, 1981). Although

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self-defense classes vary in format and content, most teach awareness, physical fighting skills, and escape tactics. Some, as I discuss at greater length below, also teach verbal assertiveness and empowerment skills.

While other aspects of the antirape movement have become institutionalized (Matthews, 1994), self-defense training has not. Indeed, in recent years women's self-defense training has been largely ignored and sometimes specifically excluded from prevention efforts (Hollander, 2009; McCaughey, 1997, 2013; McCaughey & Cermele, 2015). Sexual assault prevention organizations often explicitly dismiss self-defense, as in this example from the Texas Association Against Sexual Assault:

Self-defense. . . programs help potential victims (usually women) learn skills to fend off attackers. Although these programs vary significantly in focus, content and length, for the most part they are all risk reduction. They can be very powerful tools for empowering women and helping victims heal, but often they do not focus on the reality of sexual assault (i.e., that it usually occurs between two people who know each other) and some people believe these programs actually give women a false sense of safety. More importantly, self-defense classes do nothing to challenge the attitudes or beliefs of the potential perpetrator, meaning that the perpetrator is likely to target someone else. Self-defense classes do not address any of the risk factors for or underlying conditions of sexual violence and therefore are not primary prevention. (Curtis & Love, n.d., p. 11)

The quote above summarizes the major arguments against women's self-defense training: beliefs that it is ineffective, does not address acquaintance assault, encourages victim blaming, and does not target the root causes of violence against women. These critiques are widespread among prevention organizations (e.g. see Colorado State University Women and Gender Advocacy Center, n.d.; West Virginia Foundation for Rape Information and Services, n.d.). They are also found in both scholarly (Basile, 2015; DeKeseredy, 2014) and journalistic (Breslaw, 2014) discussions of assault prevention, and in social media responses (e.g. see "Rape culture wins," 2014). Many funding agencies explicitly or in practice exclude self-defense training from eligibility for support (McCaughey, 2013; Paiva, personal communication, 2013), and the Centers for Disease Control has also chosen not to include self-defense training in its research and advocacy on sexual assault prevention (DeGue et al., 2014).

In this paper, I assert that these critiques are misguided, founded on (1) misunderstandings (or sometimes, misrepresentations) of self-defense training, (2) stereotypes about gender, and (3) individualistic assumptions about the impact of self-defense training. Further, I argue that women's self-defense training—when done well—*is* primary prevention, in that it helps to change the root conditions that allow violence to flourish. For all these reasons, and because recent research has built a case for its effectiveness, I argue that women's empowerment-based self-defense training should be part of any sexual violence prevention effort.

Before turning to the critiques, it is important to be clear about what self-defense training is. I begin by describing the breadth of women's self-defense training.

I then turn to the major criticisms of self-defense training and evaluate the arguments and evidence that bear on these critiques. I conclude with a discussion of the implications for prevention policy.

What do we mean by “self-defense training”?

Some criticisms stem from misunderstandings of women’s self-defense. Many critics assume that self-defense training involves only physical skills such as punching or kicking—perhaps with a side dish of warnings to watch one’s drink, wear modest clothing, or avoid walking alone at night. In reality, many different programs call themselves “self-defense.” Dimensions of variation include the duration of instruction (ranging from a 1 hour workshop to a lifetime of training), the instructors (male, female, or both; certified or not), the sponsors (universities, police departments, martial arts studios, gyms, or community organizations), the skills taught (physical resistance, verbal self-defense, weapons training, or risk reduction techniques), and the style of instruction (padded attacker,¹ martial arts, online, etc.). Thus, a 1 hour kickboxing class taught by a poorly trained gym instructor and a comprehensive, 30 hour course taught by a certified instructor with 20 years of experience may both be understood—and critiqued—as the same thing. It is unlikely, however, that these classes are equally effective at preventing violence.

There is increasing focus on a style of training termed “empowerment self-defense” (Thompson, 2014), also known as “feminist self-defense” (Rentschler, 1999; Telsey, 2001). These classes focus explicitly on empowering women rather than restricting them by instructing them on what they should or shouldn’t do. They address the full range of violence against women, especially assaults perpetrated by acquaintances. They teach effective physical tactics that build on the strengths of women’s bodies (e.g. prioritizing lower-body rather than upper-body strength), target vulnerable points on assailants’ bodies, and require minutes or hours rather than years to master. At the same time, the goal of these classes is to stop violence before it starts, and to that end they offer an array of strategies that include awareness, assertiveness, and de-escalation skills as well as physical techniques, and empower women to choose the options that are best for their own situations. Perhaps most importantly, empowerment-based self-defense classes interrogate both the social conditions that facilitate sexual assault and the psychological barriers to women’s resistance that result from gender socialization and expectations. For example, they discuss how women are encouraged to put others’ comfort before their own, to care for others even at the risk of their own safety, and to accept abuse rather than demanding respect. In so doing, these classes foster a critical consciousness about gender inequality (Searles & Berger, 1987; Telsey, 2001).

