

The Roots of Resistance to Women's Self-Defense

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Those who teach or research women's self-defense often encounter significant resistance from others. In this article, the author discusses three major types of resistance to women's self-defense (and to women's resistance to violence more generally): the belief that women's resistance is impossible, that it is too dangerous, and that it risks blaming the victim. The author argues that one source of these reactions is people's taken-for-granted beliefs about gender, which limit their ability to understand the research on women's resistance and self-defense—and, indeed, prevent them from being able to conceptualize women as strong and competent social actors.

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Several years ago, I initiated a research project on women's self-defense. I wanted to know whether learning self-defense increases women's safety by making them less likely to be attacked or more effective at resisting if they are attacked. I was also interested in the consequences for women's lives more broadly: Does learning to defend themselves against violence affect women's self-perceptions, their interactions with others, or their understandings of the world around them?

I began this research, in part, because of the curious scholarly silence on women's self-defense. I had taken—and subsequently taught—a self-defense class in college and had found it to be an experience that radically changed my sense of safety and my understanding of the world around me. I felt empowered, both in situations that seemed potentially dangerous and in my everyday interactions with others, and newly aware of the central role of violence and the threat of violence in maintaining gender inequality as well as other types of stratification.

I had assumed that my own powerful experience with self-defense training, which I observed in my students as well, would be well documented and analyzed in the

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scholarly literature on violence against women. But to my surprise, when I searched for research on women's self-defense, I found only a handful of articles and books, few of them empirical (among them, Cummings, 1992; Kidder, Boell, & Moyer, 1983; McDaniel, 1993; Ozer & Bandura, 1990). I did find a small but powerful literature on women's resistance to violence, which made clear that active resistance could be an effective way of avoiding rape and sexual assault by acquaintances or strangers (e.g., Bart & O'Brien, 1985; Levine-MacCombie & Koss, 1986; Quinsey & Upfold, 1985; Ullman & Knight, 1992, 1993).¹ But there was a resounding silence about the question of whether formal training in self-defense bolsters women's ability to resist. Self-defense training was, in effect, invisible as a means of violence prevention.

I embarked on a research project to fill this gap. In the process of doing this research, I have applied for a number of grants, submitted papers to journals, and talked about the project with many people. Many have been very supportive of the project. But I have also received an array of negative, even hostile, reactions to the research. At first, I wrote off these reactions as idiosyncratic. But as they started to accumulate—and as I heard similar stories from others researching the same topic—I began to see these negative reactions as a form of resistance: to women's self-defense training, to women's resistance to violence more generally, and, I think, to women's empowerment.

It is vital that we understand the sources of this resistance. Self-defense training is one of the most promising interventions to prevent violence against women, particularly sexual assault committed by strangers or acquaintances.² Few other interventions with women both hold the hope of stopping sexual assault before it occurs and appear potentially effective in evaluation research (Gidycz, Rich, & Marioni, 2002; Gidycz, Rich, Orchowski, King, & Miller, 2006). Moreover, self-defense training is one of the few such interventions that empowers women rather than frightening them and encouraging them to restrict their behavior and constrain their lives. Yet self-defense training is one of the least known and most controversial interventions. Most college campuses, for example, have sexual assault prevention programs, often in the form of educational workshops offered to freshmen or living groups. Yet such workshops, when evaluated, have proven to be remarkably *ineffective* in changing behaviors and attitudes associated with sexual assault or, in the few evaluations to measure the real outcome of interest, in reducing the incidence of sexual assault among students (Anderson & Whiston, 2005; Gidycz et al., 2002). In contrast, few college campuses offer comprehensive, feminist self-defense training,³ though this may prove to be far more effective in reducing rates of sexual assault.⁴

To change these patterns, we must better understand why people resist or ignore self-defense training as a viable method of sexual assault prevention. Until we understand the roots of this resistance, women will continue to have limited access to the empowering and potentially life-saving information that resisting sexual violence

is not only possible but also often effective. And because violence against women is one of the central sources of gender inequality, understanding why people resist effective violence prevention strategies helps us understand one way gender inequality is maintained.

In this article, I discuss three major types of resistance to women's self-defense (and to women's resistance to violence more generally) and suggest some reasons why these reactions are so frequent in this work. I use my own experiences as a foundation but cite other scholars' and practitioners' similar experiences to aid in understanding both the extent and the sources of this resistance.

