"I Can Take Care of Myself"

The Impact of Self-Defense Training on Women's Lives

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Feminist self-defense classes teach skills for preventing and responding to violence. However, self-defense training has many other positive effects on women's lives—effects that themselves may reduce women's risk of assault. In this article the author offers evidence of these effects drawn from a longitudinal study of self-defense training. In addition to increased confidence in potentially dangerous situations, self-defense students reported more comfortable interactions with strangers, acquaintances, and intimates; more positive feelings about their bodies; increased self-confidence; and transformed beliefs about women, men, and gender. The author suggests that self-defense classes are life transforming because they address three issues central to women's lives: fear of sexual assault, self, and gender.

Keywords: *fear; gender; resistance; self-defense*

The goal of feminist self-defense classes is to teach women the skills they need to prevent and respond to violence. These classes are distinguished by their attention to two related dimensions of women's experience. First, the specific focus of these classes is sexual violence against women, including rape and sexual

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I owe thanks to many people for their support of this project. First, my thanks to the self-defense students, instructors, and facilitators for their willingness to share their experiences with me. I am also grateful to the participants in the 2000 and 2001 Nag's Heart conferences on violence against women for their advice and enthusiasm in the early stages of the research. The Center for the Study of Women in Society and the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Oregon provided financial support. Thanks to Rachel Einwohner, Lynn Fujiwara, Linda Fuller, Mimi Goldman, Patty Gwartney, Judy Howard, Ken Hudson, Ellen McWhirter, Sandi Morgen, Ellen Scott, Jean Stockard, and Nadia Telsey for support and feedback at various stages of this project. Thanks also to my research assistant, Emerald Bogue, for excellent literature reviews. Finally, I am deeply grateful to Chris Halaska for survey design, endless technical support, and most important, believing in this project.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN, Vol. 10 No. 3, March 2004 205-235
DOI: 10.1177/1077801203256202
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assault, although the lessons learned may also be applicable to other types of violence, from sexual harassment to nonsexual assault to relationship violence. Classes are generally limited to female students, because women are far more likely than men to experience sexual violence, and the physical skills taught are well-suited for women's bodies (i.e., they tend to rely on lower rather than upper body strength), for rapid learning, and for sexual assault situations. These classes contrast with traditional martial arts training (generally a long-term course of study where defensive skills may take years to develop) and much traditional self-defense training (which, like martial arts training, is not generally focused on sexual assault situations or physical techniques adapted to women's bodies).

Second, feminist self-defense classes address the gender socialization and inequalities that make physical and verbal self-defense challenging for many women. As Searles and Follansbee (1984) wrote,

> Traditionally, women have been socialized to believe that they are the "weaker sex." Females socialized into the conventional feminine role have been taught to be passive, dependent, emotional, helpless, inadequate, ladylike, inactive, and incapable of protecting themselves. In order to avoid being victimized, they have been encouraged to limit their mobility and to rely for protection on men—fathers, boyfriends, husbands, police officers—or other external agents such as large barking dogs or burglar alarms. The emphasis on being soft, gentle, and ladylike has further hampered women as it has discouraged them from developing their physical potential and from expressing anger or aggression in any active or physical way. Taught not to rely on themselves and discouraged from developing the capabilities to be able to do so, females have thus been trained to be good victims. (p. 66)

Feminist classes address these issues head-on by including substantial training in assertiveness (verbal self-defense) and discussion of psychological and emotional issues surrounding both violence against women and self-defense. This contrasts with both martial arts training and nonfeminist self-defense classes, which may not recognize or address the psychological and emotional issues at stake for women.[1]

Self-defense classes are only one of many possible strategies for preventing violence against women; others include rape educa-

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tion programs instituted in many high schools and colleges, escort services on college campuses, security devices such as personal alarms, chemical sprays, safety precautions (e.g., locking doors or using the "buddy system" when out alone at night), legal reform, and increased police presence. However, unlike most other safety measures, self-defense classes begin with the assumption that women have the ability to protect themselves, rather than relying on others for protection.[2] Conventional safety advice and many traditional self-defense classes teach women to present a "profaned self" characterized by ineptness, fear, and incompetence (Gardner, 1990). In contrast, feminist self-defense classes facilitate the development of a self-presentation that is strong and competent.

Does self-defense training reduce violence against women? There is as yet no research that clearly answers this question, although there is a host of circumstantial evidence that suggests that self-defense training should be effective. First, it is clear that resistance reduces the risk of sexual assault for women. Experts estimate that fewer than 25% of rape attempts are completed (Gordon & Riger, 1989). In the majority of attempts, then, the intended victim escapes or fends off the attacker. Summarizing the small but consistent body of research on resistance to sexual assault, Ullman (1997) concluded that forceful physical resistance (fighting), nonforceful physical resistance (e.g., fleeing or pulling away), and forceful verbal resistance (e.g., yelling or threatening) are consistently associated with rape avoidance (see also Bart & O'Brien, 1985; Kleck & Sayles, 1990; Siegel, Sorenson, Golding, Burnam, & Stein, 1989; Ullman & Knight, 1991, 1992). Moreover, recent research (Ullman, 1998; Ullman & Knight, 1992) has demonstrated that resisting assault does not increase women's risk of serious injury, countering a long-standing myth. It is not yet clear, however, whether self-defense *training* enhances women's resistance to threatened violence. As Madden and Sokol (1997) wrote,

> It is not likely that many of the women reflected in the [research] studies had any self-defense training, yet they were effective. . . . Imagine how much more effective they might have been—how much more quickly they might have ended the assaults—had they had some training about what works best. (pp. 135-136)

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Second, although there has been no research on the relationship between self-defense training and subsequent victimization, learning self-defense has been shown to affect women in ways that are consistent with reduced victimization. For example, immediately after taking a self-defense class, women report lower levels of fear and greater confidence in their ability to defend themselves (Cohn, Kidder, & Harvey, 1978; McCaughey, 1997; McDaniel, 1993; Ozer & Bandura, 1990; Weitlauf, Smith, & Cervone, 2000) and are judged to have effective fighting skills in mock attack scenarios (Ozer & Bandura, 1990). These changes occurred in both survivors of sexual assault and women who had never experienced violence (Ozer & Bandura, 1990). There is also anecdotal evidence about the real-world utility of self-defense training: Many self-defense organizations collect success stories from their graduates, who contribute narratives of how they have used their training in real-life situations (e.g., Bay Area Model Mugging, n.d.; FullPower, n.d.; see also Caignon & Groves, 1987).