There is a growing body of research on the effectiveness of self-defense training. However, nearly all of this research evaluates a small subset of the total range of courses, focusing on longer, empowerment-based, and padded-attacker classes (see Brecklin, 2008; Hollander, 2014; Sarnquist et al., 2014; Senn et al., 2015; Sinclair

et al., 2013). Consequently, my discussion below focuses on this narrower subset of courses and may not apply to other types. When I discuss self-defense training below I do *not* mean a brief workshop that focuses on scare tactics, tells women to monitor their dress or their alcohol consumption, and/or directs them to limit their activities or to depend on men for protection. Rather, I mean a thoughtful process of empowering students through awareness of the realities both of assault and of their own abilities, both verbal and physical, to prevent and resist violence against them. I refer to these classes as Empowerment Self-Defense (ESD) classes below to make clear that I am referring only to this narrower subset of classes about which we have empirical evidence.²

It is also important to distinguish between the *practice* of self-defense during an assault and the *process and everyday consequences of learning* self-defense ideas and strategies. As I discuss below, much of the effectiveness of self-defense classes results from the training itself and its implementation in everyday situations to deter assaults, not simply its use in response to a physical assault. As both I (Hollander, 2014) and Senn et al. (2015) found in recent studies, self-defense training not only improves women's ability to resist assault, it also reduces the *initiation* of assaults against women, suggesting that women who have been trained in empowerment-based self-defense are able to avoid or forestall attacks before they begin. The persistent mischaracterization of women's self-defense as being only the *use* of physical tactics in an assault situation is an important reason why self-defense is often dismissed as a prevention strategy.

Critiques of self-defense training

It doesn't work

Self-defense classes "give women a false sense of safety." (Curtis & Love, n.d., p. 11)

I read somewhere that the average man is seven times stronger than a woman of the same height. Seven times! My husband has totally accidentally hurt me when we're just horsing around. I don't care how much martial arts training I have, I would not be able to best him in a struggle. (starHopper_27, on Jezebel.com)

I turn now to the most frequent critiques of women's self-defense training. The first critique is the simplest: self-defense training simply does not work. Because women are not capable of defending themselves against men's violence, self-defense training fosters a false—and dangerous—self-confidence (Webster, 2012). (Note that this critique assumes that self-defense refers only to physical resistance, and that it focuses only on the use of self-defense skills in a crisis situation.) This contention is, at root, a claim that women are inevitably vulnerable and weak and men are naturally strong and dangerous (Hollander, 2001; McCaughey, 1997; McCaughey & Cermele, 2015). This critique, of course, fits well with dominant ideas about gender, ideas which many scholars argue are socially constructed and inaccurate (Gavey, 2005; Lorber, 1994).

The evidence, however, strongly suggests otherwise. There is a large and nearly unanimous literature that demonstrates that women often resist violence, even without self-defense training, and that their resistance is frequently successful (Clay-Warner, 2002; Tark & Kleck, 2004, 2014; Ullman, 2007) and does not increase their risk of injury (Tark & Kleck, 2014; Ullman, 1998). For example, Tark and Kleck found that active resistance (e.g. running away, yelling, or physically resisting) “decreased the risk of rape completion about 80–86%, compared with non-resistance” (Tark & Kleck, 2014, p. 286). There is also a growing body of research that finds that feminist, empowerment-based self-defense training reduces women’s risk of experiencing violence. My own research, for example, found that college women who completed an ESD class had a significantly decreased risk of assault over the following year, compared with similar women who did not take such a class (Hollander, 2014). Moreover, those women who did experience a subsequent attack reported attempted rather than completed rape, suggesting that women with self-defense training were able to thwart the perpetrator’s intent to rape. Senn’s recent randomized control trial study found similar reductions in sexual assault: college women who completed a 12 h course that included verbal and physical self-defense (as well as instruction and practice in assessing risk, overcoming barriers to acknowledging danger, and sexuality education) were nearly half as likely to report a completed rape over the following year, and about one-third as likely to report attempted rape, as women who were simply provided access to brochures on sexual assault (Senn et al., 2015).