Three Forms of Resistance

It's Impossible

The first type of resistance I encountered I came to call the "it's impossible" reaction. My initial exposure to this reaction came when I was applying for a small grant to support my research on women's self-defense training. After the decisions were announced—and my research was not funded—I was told that although my application had been generally well received, it had been shot down by one member of the award committee. This person had essentially argued that research on women's self-defense was not worth funding because women are not capable of defending themselves against men's violence. Using this argument, she was able to convince the other members of the committee not to support my research.

I was stunned. But being a fairly new academic at the time, I blamed myself for this reaction: I must not have included enough evidence in my proposal that women could, indeed, defend themselves and that their resistance could be effective. So in my next proposal, I included an abundance of information making it clear that women can and do defend themselves from men's violence. For example, experts estimate that fewer than 25% of rape attempts are completed; in the remainder, the intended victim escapes or fends off the attacker (Gordon & Riger, 1989). Clay-Warner (2002), in an analysis of data from the National Crime Victimization Survey, found that there was an "81% reduction in the likelihood of completed rape for women who used physical protective action [either physical fighting or attempting to flee], controlling for situational and demographic factors, as well as the use of other strategies" (p. 697). Summarizing the research to date, Ullman (1997) concluded that forceful physical resistance (fighting), nonforceful physical resistance (e.g., fleeing or pulling away), and forceful verbal resistance (e.g., yelling) are consistently associated with rape avoidance (also see Bart & O'Brien, 1985; Siegel, Sorenson, Golding, Burnam, & Stein, 1989; Ullman & Knight, 1991, 1992). Moreover, women who fight back against attackers do *not* sustain greater injury than do those who choose not to resist (Ullman, 1998; Ullman & Knight, 1992). Research

is virtually unanimous that active resistance can be an effective means of avoiding sexual assault (for a comprehensive review of this literature, see Ullman, 1997, 2007).⁵

The grant committee member's reaction is a more refined version of the derision many self-defense students report receiving from friends, family members, partners, and others. When I took a self-defense class, I recall male friends laughing about the idea of women fighting. Male acquaintances would move in close, motion toward their chests, and, with a smirk on their faces, say, "C'mon, hit me" or "Show me your moves." At its most explicit, both men and women would scoff, "No way could you stop a man who really wanted to attack you."

Twenty years later, some of the participants in my self-defense research tell me that their friends and family are supportive of their decision to learn to defend themselves.⁶ But for others, the "it's impossible" reaction still lurks, and all have heard stories about other students' experiences with negative reactions. Some participants reported direct resistance, as in these examples:

My boyfriend was very negative. Even to this day, I'll say, "I'll use my self-defense moves on you," and he just laughs. "Oh, come on." [Question: He doesn't take it seriously?] Yeah. "Your elbow is not going to stop anybody." You know, "If someone's going to attack you, they're going to attack you. And whatever you do, it's not going to work."

My female friends were supportive, my Greek female friends were intimidated or unaffected, my male friends were skeptical or would joke about it, my family just thought it was "just another one of those feminist women's studies things."

My dad made fun of me.

All of my male friends made fun of me. They kept telling me that it wasn't an effective way of protecting myself and [that] I would be better off taking martial arts of some kind.

As in these examples, negative reactions came principally from men, though participants reported some instances of male support and some instances of female resistance to self-defense training.

Sociologist Martha McCaughey (2000) has also observed that a belief in the impossibility of women's self-defense underlies the silence about resistance in many prevention materials and programs:

There's a missing link between all the avoidance measures a woman is supposed to employ until a man tries to assault her (despite women's avoidance measures, men still attack them) and the aftermath of his attack. If the avoidance measures fail . . . there's no mention of twisting the testicles, breaking a kneecap, or gouging out eyes. Instead, we read instructions about not taking a shower, going to the hospital, and so on. It's as though women's fighting back and stopping an assailant isn't even possible. (p. 158)

Even feminists working to prevent violence against women, she says, have “swallowed whole the rape myth that men cannot be stopped” (p. 159). This belief in the impossibility of women's successful resistance to violence lies at the root of many negative reactions to women's self-defense. And of course, these beliefs—that men are unstoppably strong and that women are inherently vulnerable—help perpetuate violence against women (Hollander, 2001).