In this article, I argue that feminist self-defense training may also reduce women's risk of assault by changing their sense of self, their beliefs about women, and their interactions with the world around them. These interactions include but extend far beyond their responses to stereotypically dangerous situations. Indeed, these changes pervade every aspect of women's lives: their feelings about themselves; their feelings about others; their interactions with strangers, acquaintances, employers, and teachers; and their relationships with intimates. Although other research has suggested these effects (e.g., McCaughey, 1997), we have as yet no systematic evidence of how self-defense training affects women's everyday lives.

In this article, I offer evidence of these changes, drawn from the first phase of a longitudinal study of self-defense training. When complete, this study will address the question of whether self-defense training helps women to prevent or resist subsequent violence. However, even the short-term results provide evidence of the pervasive changes that self-defense training effects in women students' lives. These changes are consistent with a reduced risk of violence and an increased likelihood of resistance to assault. These results suggest that feminist self-defense training changes students' understanding of both self and gender—changes that may make them less vulnerable to violence.

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METHOD

The data presented here are drawn from surveys of women who enrolled in two feminist self-defense classes taught at a major state university in the western United States.[3] This class has been taught at the university by the same (female) instructor for over 10 years, and in the surrounding community for over 20 years. The class is currently offered through the Women's Studies Program for academic credit.

The class includes 45 hours of instruction over the 10-week academic quarter: 3 hours per week of physical and verbal self-defense training plus required weekly 1.5-hour discussion sections. The class includes instruction and practice in physical and verbal self-defense skills, as well as awareness and prevention strategies and information about violence against women. Physical techniques are practiced in slow motion against other class members and full force against pads held by the instructor and her several assistants; unlike "model mugging"-type classes, padded "attackers" are not used. There is extensive time for discussion and attention to the psychological and emotional aspects of violence against women and self-defense. The class fits the criteria for effective self-defense classes laid out by the National Coalition Against Sexual Assault (NCASA) (n.d.) and other writers (e.g., Madden & Sokol, 1997; Searles & Follansbee, 1984) and is similar to other feminist self-defense classes offered around the nation (e.g., see Cummings, 1992; Rentschler, 1999).

Thirty-six of the 60 women enrolled in the two classes volunteered to participate in this research. Each participant completed a survey at the beginning and end of the self-defense class. The surveys were written and self-administered in a private room; each took an average of 45 minutes to complete. The first survey included questions about previous experiences of violence, fear of violence, beliefs about violence (including rape myths), perceptions of danger, use of safety strategies, physical activities, body perceptions, previous self-defense training, media exposure, beliefs about women and gender, and demographic information. The second survey repeated many of these measures and in addition asked about women's experiences in the self-defense class and about experiences of danger and violence since beginning the

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class. The surveys included both closed- and open-ended questions, and both original measures and preexisting scales, including the Sexual Experiences Survey (Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987), a modified version of the Self-Defense Self-Efficacy Scale (Weitlauf et al., 2000), the Rape Myths Acceptance Scale (Payne, Lonsway, & Fitzgerald, 1999), the Physical Self-Efficacy Scale (Ryckman, Robbins, Thornton, & Cantrell, 1982), and the short form of the Liberal Feminism Ideology Scale (Morgan, 1996). Prior sexual victimization was assessed through a two-stage process, including behaviorally specific screen questions followed by incident reports that gathered detailed information on specific episodes of sexual violence, similar to the methods used in the recent National College Women Sexual Victimization study (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000).

The 36 participants ranged in age from 19 to 25, with a mean age of 21. Most had junior or senior class standing, although 1 was a freshman, 1 was a sophomore, and 2 were graduate students. Of the 35 who answered the question about race, 28 identified themselves as White, 3 as Asian or Pacific Islander, 1 as Latina, 1 as Arab American, and 2 as mixed race. Four self-identified as lesbian and 3 as bisexual; the remainder said they were heterosexual.

Although other writers have reported that sexual assault survivors are more likely than other women to enroll in self-defense classes (Huddleston, 1991), this did not seem to be true for the present sample: There were no significant differences in the rate of prior victimization between these self-defense students and the 128 other students not enrolled in a self-defense class who were surveyed during the same quarters.[4] Among the self-defense students, 9 women reported prior experiences that met the legal definition of rape, whereas 5 additional women (as well as 8 of the women who also reported rape) reported an attempted rape. In most of these incidents, known others gave the women alcohol or drugs to try to induce sexual compliance; only 8 of these 22 cases involved force, and no cases involved strangers. As with Koss's (1985) studies of college women, most of these were "unacknowledged rapes": Only 3 participants answered yes to the question, "Have you ever been raped?" Finally, 26 women (including all but 1 of those who reported an attempted or completed rape) reported experiences of unwanted sexual contact or coercion[5] that did not meet the legal definition of rape; again, the proportion of

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women reporting these experiences was similar in the larger non-self-defense sample. Altogether, only 9 women in the self-defense sample unequivocally reported no unwanted sexual experiences.

This group is, of course, a limited sample of self-defense students. In addition to the small sample size, the location of the study (a midsized town in the Pacific Northwest) means that the participants, reflecting the larger state population, are mostly White. Moreover, the fact that the self-defense class was offered through the university means that the sample is limited to young women with higher than average educational attainment and class status. Results, therefore, are not generalizable beyond university populations.