In addition to this direct evidence that self-defense training prevents victimization, ESD training also enhances women’s ability to recognize threatening behaviors, increases their self-efficacy, and improves their physical competence (Brecklin, 2008; Hollander, 2014; McCaughey, 1997; Ozer & Bandura, 1990). These are all factors that increase their ability to respond effectively to threat (Norris, Nurius, & Dimeff, 1996). ESD training also changes women’s body language and self-presentation, which may reduce the likelihood that they will be perceived as vulnerable targets (Hollander, 2013).

Thus, the critique that women are not strong enough to defend themselves is based not on real-world evidence but on gender stereotypes and ideology, as well as on a narrow understanding of what self-defense training entails. It may also, as some writers have suggested, be rooted in discomfort with women’s empowerment and use of violence (McCaughey, 1997). In reality, even women with no self-defense training defend themselves effectively against violence; ESD training further enhances their power and effectiveness.

It doesn’t work all the time, or in all situations

Saying that “women learning self-defence” is the answer completely negates the assaults that happen to people who have physical disabilities, to young children, to old women who are physically infirm, to women who have been slipped any type of date rape drug, or plied with so much alcohol they’re incoherent. (Anonymous, 2014)

Even among women who are conscious, who do/can fight back, and have had self-defense training, [self-defense's] efficacy is not 100%. (McEwan, 2008)

Another critique of self-defense training is that it may not work, or work as well, in certain situations (e.g. when the target of assault is inebriated or impaired by drugs or when the perpetrator has a weapon) or for certain groups of people (e.g. women who have a physical or cognitive disability, are very old or very young, or are members of an already marginalized group (McEwan, 2008)).

The evidence for situational variation is mixed. Some studies have found that the effectiveness of physical resistance varies depending on characteristics of the target, the perpetrator, the relationship between them, or the environment (Bart & O'Brien, 1985; Kleck & Sayles, 1990). More recently, however, Clay-Warner's (2002) and Tark and Kleck's (2014) multivariate analyses of a large, nationally representative sample found that the effectiveness of self-defense strategies did not vary across situations. In either case, however, just because physical resistance may not stop all assaults does not mean that it is not a useful strategy. After all, we do not discard a cancer treatment if it is not 100% effective: we use it when it works, and turn to other treatments when it does not. And if it fails for one patient, we do not suggest that no other patient ever try it, or demand that funding for that treatment be withheld. And just as cancer treatment is generally a multipronged effort, most advocates see self-defense not as the sole solution to sexual violence, but as one part of a multidimensional effort (Flood, 2011; Gidycz & Dardis, 2014; Rozee & Koss, 2001; Senn et al., 2015).

Concerns about the usefulness of self-defense training for specific groups of women similarly overgeneralize from the difficulties experienced by a particular group to the entire population of women. In addition, these critiques rely on assumptions about the capabilities of these groups and the content of self-defense training. While it is true, for example, that not all women have the same ability to defend themselves physically, virtually all women are capable of some form of verbal or physical resistance (Madorsky, 1990), and self-defense training has been adapted for women who are physically disabled, visually impaired, developmentally disabled, very old, or very young (Brenick, Shattuck, Donlan, Duh, & Zurbriggen, 2014; David, Cotton, Simpson, & Weitlauf, 2004; Madorsky, 1990; Pava, Bateman, Appleton, & Glascock, 1991). Although research on these populations is sparse, there is evidence both that they may be interested in learning self-defense (David et al., 2004) and that such training may increase their confidence and skills (Dryden, Desmarais, & Arseneault, 2014; Madorsky, 1990; Pava et al., 1991).

Others hesitate to endorse self-defense training because they note, correctly, that certain groups of women (e.g. poor women, trans women, lesbian women, or women of color) are likely to be blamed and criminalized if they physically defend themselves (e.g. Law, 2012; Power, Cole, & Fredrickson, 2011). The recent case of Marissa Alexander, an African American woman sentenced to 20 years in prison after firing a warning shot near her physically abusive estranged husband (Eastman, 2015), attests to the very real risks that marginalized women

face in these situations. Many other similar cases of criminalization have been documented (Kaba, 2012; Law, 2012). For women in these groups, physical resistance may be as risky as the violence they are resisting, making the choice to resist more complex (Telsey, 1981).