It's Too Dangerous

Having bolstered my written and oral discussions of my project with mountains of data demonstrating women's capacity for effective self-defense, I began to notice a second type of reaction, which I summarize as “it's too dangerous.” Here the issue is that if one teaches women's self-defense or gives credence to it through research, then women will get the crazy idea that they can defend themselves and will proceed to go out and (a) put themselves in risky situations or (b) start beating up men. In either case, they will get hurt, and the result will be more danger for women, not less.

Of course, this conclusion makes sense only if one believes that women cannot really defend themselves. In this way, this second form of resistance is simply an elaboration of the first. But this type of reaction adds a new twist: The idea that women are not intelligent enough, or street smart enough, or perhaps rational enough in their thinking, to apply their knowledge of self-defense judiciously. If women learn self-defense, they will become overconfident, or foolhardy, or aggressive, or lose control, and the consequences will be dangerous.

Other authors have noted this reaction framed in a different way. For example, Russell, McCarroll, and Bohan (2007) convened a focus group discussion among feminist women who had chosen *not* to take a self-defense class. They found that one reason these women gave for avoiding learning self-defense was the fear that they might actually enjoy using self-defense skills. As one woman said, “I think I am scared because maybe I would like it.” She implied that this pleasure might actually make violence and injury more likely by leading her to use physical self-defense where it was not warranted or by causing her to give off an air of “asking for a fight.” One woman likened her hesitation about learning self-defense to Einstein's famous comment that “you cannot simultaneously prevent and prepare for war”:

Going back to the idea of not being able to simultaneously prepare for and prevent war, if I prepare for it I am more likely to get into a fight, walking around with the air that I'm ready for a fight.

In other words, Russell et al. explained, this position implies that “women who are not vulnerable are dangerous to themselves and to others” (p. 4).

I should note that *none* of the more than 125 women I have surveyed and interviewed about their experiences of learning self-defense have mentioned that they

have become more violent or take more risks as a result of taking a self-defense class. Indeed, after I began to encounter these reservations, I made a point of asking my interviewees whether they felt learning self-defense had made them overconfident. To a person, they were unanimous that although learning self-defense made them less fearful of violence, it did not make them less cautious or, worse, eager to use their skills. As one interviewee said,

I don't think women are going to be over-confident. . . . It's not like all individual people who take taekwondo and karate, they don't, a lot of them don't think they're invincible. So why would women think they're invincible? . . . I mean, you don't walk out looking for fights. . . . I don't walk around being like, "Come on, you want to step outside?" You know. We don't walk around like that. It's like, because women have such low levels of confidence that . . . I don't think they're going to go and blow up and be overly confident. I really don't. Because women are often so unaware and so unconfident about their abilities.

Recent research on self-defense training concurs that learning self-defense skills does not encourage overconfidence and reckless behavior. For example, Weitlauf, Smith, and Cervone (2000) found that although training increased women's ability to identify danger and physically defend themselves,

the intervention did not desensitize women to the real threat of assault or promote overconfidence in their ability to defend themselves. Thus, the women did not feel less vulnerable to an assault attempt, but they felt far more capable of dealing with it should it occur. (p. 632)

Indeed, "rather than serving as a disinhibiting influence, the training was associated with a decrease in self-reported aggression" (p. 632; also see Madden, 1990; Madden & Sokol, 1997; Ozer & Bandura, 1990).

Sometimes the "it's too dangerous" reaction to self-defense refers to danger not at the individual level but at the societal or cultural level. In Russell et al.'s (2007) focus groups with feminists, some argued that learning self-defense was unacceptable because it meant learning to be violent. One participant said, for example,

I heard two women who had just finished Model Mugging talking about how fantastic it is to take a man's head and crack it against your knee.⁷ And I thought, "I'm here to talk about nonviolence and people are talking about cracking men's heads against knees." (p. 4)

To these women, violence is philosophically unacceptable as a solution to violence: "Women need to be safe from violence without having to learn self-defense, and we must develop better means of conflict resolution than physical violence" (Russell et al., 2007, p. 5; also see Cummings, 1992). In other words, "violence begets violence," as some of the therapists Rosenblum (2007) studied argued. Note that in this

narrative no distinction is made between aggressive and self-defensive violence; self-defense is characterized as simply another type of violence rather than as a *response* to violence or a way of deterring or deflecting violence.⁸

McCaughey (2007) experienced a similar reaction from the organizers of V-Day, the organization that oversees productions of *The Vagina Monologues* (Enslar, 2001) on college campuses around the United States. V-Day (2007), which describes itself as “a global movement to stop violence against women and girls,” helps local organizers mount productions of *The Vagina Monologues* and donate their profits to anti-violence organizations. When McCaughey inquired about the possibility of contributing profits from her campus’s production to an organization dedicated to teaching self-defense to women, the national director of the College Campaign responded, “Ultimately self-defense groups aren’t so much doing ANTI-violence work. They are teaching defending yourself against violence, but generally speaking, using violence to do so” (McCaughey, 2007, p. 9).