Despite these limitations, the results described below are still useful. First, university students are one of the major groups of women who enroll in feminist self-defense classes. Typically, such classes are offered in two locations: in educational settings such as universities and in community settings, usually through non-profit organizations; thus university students are an important constituency for self-defense training nationwide. Moreover, it is appropriate to focus on college-aged women because younger women are at a particularly high risk of sexual assault (Fisher et al., 2000; Koss et al., 1987). According to the National Women's Study, 22.2% of sexual assaults occur between the ages of 18 and 24 (National Victim Center, 1992). Moreover, many current sexual assault prevention programs are aimed at college populations. Recent studies have found that these rape prevention programs, which often focus on changing knowledge and attitudes about rape and teaching women safety precautions, do not reduce the incidence of sexual assault (Breitenbecher & Gidycz, 1998; Breitenbecher & Scarce, 1999). The efficacy of self-defense training programs, in contrast, has not yet been assessed. Although the sample employed here has limitations, it provides a useful starting point that can be the basis for later work on other types of populations.

RESULTS

What was most striking about responses to the second survey (administered at the end of the self-defense class) was how deeply the class had affected the students' lives, as well as how consistent

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these effects were across the 36 students. Some effects were felt in situations the participants perceived to be potentially dangerous—in other words, in the kinds of situations self-defense classes are explicitly designed to address. Below, I begin by describing two types of such changes: in the strategies the students use to keep themselves safe and in their responses to potentially dangerous situations. However, the effects of self-defense training were not limited to these dangerous situations but also affected many other aspects of the students' everyday lives. I focus on five areas in which changes were most salient: interactions with strangers, interactions with known others (acquaintances, friends, employers, teachers, and intimates), feelings about one's body, perceived self-confidence, and beliefs about women, men, and gender. In the conclusion of the article, I discuss how these changes themselves may make women less vulnerable to male violence.

SAFETY STRATEGIES

Not surprisingly, many participants (31) claimed that the self-defense class had changed their daily practices intended to prevent or avoid dangerous situations. Some of these changes involved implementing simple, commonsense precautions, such as locking doors more often, leaving a porch light on, checking the identification of those who come to the door, or getting one's keys out before approaching one's home or car. Others, however, involved heightened awareness, as these comments reflect[6]: "Mainly my changes have been in my habits. I try to be aware of my surroundings and have confident body language." "I avoid walking home at night as much as possible. I keep aware of my physical surroundings." "I use my intuition."

It is important to note that changes in safety precautions were probably the least salient of all the changes participants reported in the follow-up surveys. This is notable because of the heavy attention to such strategies in other, nonfeminist self-defense classes and in safety advice offered to women by police and other authorities (Stanko, 1996). This kind of advice is problematic in several ways. First, most women already have a well-developed sense of fear and an elaborate set of precautions they take to keep themselves safe (Gordon & Riger, 1989; Rozee & Koss, 2001;

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Stanko, 1996). There is also evidence that employing such precautions does not reduce the risk of victimization (Kaniasty & Norris, 1992), perhaps because most sexual assaults are committed by acquaintances, whereas nearly all safety strategies (including those described by these participants) are intended to repel strangers. These kinds of safety precautions also place the responsibility for preventing sexual assault on women's shoulders, while letting perpetrators off the hook (McCaughey, 1997). Finally, most safety strategies limit women's activities and freedom, keep them from fully using public space and citizenship, and encourage their dependence on men for protection (Burton, 1998; Riger & Gordon, 1981; Stanko, 1990).

Feminist self-defense classes avoid some of these pitfalls—while not encouraging women to be foolhardy—by directly confronting the consequences (both positive and negative) of using such precautions. For example, an assignment for this class asked students to assess the preventative measures they currently employ. The assignment begins by addressing the social context of such precautions:

> Taking preventative measures is a matter of individual choice. At some point there are diminishing returns for steps you take—you give up too much freedom or trust for the additional amount of safety you gain. What is important is that you are aware of the tips, aware of your choices, aware of the risks you take. We shouldn't HAVE TO do any of these, yet circumstances dictate doing at least some is in our interest.

With this framing of the issue, the students are able to make a conscious choice about whether and when to use such strategies, as suggested by this student's comment: "I know that there are precautions I can take that won't drastically change my lifestyle (like keeping doors and windows locked when I'm home or away)." This student clearly recognizes the trade-off between safety precautions and freedom and has made deliberate choices to increase her safety. This is a very different approach to safety than the fear-driven "more is always better" approach to safety precautions encouraged by many authorities and purveyors of commercial safety devices.

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POTENTIALLY DANGEROUS SITUATIONS

The time between the initial and follow-up survey was only 10 weeks; unsurprisingly, few women had experienced any kind of threatened or actual assault during that period. A number of respondents, however, described using their new skills in situations they perceived to be potentially dangerous; it is conceivable that their use of these strategies prevented violence that might otherwise have occurred. Some of these situations were stereotypical assault situations in which women were approached outside at night:

> I was walking in an alley with a female friend at 2 a.m. A man approached us using ploys, testing, lying. I told him to leave so we could walk home without him.
>
> I was followed one night by this old drunk guy. He started asking me a question—"Do you want to hear a story?" I looked him in the eye and said no. Then he said, "Don't be scared, little girl." I looked at him and said, "I'm not scared." And I kept walking. He left me alone after I told him I wasn't scared.
>
> I was walking to a bar to meet some friends. Some of them were already in the bar. . . . A man who was strung out on something passed us and said to me, "You dykes are going to get your asses kicked out here." I felt threatened. He followed us back to the bicycle rack in front of the car. He tried talking to me and started yelling "What's your problem?" I told him to leave me alone. He left.

In each of these cases, the writer successfully used newly learned assertiveness strategies to manage a potentially threatening situation. Other stories involved strangers in more public situations, such as football games:

> I was at a football game, and some boys (strangers) were making very crude and inappropriate names toward me. I tried to ignore them at first, but then I felt like they went too far—so I turned around and confronted them and used the three-part statement[7] to express my feelings. They were dumbfounded and were silent, so I said, "Thank-you, hope you enjoyed the game," and walked away.
>
> I attended a game a few weeks back and a drunk man put his arm around me, so I looked him straight in the eye and said "excuse me" in a stern voice. It worked!