Although these concerns are well founded, physical self-defense is only part of what women learn in ESD classes, and the misapprehension that self-defense is purely physical causes critics to miss the other ways that ESD training works to prevent violence. Awareness, avoidance, and de-escalation tactics may help to forestall assaults, even for women for whom physical self-defense may be difficult or impossible. Verbal self-defense may deter or interrupt assaults before they reach the point of physical confrontation. ESD training empowers women to choose the strategies that work best for their particular circumstances—their own abilities and status, the particulars of their assailant, and the resources available in their environment. Not every strategy may work in every situation or for every person, but when women are armed with this toolbox, they have more options than when they are not. It makes no sense to throw out the entire toolbox because the hammer does not effectively saw wood.

It's victim blaming

Why is the responsibility to stop rape always placed on the victim? The perpetrators of rape are the ones responsible for stopping it. (Miranda, 2010)

Self-defense classes for females, encouraging females to wear less-provocative clothes, or [encouraging] females to drink less alcohol – these are just some examples of how our society victim blames those who become survivors of sexual violence. (Georgia Network to End Sexual Assault, n.d.)

Critics frequently contend that self-defense training encourages victim blaming (Sanchez, 2014). These critiques take two forms. First, some argue that advocating self-defense implies that women are *responsible* for preventing or stopping violence. If women choose not to learn self-defense, choose not to use self-defense skills in an assault, or use them unsuccessfully, then the violence against them may be seen as their fault. Advocating self-defense for women, these critics contend, lets perpetrators off the hook, and forces women to shoulder the burden of prevention. As *Jezebel* blogger Rebecca Rose recently wrote, “College students shouldn’t have to ‘learn how to protect themselves.’ College men should ‘learn not to rape.’” (Rose, 2014)

Underlying this argument is the belief that the only appropriate targets for prevention efforts are those responsible for committing or facilitating violence (DeGue et al., 2014). This perspective has resulted in the recent, and welcome, focus on strategies that might influence perpetrator behavior or increase bystander intervention (e.g. Banyard, Moynihan, & Plante, 2007). But it is possible to

both lay blame for violence at the feet of perpetrators *and*, simultaneously, acknowledge that women can exert agency to reduce their chances of victimization (Senn, 2011). Indeed, in all the ESD classes I have observed, teachers go to great lengths to explicitly attribute responsibility for assault to perpetrators, not victims (Hollander, 2009; Telsey, 2001; Thompson, 2014). The National Women's Martial Arts Federation (NWMAF), one of the central advocates for ESD, addresses this concern explicitly in their requirements for instructor certification:

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, control, and abuse another human being. (National Women's Martial Arts Federation, n.d.)

The second type of critique focuses on the aftermath of violence, conjecturing that if women learn self-defense, but are unable to successfully use what they have learned in a subsequent attack, they will blame themselves for their assault (e.g. Basile, 2015; Colorado State University Women and Gender Advocacy Center, n.d.). Empirical research on this question, however, has found that women who are raped but physically resist are actually *less* likely to blame themselves for their assault (Bart & O'Brien, 1985; Rozee & Koss, 2001). Cermele speculates that learning self-defense may actually *reduce* women's likelihood of blaming themselves, because it "allows for the discussion of agency and victimization and creates space for exploration of victim-blaming and self-blame" (2004, p. 10). Two recent studies support this hypothesis, finding that women with ESD training who experienced a subsequent assault blamed themselves no more than similar women without self-defense training (Orchowski, Gidycz, & Raffle, 2008)—or even blamed themselves less (Gidycz et al., 2015).

Critics often compare calls for self-defense to other forms of advice to women, such as recommendations that they restrict their activities, drink less, or wear more modest clothing (see, e.g. Culp-Ressler, 2014; Georgia Network to End Sexual Assault, n.d.). But self-defense training differs in important ways from these other forms of self-protection recommended to women. Staying home, relying on others for protection, and monitoring one's clothing or behavior all *constrain* women's lives by reducing their access to public space, limiting their agency, or fostering their dependence on others (Rozee & Koss, 2001; Stanko, 1997). ESD training, in contrast, *expands* women's range of action, empowering them to claim public space, enter into relationships with others as equals, make their own choices about their behavior, and assert themselves in their everyday lives (McCaughey, 1997; Thompson, 2014). Of course, not all self-defense classes are alike, and some classes may indeed suggest that women restrict their lives in these ways. Empowerment-based self-defense classes, however, critique these limitations and instead argue that women have the right to move in the world as freely as men.