In response to concerns about violence, some self-defense programs are careful to differentiate between violence and self-defense. Rentschler (1999), for example, argued, “I do not want to suggest that self-defense is violence, because it is not. Self-defense is pacifist” (p. 160). Hagan (1993) wrote that “self-defense is a pragmatic and necessary extension of self-love, self-respect, and self-determination. Self-defense does not contradict a commitment to nonviolence. While the form of self-defense is up to the individual woman, the need for self-defense is unquestionable” (p. 117). Madden and Sokol (1994) said that a good self-defense class “distinguishes self-defense from aggression” (p. 25), and both the self-defense class I taught in the 1980s and the one I observed more recently carefully differentiated assertiveness (self-defense) from aggressiveness (violence). Nonetheless, one of the “feminist dilemmas” facing self-defense programs remains: Is teaching and learning self-defense “acceding to a violent society”? (Madden & Sokol, 1994, p. 25). These fears, that women’s resistance is dangerous both to themselves and to society more generally, keep women from learning self-defense and keep those interested in prevention from supporting it. In doing so, these fears help maintain existing gender hierarchies, which could be threatened if women were to effectively defend themselves against men.

It’s Victim Blaming

A third type of resistance emerged as I went on with the research and began presenting preliminary findings to various audiences. It came especially frequently from audiences I expected to be sympathetic, such as those doing violence prevention work. Occasionally, what I had to say—that learning self-defense empowers women in a variety of ways—was met with outrage. How dare I advocate women’s self-defense? Encouraging women to protect themselves, these critics argued,

implies that women are *responsible* for protecting themselves and thus are responsible for controlling men's violence. In other words, this kind of reaction says that advocating self-defense implies victim blaming:

As self-defense training becomes more popular, it is important to be aware of the danger of it becoming another way in which women are forced to assume responsibility for being raped, and even for preventing rape. Women may be told that if they want to stop rape, they must learn to defend themselves, instead of men being told to stop raping. Lack of knowledge of self-defense skills may also become yet another way that society blames victims for their rape. (McDaniel, 1993, p. 45)

Sometimes this resistance came in a slightly different form: What if a woman has experienced an assault and did not resist? Won't learning about the efficacy of self-defense make her feel like she is to blame for her assault—that it would not have happened if she had only fought back? Won't survivors experience self-defense training as “a way to learn what they ‘should have done’ to thwart a prior assault”? (Cermele, 2004, p. 9).

This reaction is also found in the literature on self-defense. For example, Madden and Sokol (1994) noted that “it is difficult to talk about controlling the future without implying that one should have been in control in the past and is to blame for past misfortune” (p. 24) and noted that “a reviewer of a grant proposal submitted by one of us used this as an argument for not funding a study of the effectiveness of self-defense classes with abuse survivors” (Madden & Sokol, 1997, p. 138). Cermele (2004) summarized this concern:

If self-defense is possible, and even effective, as a means of resistance, then it might follow that women are responsible for the assaults against them by virtue of failing to act or failing to act effectively. Following this line of thinking, self-defense training for women might contribute to our culture of victim-blaming as well as increase the level of self-blame that victims or survivors may experience. (pp. 3-4)

Recently, a new variation of the “it's victim blaming” reaction has emerged. With the increased attention to violence prevention in the past few years and especially the new emphasis on primary prevention (i.e., efforts to address the root causes of violence), some practitioners have argued that learning self-defense is not primary prevention and therefore does not warrant our attention or our money. Some say that learning self-defense is not prevention at all and that the only true prevention would be to stop men from raping:

Paradoxically, [self-defense] measures may not result in the prevention of either sexual assault or victimization in the general population. There is evidence that assailants abandon attacks on resistant women and seek locales and victims offering minimum resistance and threat of detection. The net effect of successful rape avoidance, then,

may be to displace victimization from informed women, prepared women, and women proficient in self-defense to the very young, the physically or mentally disabled, or the elderly. (Swift, 1985, p. 418)