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Thirty-five of the 36 participants indicated that taking the self-defense class had increased their perceived safety; the same number said the class had increased their confidence in their ability to defend themselves from violence:

> I feel more in control of situations and I am no longer terrified when walking alone at night; I trust my intuition and I feel as if the chance I would be chosen as a victim is low due to my attitude and my energy/confidence.
>
> I haven't been in a situation where I was attacked, but I feel much safer and more confident. I *can* take care of myself and handle situations as they come.
>
> I feel that now I present myself with more confidence which may deter attackers. I also feel I have the tools to defend myself if need be.
>
> I have way more confidence in my ability to stop a potential assault, and I'm not scared as much any more. I was followed one night, and I used some strategies that made the man stop following me. I feel much safer in my skin now.

It is clear from these comments that two parallel changes have taken place here: Women have developed confidence in their physical ability to defend themselves and have also developed a more general confidence in themselves—in their ability to recognize a dangerous situation and to respond to such situations if they occur—which in itself decreases their risk of assault. These two interrelated changes transform women's relationship to the world around them.

The participants' responses to the closed-ended survey questions also demonstrated their increased confidence in dealing with potentially dangerous situations. On both surveys, participants were asked to indicate, on a 7-point scale (where 1 = *not effectively at all* and 7 = *very effectively*), how effectively they felt that they would be able to defend themselves if a stranger attacked them. Before the class, the average answer was 4.2; after the class, the average had risen to 6.0 ($t = -7.443$, $p < .001$). Similarly, students' average scores on the Self-Defense Self-Efficacy Scale (Weitlauf et al., 2000), which measures confidence in one's ability to enact six behaviorally specific types of physical self-defense, rose from an average of 31 to an average of 48 out of a

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possible 60 points ($t = -11.067$, $p < .001$). Clearly, the participants' perceived abilities and confidence had grown.

Importantly, the participants in this class did *not* say that learning more about violence against women had made them more fearful or, alternatively, made them fearless or overconfident. Rather, they professed a heightened awareness of danger, but an increased confidence that they can cope with violence:

> The fear is still there, but now I know that I can do something.
>
> I feel like I know when to be afraid now. Intuition gives you an acute sense of fear . . . it doesn't need to *convince* you to be scared. I know that when I am scared, I should do something about it (leave, call someone, etc.) rather than cower.
>
> I'm more aware of myself—my environment and my powers—so I feel safer. I'm also at the same time more knowledgeable about violence and the realities of it. So my fear is angled now in a more accurate direction where before it was so scattered by the stereotypes of rapes, abusers, etc.

On the closed-ended questions about fear and danger, the students' generalized fear for their own safety was unchanged. However, their average sense of worry or unease in a variety of specific situations—being at home, walking through parking lots, going to movies or plays, using public transportation, going to clubs or bars, and using laundromats (all alone and after dark)—decreased, and these changes were statistically significant. These findings, and the quotes above, are consistent with psychological research on the relationship between coping capabilities and fear or anxiety. When people believe they can cope with threats, they experience less anxiety, even if the threats still exist (Ozer & Bandura, 1990).

INTERACTIONS WITH STRANGERS

Participants were asked whether the self-defense class had helped them deal with a variety of people, both strangers and known others. The participants reported that the self-defense class had helped them deal with strangers: Virtually all answered yes to this question. They provided a variety of examples of these changes. Many focused on their use of public space and their own body language when dealing with strangers, as in these com-

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ments: "I don't move out of the way on the street anymore and I take up more space." "If I am walking down the street about to pass a man I will *not* move out of the way." "I started using eye contact with every person I walked by. I used to always look down to avoid confrontation." "I walk confidently and with purpose with my arms swinging along with me—I TAKE UP SPACE. I speak louder, laugh louder, I make eye contact, I resist smiling at everyone if I don't want to."

Other changes focused on verbal interactions with strangers. Here, too, the participants said they were more aware of their own boundaries and more able to communicate their needs to others:

> I feel more entitled to be assertive and maintain my boundaries, whereas I used to feel I was being rude.
>
> Being direct and honest about how I feel/think is a very beneficial thing that can translate from one scenario to the next. Being sure and assertive of who I am, my thoughts, and my space improves the kinds of relationships you do have.
>
> I am less afraid and more assertive and straight forward (I don't feel like I always have to smile and be friendly).
>
> When a petitioner was bugging me to sign papers, I turned to him, looked him in the eye, and said, "No, I don't want to sign your papers." He left. The best thing about it is that I didn't even hesitate. I held eye contact the whole time.
>
> I don't feel like I have to explain myself to strangers at a bar. "No" is enough.

Self-defense training changes women's interactional patterns with strangers, even when those interactions do not threaten violence. In this way, self-defense training literally trains women to defend their *selves*—not only their physical and sexual selves, but their psychological and emotional selves as well.

INTERACTIONS WITH KNOWN OTHERS

Although many women's fears center on assault by strangers (Gordon & Riger, 1989; Hollander, 2001; Stanko, 1992), the average woman is at much higher risk of assault by an acquaintance or intimate. Recent studies have found that at least 85% of attempted or completed sexual assaults against women are at the hands of

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known others (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). Indeed, *all* the past unwanted sexual experiences described by the participants in this class, and by the other 128 women in the larger sample, were perpetrated by friends, acquaintances, relatives, or intimates. Accordingly, it is important to examine whether the strategies learned in self-defense classes are also effective when interacting with known others.

Overwhelmingly, the participants in this research reported that the class had helped them deal with friends and acquaintances (29 out of 36 said yes, whereas 4 were not sure). Some of these experiences were potentially threatening situations, as in these examples:

> When my friend's boyfriend got belligerently drunk, tried to hit on me and called me a bitch I used three-part statements and assertive voice and saying "NO!" I said, "John, you are making me feel very uncomfortable. You are being very rude and invading my space—it is NOT okay and I want you to leave."

> My best friend's boyfriend pushed me onto a bed and started "playfully" tickling me. He was DRUNK and I was too but I was frightened when he got on top of me. I was disgusted, yelled "Get OFF ME!" and slapped him. He called me some name and stumbled out of the room.