It doesn't focus on acquaintance assault

[Advocating self-defense] ignores the fact that over 80% of assaults are committed by someone known to the victim: tell me that you'd find it easy to beat the shit out of someone you love and thought you could trust! (Anonymous, 2014)

Some critics claim that self-defense training cannot play an effective role in sexual assault prevention because they assume its focus is limited to stranger assault (e.g. Colorado State University Women and Gender Advocacy Center, n.d.; DeKeseredy, 2014; Frazier & Falmagne, 2014; McEwan, 2008). Of course, it matters which type of self-defense class is under consideration, and some courses doubtless do focus exclusively on such scenarios. The Rape Aggression Defense (R.A.D.) curriculum, for example, frequently taught by police departments, focuses almost exclusively on stranger assaults (Schorn, 2015). ESD classes, however, devote substantial attention to the reality that most assaults are perpetrated by acquaintances and intimates, and teach verbal assertiveness skills and nonviolent physical skills appropriate for these kinds of situations (e.g. Gidycz & Dardis, 2014; Gidycz et al., 2015; Gidycz, Rich, Orchowski, King, & Miller, 2006; Hollander, 2004, 2014; Orchowski et al., 2008; Sarnquist et al., 2014; Senn et al., 2015; Sinclair et al., 2013).

Such classes improve women's ability to recognize abusive or threatening behavior (Rozee & Koss, 2001; Senn et al., 2015), an ability which is crucial to resisting acquaintance assaults (Norris et al., 1996). In some situations, and especially with strangers, this assessment is straightforward: someone enters a woman's home uninvited, makes explicit threats, or physically attacks her. Frequently, however, the situation is more ambiguous. A new acquaintance asks slightly-too-personal questions, a date exerts sexual pressure, or an employer makes off-color sexual jokes. Are these inappropriate but ultimately trivial behaviors, or are they the first sign of abuse that will continue to escalate? Making accurate appraisals may be particularly difficult when the social context is one that suggests affiliation and relaxation, such as a date or party (Norris et al., 1996). By making explicit the warning signs that predict men's violence against women (Rozee & Koss, 2001), ESD training facilitates more accurate assessments of these ambiguous situations.

In addition, comprehensive self-defense classes teach verbal assertiveness skills that enhance women's ability to stop assaults in their early stages, before they escalate to physical danger. Students practice setting and enforcing clear boundaries, which communicates to others that they know their own desires and will not be easily deterred from protecting them; this message itself may discourage potential assailants. Boundary setting is particularly useful in sexual situations with potential or even long-time intimate partners, where ambiguity and ambivalence can lead to situations which fall short of the legal definition of rape, but which are nonetheless not fully consensual (Gavey, 2005). In order to set and enforce boundaries, women must be aware of their own desires and believe in their right to assert those desires in a sexual situation; this practice can counteract the self-silencing that has been documented by Phillips (2000) and others. Many self-defense classes

also teach nonviolent physical skills that can communicate nonconsent without causing physical harm (Rentschler, 1999; Thompson, 2014). Women are more likely to use these nonviolent techniques with acquaintances (Bart & O'Brien, 1985; Clay-Warner, 2003; Ullman & Siegel, 1993). In sum, then, the critique that women's self-defense classes focus only on strangers is based on inaccurate assumptions about their content, at least for ESD courses.

It doesn't address the root causes of violence

Primary prevention does not include training women in self-defense courses because this strategy does not truly address any of the root causes of sexual violence. This strategy may indeed prevent someone from being sexually assaulted, but it does not impact the norms and systems that allow sexual violence to occur in the first place. In order to get to the root causes of sexual violence, strategies that seek to change attitudes, norms, beliefs, and behaviors must be implemented and systems that support the protective factors and decrease the risk factors for sexual violence must be developed and strengthened. (Indiana Sexual Violence Primary Prevention Council, n.d.)

Perhaps the most powerful critique of women's self-defense training is that it does not challenge the underlying causes of sexual assault. This critique grows out of the relatively recent shift toward "primary prevention," derived from the public health approach to preventing disease in populations.

Primary prevention has been defined in multiple ways. The Centers for Disease Control's definition is the most frequently referenced:

Sexual violence interventions can be divided into the following three categories:

- **Primary Prevention:** Approaches that take place *before* sexual violence has occurred to prevent initial perpetration or victimization.
- **Secondary Prevention:** Immediate responses *after* sexual violence has occurred to deal with the short-term consequences of violence.
- **Tertiary Prevention:** Long-term responses *after* sexual violence has occurred to deal with the lasting consequences of violence and sex offender treatment interventions.

(Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2004, p. 3)

This definition, together with the misunderstanding that self-defense means only the use of physical skills in assault situations, may underlie critics' contention that self-defense is not primary prevention, because they perceive it as something that is used only after an assault has begun. As I have argued above, however, ESD classes include awareness, avoidance, de-escalation, and verbal assertiveness, techniques that may deter an assault before it happens. Indeed, the finding that women with self-defense training report fewer attempted rapes than those with no training (Hollander, 2014; Senn et al., 2015) lends support to the idea that self-defense

training helps women deter assaults, as well as interrupting them once they are underway.

Other groups have defined primary prevention more narrowly. The Oregon Attorney General's Sexual Assault Task Force, for example, defines primary prevention as "focusing efforts on the root causes of sexual violence in order to stop it before it occurs. Primary efforts address the attitudes, behaviors, and conditions that support, condone, and lead to sexual violence" (2006, pp. 1–2). This narrower definition highlights another basis for the dismissal of self-defense training. Critics charge that, because it engages potential targets rather than perpetrators, self-defense training does not change the underlying causes of violence against women (Colorado State University Women and Gender Advocacy Center, n.d.; REACH of Macon County, n.d.). Even if self-defense training might prevent *victimization* for an individual, these critics argue, it does not prevent *perpetration*, or the overall prevalence of victimization in a population (DeGue et al., 2014; Swift, 1985). Perpetrators who are deterred by an empowered woman's resistance will simply go in search of a more vulnerable target (Lonsway, 1996).

The critique that self-defense does not address the root causes of violence relies on assumptions about what those root causes actually are. Some identify these causes simply as men's use of violence; to prevent sexual assault, then, we must focus on men, not on women. Comments that we should "teach men not to rape" are in this vein. Other arguments go deeper, focusing on social norms, systems, attitudes, and beliefs. This analysis is on the right track: sexual violence does not emerge from a vacuum but is rooted in societal attitudes and structures. In particular, it is facilitated by beliefs about gender difference and inequality: the notions that men and women are inherently different, that men are dominant and strong and women submissive and weak, that women are objects for men's pleasure, and that women are responsible for men's happiness, as well as their own victimization (Gavey, 2005; Hollander, 2001; Lorber, 1994; McCaughey, 1997; Phillips, 2000).

Where this critique goes wrong, however, is in its assumption that self-defense training cannot affect these factors. It assumes that self-defense training affects women in very limited ways, and, further, that whatever changes self-defense training produces do not affect anything or anyone beyond the women themselves. But this assumption is based on an atomized understanding of individuals and an impoverished notion of the role of interaction in the construction of social norms and practices.

We have good evidence that ESD training produces deep and sustained changes in the women who complete it. Women report that the tools they learn in ESD classes help them feel more confident in all areas of their lives (Hollander, 2004; McCaughey, 1997; Weitlauf, Cervone, Smith, & Wright, 2001). They describe new feelings of comfort in their bodies, new beliefs about women and men, and a more critical understanding of gender inequality (De Welde, 2003; Hollander, 2004; McCaughey, 1997). These are fundamental changes in a woman's sense of self; it is not unreasonable to think that such changes would affect those around her, including her family, friends, coworkers, children, and community (Hollander, 2013).

More immediately, it is also likely that self-defense training can affect would-be perpetrators directly, through the behavior of the women with whom they interact. The argument that perpetrators will respond to a self-protective woman by inevitably searching for an easier target makes sense only if perpetrators' behavior is governed solely by stable internal characteristics: if they are "bad guys" who would be bad in any situation. But individuals' behavior is shaped not only by internal traits but by social interactions, situations, and contexts (Heise, 1998; Swartout et al., 2015). This is not to suggest that women invite sexual assault, or that perpetrators are not solely responsible for their behavior. But behavior is determined in part by what is happening in the social context: what other people do and say, how situations are structured, and what opportunities and alternatives are available.

We know that if a woman forcefully defends herself, either verbally or physically, she is less likely to be raped. It is also plausible that a potential assailant, after encountering a woman who actively resists, may reconsider the wisdom of attempting assault—as may other would-be perpetrators who learn about the event. Consider, for example, a situation in which a woman thwarts an attempted rape by breaking the perpetrator's knee or gouging his eyes. Might not his assessment of the likely costs and benefits of assault be changed by such an interaction? And even if potential perpetrators do not experience women's use of physical self-defense, they may be influenced by changes in women's self-presentation and interactional style. Women who have completed a self-defense class say they now interact more comfortably and assertively with a range of other people, value their own feelings, and take seriously their right to be safe and respected (De Welde, 2003; Hollander, 2004; McCaughey, 1997). These changes may influence those with whom they interact, modeling assertive behavior to other women and girls and serving notice to potential perpetrators that they will not suffer abuse (Flood, 2011). And these individual interactions, cumulated over time, hold the possibility for changing interactions, behaviors, and beliefs (McCaughey, 1997). In other words, if self-defense training changes the ways women interact with their potentially violent acquaintances, then it may prevent perpetration as well as victimization, and both types of changes may affect the "root causes" of violence.³