Similarly,

Even the most successful programs advocating female avoidance or resistance of rape, although ostensibly aimed at rape "prevention," are perhaps better conceptualized as efforts toward "deterrence." Because men who rape select potential victims on the basis of vulnerability (Brownmiller, 1975), it makes sense that a deterred attempt will only result in the victimization of another, more vulnerable individual. Rape deterrence strategies can therefore only protect *individual women* (albeit with no guarantees), but can never reduce the vulnerability of *women as a group*. (Lonsway, 1996, p. 232)

Critics argue that these strategies often assume (explicitly or implicitly) that stopping rape is the responsibility of women. Only addressing "men's motivation to rape" can prevent rape (Lonsway, 1996, p. 232). Others have suggested that "programs directed toward individuals are band-aids that do not address the systemic, societal causes of violence and discrimination against women" (Madden & Sokol, 1994, p. 24; also see Corcoran, 1992).

I have a great deal of sympathy for these positions. Women *have* been blamed for their own victimization for too many years. I believe that assault is always the responsibility of the perpetrator and that it is not women's responsibility to stop sexual assault. And those concerned with preventing violence against women *should* focus much more on the root causes of sexual assault.

At the same time, I also do not think we should wait around for men to stop assaulting women. As Marcus (1992) convincingly argued, "While the ethical burden to prevent rape does not lie with us but with rapists and a society which upholds them, we will be waiting a very long time if we wait for men to decide not to rape" (p. 400). I believe that women should have access to all information and tools that may improve the safety and quality of their lives. I also know that learning self-defense carries with it a host of other benefits to women, including reduced fear, increased self-confidence, more comfortable interactions with others, more positive feelings about one's body, and a general sense of empowerment and self-worth (Cohn, Kidder, & Harvey, 1984; Hollander, 2004; McCaughey, 1997; McDaniel, 1993; Ozer & Bandura, 1990; Weitlauf et al., 2000). And although this is a topic for another article, I believe that learning self-defense *is* a form of prevention and even, in some ways, a form of primary prevention.

Good self-defense classes, and good instructors, do not blame women for their own victimization. In the classes I have seen, as a student, teacher, and observer, instructors go out of their way to emphasize that women are *never* responsible for assault. They say explicitly that the responsibility for assault lies squarely with the

perpetrator. They make clear that the fact that women can and do 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 if they choose not to resist or are unsuccessful in doing so. They talk about the ways that women have been taught to be passive and fearful and taught to believe that women can never be physically strong, thus putting the blame for women's lack of resistance on society, not on the individual. They communicate that women cannot be blamed for what they did not know at the time of an assault (Rosenblum, 2007); if they did not know how to defend themselves or did not know that they *could* defend themselves, they cannot be held accountable for failing to do so. As Donna Chaiet, the executive director of a personal safety program, commented, "We don't blame someone who doesn't know how to swim for drowning" (quoted in Cermele, 2004, p. 4). Indeed, Cermele (2004) argued that learning self-defense may actually *reduce* victim blame because it "allows for the discussion of agency and victimization and creates space for exploration of victim-blaming and self-blame" (p. 10). Even among women who are raped, there is evidence that those who physically resisted both blame themselves less and have faster psychological recovery (Bart & O'Brien, 1985; Furby & Fischhoff, 1986; Rozee & Koss, 2001). So although fears about victim blaming are important, I have not found it to be a significant issue for well-designed feminist self-defense classes.

The Roots of Resistance to Women's Self-Defense

Why is there so much resistance to women's self-defense training and, more generally, to women's resistance to violence? One possibility is that understanding women's resistance and self-defense simply requires balancing complex ideas—that is, that women have the *ability* to defend themselves but that it is not their *responsibility* to do so. But I think in most cases the real source of this resistance is something more fundamental: the ideas about gender that are deeply rooted in our culture. I argue below that people's taken-for-granted beliefs about gender limit their ability to understand the research on women's resistance and self-defense—and indeed prevent them from being able to conceptualize women as strong and competent social actors. These ideas about gender imbue and underlie the three forms of resistance I have described above.