These situations are especially notable because they resemble many of the acquaintance assault experiences participants reported happening in the past, before they had begun the self-defense class. In these situations, trusted friends or acquaintances became threatening and coerced or forced women into unwanted sexual contact or intercourse. After completing the course, the participants felt significantly more prepared to respond to these types of situations; their average assessment of how effective they would be in defending themselves if an acquaintance or intimate attacked them rose from 4.4 (on a 7-point scale) at the beginning of the class to 6.0 at the end ($t = -5.418$, $p < .001$).

The first comment above is also notable because the participant reports using specific assertiveness (verbal self-defense) strategies learned in the class. Indeed, all but 4 of the 36 participants reported on the second survey that they had already used their newly learned assertiveness strategies in their everyday lives; the

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TABLE 1
Types of Assertiveness Strategies Used by Self-Defense Students

Strategy	*Number Reporting Use of Strategy* (n = *36)*
Body language/taking up space	30
Eye contact	27
Assertive voice	26
Using intuition	26
Saying "no"	23
Active listening	19
Avoidance	19
Three-part statements	17
Verbal principles or strategies	12
Recognizing ploys, clues, and testing	12
De-escalation	10
Broken record	4

average number of strategies reported was 6.5, as illustrated in Table 1.

Clearly, the assertiveness and awareness strategies taught in self-defense classes have immediate value to students. As one said, "I use these techniques in my life every day." Moreover, these skills are perceived to be the key to implementing the physical self-defense skills learned in the class. As one student wrote,

> Self-defense is not only understanding the physical elements of protection, but also getting in touch with the person inside. I could know all the physical skills known to woman, but if I did not feel confident or assertive, my knowledge would be useless.

This student echoes a claim made by many who have taught and studied self-defense: "Highly developed physical protection skills are useless if a woman does not have the mental preparedness and sense of self-worth that will enable her to use her physical skills" (Searles & Follansbee, 1984, p. 67). As described above, feminist self-defense focuses explicitly on these issues; they are not considered separable from the physical self-defense techniques.

The students report using assertiveness strategies with a wide variety of people. Some reported using these strategies with strangers or in threatening situations with acquaintances, as

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described in the previous section. Others reported using their newfound skills with friends or acquaintances in situations that they did not perceive to be dangerous: "I have used many of these techniques in social and party situations. And I have also used some of these strategies with my roommates during arguments." "I've been using three-part statements quite a bit, just in day-to-day conversation. I find it's a great tool for expressing myself without getting into an argument." "I discuss things with my friends instead of leaving things bothering me." "[I used] saying 'no'—to a roommate always asking for favors (without explanation I said 'no')." "I'm more assertive with some of my male friends now." These changes seem to affect the quality of their relationships, as well as specific interactions: "Friends count on me in situations—they see my confidence." "I feel empowered and they [friends] feel it too, so a different level of respect has risen."

A majority of the respondents (22 of 36) also indicated that the class had helped them deal with intimate partners, as in these comments: "All in all I feel more justified in my feelings whatever they may be, and I speak my mind more than I ever did in the past. I am less self-conscious of appearing rude." "My partner knows that when something offends or upsets me I will say something about it." "With my boyfriend I have learned to be more assertive and to use the assertive voice. Generally I was very passive with him but now I notice I stand up for what I believe and want." "I've learned how to communicate better [with my romantic partner]." "I would never deal with an abusive relationship again."

Changes in the participants' relationships with their intimate partners also included greater assertiveness regarding sexuality. Several women noted that they felt more comfortable refusing sex—as well as making their own desires known: "[I] am able to be more secure when saying "No" to sex." "I've noticed several times in the past when I felt violated and I didn't even say how I felt. No more!" "I'm more comfortable asking for what I want [with romantic partner]." These comments are especially significant because of the evidence that many women experience sexual activity that is not wanted but that falls short of the legal definition of rape (Muehlenhard & Cook, 1988). For example, Ogletree (1993) found that 42% of college women had experienced sexual coercion by a date; 70% of these women had given in to their

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dates' "overwhelming arguments and pressure" and had engaged in intercourse even though they had not wanted to. Indeed, among the 36 women included in this sample, 20 reported unwanted sexual contact (with 3 additional "not sure"), and 12 reported unwanted sexual intercourse that occurred because they were "overwhelmed by someone's continual arguments and pressure."

The follow-up surveys suggest that these students' relationships with a wide variety of people had been transformed by taking the self-defense class. The tools and strategies they learned were perceived to be relevant not only to stereotypically dangerous situations but also to everyday interactions with friends, acquaintances, intimates, and strangers—interactions that although often assumed to be benign are the location for most actual violence against women.

FEELINGS ABOUT ONE'S BODY

Self-defense training transforms not only one's interactions with others, but also one's perceptions and feelings about oneself. For example, 24 of the 36 participants indicated that the experience of taking the self-defense class had affected their feelings about their bodies. When asked to describe these changes, they offered comments such as "I love my body [now]." "I used to feel uncomfortable taking up space because I'm bigger, but now I don't." "I see my own power and strength." "I am more willing to take up space!" "It's all MINE!" "I am more confident and I feel more unique and beautiful." "It is able to hurt someone and protect me." "I am more comfortable in my skin." "I feel much stronger and more in control of my body."

The closed-ended survey questions also supported the idea that self-defense changes women's conceptions of their own bodies. The students' perceptions of their own physical competence (measured by the Physical Self-Efficacy Scale [Rykman et al., 1982]) increased from 85 to 94 (of a maximum score of 132) between the first and second surveys, a statistically significant difference ($t = -4.471$, $p < .001$). Participants' perceptions of their own strength compared with that of the average man (where 1 = *much less* and 5 = *much more*) increased from 1.8 to 2.5 ($t = -4.730$, $p < .001$).

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The sentiments expressed in the quotes above are strikingly different from those described in most of the literature on women's bodies, in which women report feeling that their bodies are inadequate, shameful, fragile, and contaminating (e.g., Brumberg, 1997; Lee, 1994; Young, 1990). Moreover, they are also different from ideas about the body implied by much feminist theorizing about violence against women. In calling much-needed attention to men's violence against women, women's experiences of violence have often become conflated with women's vulnerability to violence; because women are frequently victimized, many have assumed that women are innately and necessarily vulnerable to such victimization (Burton, 1998).