Moreover, the more women who are trained in self-defense, the greater the impact these encounters will have. If every woman in a community were trained in self-defense, then perpetrators would have no other, more vulnerable target to turn to. Women trained in self-defense may also better recognize and interrupt impending assaults of other women (Telsey, 1981). Perhaps the label "self-defense" is a misnomer, because it focuses attention on changes to the self without acknowledging that those self-changes also affect others.

Conclusions

My local weekly paper recently asked residents, "Should women have self-defense training? Or should men have training in how not to be violent?" (Sullivan, 2014). This framing of solutions to sexual violence as *either* perpetrator-focused *or*

target-focused oversimplifies the problem and falsely dichotomizes the changes necessary to solve it. Sexual assault is a complex social problem that is deeply rooted in culture and social structure but manifested in individual behavior. Solving the problem of sexual violence is not a matter of choosing between perpetrator-focused and target-focused strategies; a complex social problem requires that we address it on multiple fronts and in multiple ways. Ultimately, changes in social norms, gender expectations, and social structures will be required to fundamentally alter the social conditions that facilitate this violence.

Unfortunately, efforts to change these social conditions have so far proved unsuccessful (DeGue et al., 2014; Gidycz & Dardis, 2014; Rozee & Koss, 2001). Bystander education training (Banyard et al., 2007) is one recent and promising intervention; however, even if bystanders can be trained to effectively intervene in the early stages of a sexual assault, this is not a sufficient prevention strategy, as many assaults occur when no bystander is present.⁴ Other recent attempts to influence the larger culture include social media campaigns, educational video games, and building healthy relationship skills, but there is as yet little evidence of their effectiveness.

While the further development of these long-term strategies is vitally important, they cannot be our only approaches to preventing sexual assault. Focusing only on long-term strategies effectively condemns millions of women to suffering sexual violence before the day when sexual assault becomes rare—a day which, as far as we can tell, is still quite distant (Rozee, 2011). And even then, it is unlikely that sexual assault would disappear, as social change is always imperfect and incomplete (Flood, 2011).

In addition to long-term, society-changing solutions, we urgently need short-term strategies that can be implemented immediately to prevent the sexual assaults that are happening now: this hour, this week, this year. Most such strategies have proved to be inadequate: one-shot education sessions on college campuses, for example, are ineffective (Anderson & Whiston, 2005; Breitenbecher & Scarce, 1999), and advice to women to monitor their surroundings, their clothing, or their drinks constrains women's freedom and encourages victim blaming. Empowerment-based self-defense training is the only immediately effective prevention strategy that has been demonstrated to reduce rates of victimization (Hollander, 2014; Sarnquist et al., 2014; Senn et al., 2015; Sinclair et al., 2013) without unacceptably constraining women's lives. In addition to reducing victimization, ESD training also has a host of other benefits for women. Here the evidence is considerable: ESD training decreases women's fear and anxiety and increases their confidence and self-esteem (Brecklin, 2008; Hollander, 2004, 2014; McCaughey, 1997; Ozer & Bandura, 1990; Weitlauf et al., 2001).

Empowerment-based self-defense training may also, as I have discussed above, foster long-term changes in social norms and beliefs about gender held by both women and men. ESD training transforms women's sense of themselves and their understanding of gender; these changes affect how they interact with others and may be transmitted, both directly and indirectly, to others. The effective use of self-defense in an assault situation may cause potential perpetrators to revise their

beliefs about women—and the same may be true for others who witness or hear about the event.

Primary prevention has been too narrowly interpreted to mean an exclusive focus on potential perpetrators. While targeting perpetrators is both essential and long overdue, the root cause of violence against women is not simply individual men, but a social system that devalues women and encourages and excuses men's aggression. This system affects the beliefs and values of both men *and* women; although women are not responsible for the violence perpetrated against them, they nonetheless hold many of the same ideas that devalue women. Self-defense training challenges those ideas, and thereby challenges the gender system that facilitates sexual violence.