It's Impossible

Take, for example, the grant committee member who believed that research on self-defense is not worth funding because women are incapable of defending themselves. Cultural notions of gender—what sociologists might call our gender ideology and what psychologists might call our gender schemas—include the ideas that women are physically and emotionally weak and vulnerable, perfect victims for

men's presumably innate aggression and strength (Hollander, 2001; McCaughey, 1997). Moreover, these ideas about gender are seen as emerging from men's and women's biology: Women are, on average, smaller than men and are perceived to be inevitably weaker and uniquely vulnerable to sexual assault. Though perceived to be "natural," these beliefs are social constructions rather than transparent representations of reality. For example, women's greater average "weakness" relative to men is as much because of gender expectations that encourage smallness and delicacy in women and bulk and strength training for men as it is because of fundamental differences in male and female bodies (Hollander, 2001; McCaughey, 1997; Nelson, 1994). As Burton (1998) wrote,

The construction of women's physical weakness as the primary reason for their inability to resist is a false one. There is no sex-based deficiency that makes women unable to harm their aggressors. Rather . . . women are trained not only to disbelieve their strength, but to shy away from physical violence. (p. 192)

If one believes that women are inherently weak and thus inevitably more vulnerable than men, then it makes perfect sense to say that research on women's self-defense training is not worth funding. Women's weakness means that they will never be able to defend themselves against men's violence, so why waste time and money studying something that is impossible?

As it turns out, other researchers have encountered similar reactions. Gia Rosenblum (2007), a psychologist who encourages her clients to enroll in self-defense as a clinical intervention, has found that clients and other therapists are resistant to this recommendation. One reason for their resistance is, as she put it, "cultural beliefs about women's vulnerability and capacity for effective self-defense." Because of the grounding of these ideas about gender in physical bodies, this argument is difficult to challenge—thus, perhaps, the ability of one grant committee member to overwhelm the otherwise enthusiastic responses of the rest of the committee. Bodies are seen as natural and therefore inevitable, despite evidence that they are neither.

At the same time as we have an overabundance of beliefs about women's weakness and vulnerability, we have a stunning lack of ideas about women's potential for strength and resistance. Many people literally cannot envision women defending themselves against men's violence; this idea seems nonsensical and even laughable. When I show a film in my gender classes, for example, that includes images of women powerfully resisting male violence (McCaughy & King, 1995), students frequently respond with laughter. This is certainly the root of many of the negative reactions self-defense students receive. For example, one woman reported,

My mother was worried about me [taking] the class because she thought I would become over self-esteemed [*sic*]. She thought I would come to believe that I could beat

attackers up physically any time but she thought it would not happen always and she was worried about my safety.

People dismiss women's self-defense training because it seems impossible to imagine that women could be physically effective. Without a schema for women's successful resistance, the very idea of self-defense seems nonsensical.

This disbelief is created and sustained not simply by ideas about gender but also by the invisibility of women's resistance in popular culture and news media. As the research discussed above makes clear, women can and do effectively defend themselves against men's violence. However, these stories are rarely reported in the press. For example, Gordon and Riger (1989, p. 69) noted that although victimization surveys find that women escape 3 out of every 4 rape attempts, newspapers report 13 completed rapes for every 1 that is attempted but uncompleted. And even when a successful escape is reported, it is often couched in the language of vulnerability and victimization, obscuring the fact that a woman has successfully defended herself. Consider a headline in a 1998 *Seattle Times* article that read "Man Attacks 13th Victim Since August." One must read the entire article to discover that, in fact, this woman was *not* sexually assaulted; she "screamed and fought back until the man ran away." Indeed, 10 of the 13 "victims" of this serial rapist escaped sexual assault by successfully fighting back.

Unfortunately, this belief in women's inability to resist has been reinforced by much feminist work on violence against women. In an attempt to convince society at large of the frequency and devastating consequences of rape, feminist writers have made visible the particular horrors of sexual assault and emphasized women's vulnerability. As Burton (1998) argued in her analysis of "classic" feminist texts on violence against women written between 1971 and 1985,

It is understandable that feminist writings of this time consciously chose to tell disturbing rape stories and to describe a variety of rape scenarios, intending to unsettle the limited notions of rape in the common consciousness of the era. These texts often successfully worked against the stereotypical picture of rape and broadened notions of sexual violence to more accurately reflect the kinds of sexual assault women actually face. But the absence of women fighting back in these texts makes resistance seem impossible, and leaves the reader disempowered and hopeless. (p. 193)

This tendency continues, again with the best of intentions, in violence awareness programming. Female college students are bombarded with the "fact" that one in four college women will be a victim of rape or attempted rape. Media antiviolence campaigns often claim that, in the words of an e-mail from Lifetime TV that appeared in my inbox as I was writing this article, "One in three women worldwide will experience abuse or sexual violence in her lifetime." In the face of such overwhelming images of women's vulnerability, it is no wonder that people see rape as inevitable and women as unable to resist.