The changes in body perceptions evident in the comments above echo the argument made by McCaughey (1997), who contends that "self-defense transforms the way it feels to inhabit a female body. It changes what it means to be a woman" (p. 2; see also Rentschler, 1999). Unless they have participated in contact sports, many women have never had the opportunity to experience their bodies in a powerful way. As a result, "we often experience our bodies as a fragile encumbrance, rather than the media for the enactment of our aims" (Young, 1990, pp. 146-147). Moreover, women tend to experience their bodies as objects to be displayed and decorated. Thus, a woman interacts with her body from without as well as from within: "She gazes at it in the mirror, worries about how it looks to others, prunes it, shapes it, molds it, and decorates it" (Young, 1990, p. 155). In self-defense classes, in contrast, women both observe and experience strength and power in a female body. As they begin to feel that their bodies can protect them, rather than make them vulnerable, the value and respect they accord their bodies increases.

INCREASED SELF-CONFIDENCE

Half the participants said that one reason they signed up for the self-defense class was the desire to become more assertive and self-confident. Clearly, this goal was met: Twenty-nine of the 36 participants (including all those who had indicated this goal) said that the class had increased their self-confidence: "My self-confidence has skyrocketed." "I am more confident of being who I am." "I just feel more confident when I walk down the street that I

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can take on whatever comes." "I feel more confident in my intuition and ability." "I learned things I didn't think I could possibly do." This increase in confidence is not limited to dealing with dangerous situations; this confidence touches many aspects of women's lives.

Self-confidence is closely related to the concept of self-efficacy, or the perception that one can be effective in carrying out a particular behavior. According to Bandura (1977, 1997), self-efficacy is key to learning new behaviors, approaching new situations confidently, and performing competently. Perceived self-efficacy can be increased in four principal ways: mastery experiences (i.e., successfully performing the behavior in question), modeling (watching similar and/or respected others perform the behavior), social persuasion (including feedback about one's own abilities), and interpretations of physiological states, such as rapid heartbeat or calm relaxation. Feminist self-defense training includes all these elements: It includes practice in physical and verbal self-defense techniques, observation of others performing such techniques, information about self-defense and feedback on one's own performance, and practice in reinterpreting bodily cues as signs of power or outrage, not fear. Such training has been shown to increase self-efficacy both in domains related to self-defense (Ozer & Bandura, 1990; Weitlauf et al., 2000) and in other domains (Weitlauf, Cervone, Smith, & Wright, 2001). Importantly, this change in self-confidence can reduce a woman's risk of victimization; "a confident demeanor is a deterrent to attack and a woman's belief that she can fight, and the concomitant willingness to put up a fight, are central components to successfully thwarting attacks in the vast majority of situations" (McCaughey, 1998, p. 293).

BELIEFS ABOUT WOMEN, MEN, AND GENDER

Although women described changes in their self-confidence and self-perception, the effects of the self-defense class went beyond women's views of themselves. Importantly, the participants' views of women *as a group* shifted and transformed. Twenty-nine of the 36 participants said that the class had changed their views of women and described those changes with comments such as "Women Rock! We have to deal with all sorts of

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everyday stuff and we do it." "*All* types of women can be tough and strong." "Women can fight back + defend + survive." "We are awesome, strong and beautiful." "Women have the capability to take control of our lives." "We all kick ass." "Women are just as capable as men." These changes mark a dramatic shift in the participants' views of gender. Although women are widely seen to be weak, vulnerable, and inadequate (Hollander 2001), these participants came to see women as powerful, strong, and beautiful.

A few participants also said that their beliefs about men had changed: "I'm realizing all the little ways that we [women and men] interact and seeing if they're empowering or oppressive." "Men's sense of entitlement angers me more. I don't tolerate it as much any more." These comments suggest that men's privilege—and by implication, the systematic inequality between women and men—has been illuminated through the self-defense class. Men's behavior and greater power is no longer taken for granted. Some of this behavior relates to violence:

> Most men aren't attackers, but most men do carry around beliefs that perpetuate violence.
>
> I found that the role-plays where I was the aggressor were particularly useful. It was these activities that completely reinforced my belief that men (or women) who attack do so with knowledge of what they are doing. Men who rape and assault women make a choice to do so. Their sex drive did not carry them away and she wasn't "asking for it." To assault is a decision.

These comments suggest that the students have begun to see the role that violence plays in perpetuating gender inequality. This kind of "critical consciousness" (Friere, 1970; McWhirter, 1997) is an important part of individual and social change.

DISCUSSION

The many comments presented in this article (and the many more similar comments made by other participants) make clear the depth and breadth of the changes experienced by these self-defense students. These changes included strategies for dealing with dangerous situations and people but also extended to touch many aspects of the students' lives. For example, when asked,

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"Are there any other ways that learning self-defense has affected your life so far?" one woman simply wrote, "Is there any way it hasn't?" I have suggested here that these changes may also play an important role in preventing violence against women.

We are left, then, with the question of why this particular intervention is so effective and consequential for the women who experience it. As university faculty know to their chagrin, most college classes do not have this sort of dramatic impact on students' lives. Indeed, one critique of this project from a potential grantor was that a single class would be unlikely to produce any measurable changes in students' lives, even in the short term. The data presented above make clear that this prediction was unfounded.

I suggest that self-defense classes are life transforming because they address three issues that touch every aspect of women's lives: the fear of sexual assault, the self, and gender. First, the fear of sexual assault forms an ever-present backdrop for women's lives. Many studies have documented the extent of this fear (e.g., Gordon & Riger, 1989; Hollander, 1997, 2001; Stanko, 1993). Women rank sexual assault as one of their greatest fears—indeed, many women report that they fear rape even more than murder (Warr, 1985). This fear is not limited to particular situations or activities; because potential assailants are indistinguishable from other men, virtually any experience of danger can evoke the threat of sexual assault. This fear is intensified by the belief, widespread among both women and men, that women are weak and inherently unable to protect themselves from men's violence (Hollander, 2001; McCaughey, 1997). If danger is pervasive, and if women have little hope of defending themselves against it, no wonder women's fear is so great. And no wonder that challenging these fears by demonstrating that women *are* strong and *can* defend themselves has such dramatic effects.