Recent critiques of women's self-defense training, expressed by research and funding agencies and the general public, are mistaken. As I have argued above, they are based on three misunderstandings. First, they rely on misconceptions about what self-defense training is, including the belief that it involves only the use of physical strategies in an assault situation. In part these misunderstandings may be due to the very diverse group of training practices that call themselves "self-defense." While many may be beneficial to women, to date only comprehensive, empowerment-based self-defense training has been demonstrated to reduce the risk of victimization and to produce the changes that I argue may influence perpetrators and result in cultural change. This diversity suggests the need for comparative research on a wider range of self-defense classes, for evidence-based standards for women's self-defense training, and for greater attention to instructor certification such as that offered by the NWMAF (National Women's Martial Arts Federation, n.d.).

Second, critiques of women's self-defense training both stem from and reinforce stereotypes about gender, especially the notion that women need protection from others (men, organizations, the state) because they are unable to protect themselves. Women *are* owed the protection of organizations and the state, of course, as are men. But research on women's resistance to violence, and on the effectiveness of ESD training, makes clear that they have the capacity to defend themselves from violence; the belief that women cannot protect themselves is simply incorrect.

Finally, critiques of self-defense as "victim-blaming" or as ineffective at addressing the root causes of violence are based on a simplistic understanding of how self-defense training might affect women, including survivors. Self-defense training does focus on what women can do to reduce their risk of violence. But unlike other "risk reduction" tactics, ESD training empowers women, expanding rather than limiting their freedom. It fosters changes in women that may have ripple effects that go far beyond the individual to all those with whom they interact and to the culture as a whole. And contrary to common assumptions, women who have learned self-defense are *not* more likely to blame themselves if they are assaulted; indeed, they may blame themselves less because they better understand the social conditions that produce sexual assault.

It is possible, of course, that some people will interpret support for self-defense training to mean that women are responsible for preventing violence and that they should be blamed if they are unsuccessful. But some people's faulty interpretations

are not an adequate reason to ignore—and deny women access to—a powerful strategy for preventing violence. It is a reason to say, repeatedly and forcefully, that self-defense should not be the only strategy employed, and that perpetrators, not victims, are responsible for violence—and ultimately, for stopping violence. It is also a reason to widely disseminate the research findings that women's active resistance is often successful in stopping the violence against them, even when they have not been formally trained in self-defense (Clay-Warner, 2002; Tark & Kleck, 2014; Ullman, 2007).

Of course, many questions remain to be answered about self-defense training. Empowerment-based self-defense courses are only a subset of what is available to women. Are other types of courses equally valuable? And if not, are there inequities in access to high-quality courses? ESD classes, for example, are often taught on college campuses or for relatively large fees in the community. Are poorer women—who are arguably in greater need of self-defense training—less able to access these courses? Further, do self-defense classes impact all women equally, or do some groups of women (differentiated by age, prior victimization, race, etc.) benefit more or less? How do the skills women learn in self-defense classes intersect with what they already have learned from their past experiences? And do the changes women report after learning self-defense affect those around them, as I have speculated here?

Further research, including rigorous evaluation of a range of self-defense courses, is clearly needed. However, it is clear now that holistic, empowerment-based self-defense classes are highly effective in both preventing violence and empowering women, without blaming victims, limiting women's lives, or perpetuating harmful stereotypes about women. Self-defense training is not the only answer to the problem of sexual assault, but it deserves a place in our portfolio of strategies, especially because it can produce immediate results. Denying women access to information that could help them avoid assault, because of misguided notions that prevention should focus only on men, disempowers women, and contributes to gender inequality.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for the broad community of self-defense and sexual violence scholars and instructors who supported me in this work. In particular, I thank the attendees at the Nag's Heart conferences on sexual violence and rape prevention, and the participants in the Self-Defense Action Group. In addition, this article was strengthened by thoughtful comments from the reviewers and editors at *Feminism & Psychology*.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. In padded-attacker courses, women practice physical self-defense skills full-force against heavily padded mock assailants in realistic scenarios.
2. It is important to note that despite these commonalities, there are significant differences among the programs I categorize here as ESD. Not all programs have been systematically evaluated, so we cannot assume that effects found for one program will necessarily be found in all other programs. Moreover, not all programs have published curricula; I base my categorization of these programs on their published descriptions.
3. See McCaughey and Cermele (2015) for a different, but complementary, argument that self-defense should be considered primary prevention.
4. In addition, see McCaughey and Cermele (2015) for an analysis of the “hidden curriculum” of bystander intervention training.

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