It's Too Dangerous

The second type of resistance included the idea that training women in self-defense is risky because it will create more danger for women, not less: because women will become overconfident, because they will behave recklessly and put themselves in dangerous situations, and because they may become violent themselves—and even enjoy it. Again, cultural ideas about gender are fundamental to all these fears.

First, the idea that self-defense will foster unreasonable confidence in one's ability to defend oneself is clearly grounded in the ideas of gendered vulnerability and weakness discussed above. Why would self-defense training always produce *over*-confidence, unless the woman in question (and, by implication, all women) is not really capable of self-defense? As Burton (1998) argued, "Strength is considered to be the domain of men" (p. 197). If this is true, women can certainly bolster their skills, but even specialized training will not enable them to challenge a man.

The suggestion that women trained in self-defense will behave recklessly and put themselves in risky situations relies on another culturally constructed belief about gender: that women are emotional and irrational, prone to impulsive action. Stereotypes such as these have long been present in U.S., and indeed Western, culture (Deaux & LaFrance, 1998). For example, one rationale for keeping women out of the presidency has been the fact that the president controls the "nuclear button," that is, the means for starting a potentially annihilating war. Women, some argue, are too emotional, too much controlled by their "hormones," and too lacking in cool-headed rationality to safely fulfill such a role.

The same logic operates in some critiques of women's self-defense. Though this is rarely articulated, the fears that self-defense training will lead women to "ask for a fight" or, worse, lose control rest on the idea that, unlike men, women cannot be trusted to judiciously use dangerous tools—in this case, their own bodies (or perhaps defensive weapons). If women have access to these tools, they will be unable to use them appropriately, and, like children with power tools, the result will be danger to themselves and others. Similar to the fear of overconfidence, fears about risky use rely on beliefs about gender and, at their heart, about women's basic incompetence. Why would you arm women with self-defense tools if they cannot be trusted to use them wisely?

Fears that women will become violent rest on a very different, but still gendered, foundation. Here the issue is that if women use violence—and, worse, enjoy it—they will become "like men." This fear relies on the association of masculinity with aggression and femininity with passivity: If women use violence, they are entering the domain of men and turning their backs on their essential nurturing nature (McCaughy, 1997; Renzetti, 1999). As Russell et al. (2007) noted, our dualistic conceptions of gender allow for no third option between feminine (i.e., vulnerable) women and masculine (i.e., dangerous) men.

Even feminists have eschewed self-defense because of its connotations of violence. In their focus groups with feminists who had chosen not to learn self-defense, for example, Russell et al. (2007) noted “the gendered quality of participants’ discomfort with violence in the class” (p. 2). These women were disturbed, not by men’s assaultive behavior but by the violence they saw in women’s resistance. Hagan (1993), who interviewed women across the United States about their opinions on guns, found that many resisted using weapons for self-defense:

My assumption, that I could not learn to use a gun, was echoed with such frequency throughout my interviews with women that I suspect it is based not on experience or personal knowledge but stems instead from the propaganda that tells us what is appropriate behavior for women. Naming the prevalence of male violence is not tactful, self-defense is not ladylike, and retaliation is utterly monstrous. (p. 114)

According to McCaughey (2000),

Feminists have construed violence as patriarchal and have used the concept of violence to imply an oppressive, bad intent. Thus self-defense is, at worst, dismissed altogether as “masculinist” or is, at best, embraced carefully as not really violent, since it stops the violence of someone with bad intent. (p. 164)

Unlike others who have deliberately distinguished self-defense from violence, McCaughey (2000) suggested we acknowledge the violence inherent in physical self-defense, which entails a new understanding of gender. She called feminists to task for pretending that self-defense does not involve violence, suggesting that doing so buys into the gender dichotomies of men/violence and women/nonviolence. She said,

I insist that we admit that self-defense trains women for violence in certain circumstances, should they arrive. We need not hide our ability and willingness to use violence to protect ourselves, any more than we should hide our desire for intimacy without intimidation, or our insistence on sex with consent. . . . This does not mean teaching women to become bullies or perpetrators of violent crime. It means that we uphold women’s legal right to self-defensive violence. . . . Embracing women’s right to self-defensive violence is embracing women’s status as equal citizens who have boundaries and lives worth defending. (p. 164)

A feminist analysis of violence makes clear that the association of women with nonviolence and passivity has concrete benefits for men and allows gender inequality to continue. As Judith Angelo noted, “It’s certainly easier to terrorize women if even the most alert, discriminating, and critical ones in the bunch can’t imagine perpetrating physical violence against their oppressors without their souls splitting in two” (quoted in Hagan, 1993, p. 122).