A second reason why self-defense classes dramatically affect women's lives is because they focus not only on women's knowledge of sexual assault and the physical skills they need to avoid it but also on the students' own place and value in the world. Rather than "profaning" the self, as other safety interventions do (Gardner, 1990), self-defense classes help women learn to value the self. Indeed, honoring the self is the heart of feminist self-defense training:

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> If a woman does not have a strong sense of self-worth, she will not be likely to see her life as worth fighting for, and hence she will be unable to use her physical defense skills when necessary. Learning to value oneself is the first step toward acceptance of one's basic interpersonal rights. (Searles & Follansbee, 1984, p. 68)

Feminist self-defense classes suggest to women not only that they *can* defend themselves, but also that they have the *right* to do so: the right to take up physical space, the right to determine who will touch their bodies and how, the right to move through public space without restriction. The students wrote about this belief in a variety of ways:

> This class made me gain self-confidence and I also learned that my life is worth protecting. . . . I'm not afraid of anyone or anything any more. I believe that I could do anything I want if I really put effort into it.

> I have a right to express myself.

> [My body] is mine and no one else is allowed to touch it unless I give them my permission.

> have a right to say no.

> I believe in myself and I will do anything to protect myself.

> I am worth defending emotionally.

> It has boosted my self-esteem and has made me see myself as the "actor" instead of the "reactor."

> I am creating and defending my path.

The idea that one's life and one's self are worth defending is a profound lesson indeed, as is the idea that one can "do anything," that one has agency and can act as well as be acted upon. As another student wrote, "I never thought I would be able to defend myself if I was attacked. . . . Now I know differently. . . . I feel this changes my whole persona." The knowledge that one can defend oneself—and that that self is valuable enough to merit defending—changes everything.

Finally, the self is not all that self-defense classes change. Equally important are changes in ideas about women—and implicitly, about men and gender. These ideas are fundamental to the changes in the self described above. It is not just individuals' views of themselves that change but individuals' views of them-

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selves *as a member of the category "women."* The meaning of gender is transformed through exposure to new ideas and new physical experiences of what is possible in a woman's body.

Several domains of gender meaning are affected by self-defense training. Most obviously, beliefs about women's vulnerability and inability to defend themselves against male violence are undermined and replaced by trust in women's bodies as capable and strong. Ideas about women's vulnerability are central to notions of gender (Hollander, 2001); thus, changing these ideas changes gender. As Catherine MacKinnon (1989) has written, "To be able to resist rape, not to communicate rapeability with one's body, to hold one's body for uses and meanings other than that can transform what *being a woman means*" (p. 122).

These ideas about gendered vulnerability are founded on understandings of gendered bodies. Women's bodies are generally understood to be weak, soft, passive, and penetrable, whereas men's bodies are seen as hard, strong, and active (Connell, 1995; McCaughey, 1997). As McCaughey (1997) argued, these understandings of gendered bodies are not simply cognitive; rather, they are imprinted onto and into physical bodies. Gender, she says,

> is not just a psychological, attitudinal, or ideological matter. It's a material reality. Gender is no less bodily or material because it is discursive or textual. Social institutions seep into bodies. The standards of gender operate through meaning systems which themselves operate through the lived body. (p. 38)

Because these meanings operate through physical bodies, they are perceived to be natural when, in fact, they are largely socially constructed. Gender expectations exaggerate modest "natural" gender differences in physical ability by requiring that women keep their bodies small and delicate, take up as little space as possible, and not use their bodies assertively, while requiring the opposite practices of men (Goffman, 1976; Lorber, 1994; McCaughey, 1997; Young, 1990).

Self-defense classes disrupt conventional understandings of gendered bodies because they demonstrate to women that they can use their bodies effectively, and they also suggest that men's bodies are not invulnerable. Self-defense is a "reprogramming regimen for the body" (McCaughey, 1997, p. 95); it challenges the

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idea that the female body is weak and violable and overwrites traditional gendered bodily patterns with new practices that reaffirm women's power and strength on a visceral level. "Because gender is not really natural, it requires constant enforcement and repetition. This repetition is abruptly interrupted in women's self-defense classes" (McCaughey, 1997, p. 90). Feminist self-defense training vividly demonstrates to women—both through watching other women use their bodies in new ways and through feeling their own bodies as they practice new behaviors—that women can be strong and defend themselves from men's violence. The result is a powerful redefinition of gendered bodies.

A final domain of gender meaning relates to the issue of politeness or niceness. A key tenet of gender expectations is the idea that women should be "nice girls" (Fox, 1977); that they should be deferent to others, especially men; that they should put others' needs first; that they should avoid making a scene (Rozee & Koss, 2001). In other words, girls and women learn to put others' perspectives before their own. This gender expectation is a form of social self-control; rather than being forcefully controlled by others, women learn to control themselves. As Fox (1977) observed, "Social control through normative constructs has the virtue of subtlety; it gives the appearance of nonrestriction and noncontrol, thus reducing the potential for resistance" (p. 816). These expectations operate in a variety of realms: in conversation, where both women and men expect men and men's ideas to dominate; in relationships, where men are expected to initiate sexual activity and take the lead on decision making (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983); and in the workplace, where women are more frequently in positions that require emotional labor in service of others' needs (Hochschild, 1983).

These gendered behavioral expectations are rooted in part in the fear of men's violence:

> [Sexual] violence, as well as the fear of it, produces in women specific feminine dispositions. The fear of violence restricts women's mobility and encourages them to be with male "protectors." It prompts women to engage in a variety of cautious and modest behaviors to avoid crossing the line between virtuous woman and whore (for whom little sympathy is given when victimized). Women display deference to men that they would not otherwise because of rape culture. (McCaughey, 1997, p. 43)

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At the same time, these expectations contribute to women's vulnerability by devaluing women's needs or desires and prioritizing the desires of others, especially men. This reduces the likelihood that women will resist men's desires, in both consensual and forced situations:

> Due to traditional socialization, a woman is likely to feel obliged to act in a gracious or compassionate manner, and she may find herself being concerned about or even taking responsibility for the feelings of someone who has harmful intentions. (Searles & Follansbee, 1984, p. 67)

Of course, these expectations vary by local situation and culture; some women are more subject to these expectations than others, and some situations are more conducive to them.

Self-defense training both reduces women's fear of violence and, especially through assertiveness training, introduces the radical idea that women should consider their own needs and desires as well as those of others. Some students directly addressed these issues in their comments:

> I am more confident and aware . . . I also have learned the type of things that I don't have to put up with. I don't always have to be nice and accommodating to other people. . . . I can take care of me first.

> I learned a lot about who I am and what is most important for me.

This idea is central to physical self-defense (one must know one's own desires to determine that the interaction is unwanted and choose to resist) but transfers easily to other parts of women's lives, including interactions with strangers, family members, friends, and intimates. This is not simply an issue of individual rights but a question of whether women, as a group, should be "nice girls" who defer to men's all-important preferences or whether women have an equal right to be at the center, to have their ideas and desires taken seriously. The idea that women matter is perhaps the most radical transformation these students evidence. As one student wrote, "I am more satisfied and happy to be a woman." If women as a group matter, then individual women matter too.

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Taking themselves, and women more generally, seriously, challenges the entire gender system built on the subordination of women; it disrupts the taken-for-granted assumption that men are at the center of social life and women are at the margins (Bem, 1993). No wonder, then, that self-defense classes produce such profound changes in women's lives: They shift the foundations upon which those lives are built.

CONCLUSIONS

The data presented in this article suggest that feminist self-defense training positively affects women's lives. These effects include changes in the way women deal with potentially dangerous situations, but they also extend far beyond such situations to influence many different aspects of women's daily lives, including their interactions with a range of known and unknown others, their self-confidence and feelings about their bodies, and their ideas about gender. Although not direct responses to episodes of violence, these changes may nonetheless indirectly reduce women's risk of victimization and increase their effectiveness in responding to violence if it does occur. For example, assertiveness in seemingly benign interactions may deter an attack; there is evidence that assailants often begin an assault by testing a potential target to see if she will resist (Rentschler, 1999). Knowing her own feelings and boundaries may also allow a woman to recognize behavior that transgresses these boundaries and respond earlier, thus heading off an attack before it becomes more serious. Rozee and Koss (2001) have observed that in many assaults, women delay resisting because they are both shocked by the man's behavior and unsure of what is happening. Being aware of one's own boundaries may reduce this period of uncertainty.

Further, reducing women's fear of violence and increasing their perceived competence to deal with it if it does occur make women's everyday lives less anxious and increases the likelihood that they will respond effectively if attacked. Perceiving their own bodies as strong and competent increases women's confidence that they will be able to defend themselves; this self-confidence is an essential ingredient of successful self-defense. Finally, learning to value the self and to view one's own needs and desires as equally important as those of others increases women's motiva-

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tion to protect themselves from violence. These changes are based not only on shifts in self-perception but also on changes in the meaning of gender; the "self-defense metamorphosis" (McCaughey, 1997, p. 23) transforms how women see the world around them, as well as how they see themselves.

Further results from the ongoing longitudinal study should help to confirm these findings and also answer additional questions. For example, does self-defense training have similar effects across more diverse populations, including nonuniversity women and women of varying ages, races, and social classes? Do these effects differ for those who have and have not survived past violence? Do women who complete self-defense training have a reduced risk of attack? Does self-defense training change the way women react to an actual assault attempt (and are those changes equally effective for different kinds of assaults, such as attempted rape, relationship violence, or harassment)? Are the kinds of changes described here maintained over the long term, and how do they affect women's life choices? Answering these questions will provide a fuller picture of the power of feminist self-defense training.

NOTES

1. Other important foundational principles of feminist self-defense are that it addresses the continuum of assaults against women (from harassment to murder) as well as the continuum of assailants (from strangers to intimates). Feminist self-defense teaches options rather than static prescriptions for responding to assault, focuses on early detection, prevention, and interruption of assaults as well as physical fighting, and builds a supportive community of women (Telsey, 2001).

2. It is important to emphasize that acknowledging women's *ability* to defend themselves from men's violence does not mean that women are *responsible* for preventing such violence. Rape, sexual assault, and other forms of violence against women are always the responsibility of the perpetrator, and men should also be involved in preventing violence against women. Similarly, acknowledging that women can and do effectively resist men's violence does not mean that all women should resist all kinds of violence in all situations or that women should be blamed for their own victimization if they choose not to resist or are unsuccessful in doing so. Again, women are never responsible for men's violence against them. It is a central tenet of feminist self-defense classes that the only person who can judge the appropriate reaction to an assault is the potential victim herself, and that in some situations submitting to an assault may be the safest course of action—in other words, a legitimate self-defense strategy.

3. As noted above, these data represent the first results from a larger longitudinal study of the effectiveness of self-defense training for preventing violence against women. When complete, this prospective study will compare 250 women who take a feminist self-defense

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class (in both university and community settings) with similar women who do not take such a class to assess any differences in their risk of sexual violence or their responses to such violence. The self-defense students will be surveyed at multiple points in time: before beginning the self-defense class, at the end of the self-defense class, 1 year after completing the class, and 5 years after completing the class.

4. These students were recruited from introductory women's studies, English, education, and physical education classes and completed the same first survey as did the self-defense students; they will also complete the 1-year and 5-year follow-up surveys for comparison with the self-defense students.

5. Following Koss, Gidycz, and Wisniewski (1987), *sexual contact* was defined in the survey as "fondling, kissing, or petting, but not intercourse or penetration." *Sexual coercion* was defined as "giving in to sexual intercourse when you didn't want to because you were overwhelmed by someone's continual arguments or pressure" or "because someone used their position of authority (such as a boss, parent, teacher, or coach) to make you."

6. Open-ended survey responses have been edited for spelling, punctuation, readability, and confidentiality, but are otherwise presented verbatim.

7. Three-part statements involve clearly naming the problematic behavior, expressing one's feelings about it, and stating the change one desires in a direct yet nonconfrontational way.

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