It's Victim Blaming

The idea that self-defense promotes victim blaming is a reaction to the many years when women were held responsible for violence against them. Sometimes seen as masochism (see Symonds, 1979), sometimes seen as "precipitating" rape (Amir, 1971) through their actions or failure to act, sometimes seen as "deserving" victims (Richardson & May, 1999)—whatever the reason, women have been held responsible for men's violence. The tendency to blame victims of violence remains strong in U.S. society, as the constant interrogation of women's behavior in high-profile rape cases attests. It is certainly understandable that we should make every effort to move far beyond victim blaming and toward holding perpetrators accountable for their actions. The recent excitement about primary prevention is evidence of how ready many practitioners are to focus attention on perpetrators at last.

Nonetheless, fears that promoting or learning about self-defense will encourage victim blame or self-blame or distract from primary prevention all rest on traditional notions of gender. These fears position women as innocent victims, in contrast to the guilty victims posited by previous theories of masochism or victim precipitation. In arguing that women are never responsible for violence against them, and—critically—in suggesting that women would be harmed by knowledge of the efficacy of resistance to violence, these critics imagine women as weak, as defenseless, and as needing to be protected from external danger.⁹ This is, arguably, a more tenable position than that of the guilty victim. But both positions rely on a sense of women as victims, without agency and without the ability to refuse violence perpetrated against them. These seem to be the only two positions available to women within current gender ideology. The alternative suggested by women's self-defense—women as strong, effective, and capable of making choices about their behavior without accepting responsibility for men's violence—is not possible within mainstream cultural beliefs about gender.

Attempts to protect women from knowledge about self-defense and the efficacy of resistance presumes that women are not smart enough to parse the complex logic that perpetrators are responsible for violence regardless of victims' behavior. This kind of paternalism seems to be used most frequently when women and children are concerned. Would anyone seriously suggest, for example, that men be shielded from information about how to deter muggers because it might make them blame themselves for past muggings? Or should we not inform people about dental care because they may blame themselves for past cavities? Such suggestions seem nonsensical, yet this is precisely what is implied when people suggest that learning or advocating self-defense promotes victim self-blame. Avoiding victim blaming is important. Yet doing so by denying women's ability to act results in "the all but total effacing of women's agency in situations of sexual violence, an effect that is profoundly in operation today: resistance is futile, impossible, dangerous, and ultimately *not our responsibility*" (Burton, 1998, p. 195). This belief not only constructs women as childlike and incapable but also facilitates violence by contributing to beliefs about women's vulnerability and discouraging resistance.

Conclusions

The three forms of resistance I describe above are common precisely because they fit widespread cultural conceptions of gender. In this vision, women are vulnerable, weak, and physically and psychologically defenseless; they must be protected both from men's violence and from their own inability to fully understand or regulate their own behavior. Self-defense is dangerous because it challenges these beliefs—beliefs that most people see as natural and that form the foundation for our everyday interactions and, indeed, our lives (Hollander, 2001, 2004; McCaughey, 1997). Indeed, women's self-defense challenges gender and in so doing challenges existing social hierarchies. It is no wonder, then, that resistance to women's self-defense is so strong.

When women learn or practice self-defense, they use their bodies in forceful ways. They kick, they pound, they elbow, they strike. They yell—not feminine screaming but deep, powerful yells. And *what* they yell is also unexpected. Instead of screaming “Help!” or “Please, no!” in a high, scared, *feminine* tone—as in “Please, don't hurt me!”—they yell “NO!” from the diaphragm—as in “Don't you dare hurt me!” They yell “Back off!” and “Leave me alone!” and sometimes “Fuck off!” Perhaps most important, they assert their right to safety, to self-determination, and to making their own choices—to agency. They declare, through their body language, their words, and their tone, that they are valuable and worth defending. All this goes against mainstream ideas of what a woman should be.

Understanding women's self-defense, and understanding women's resistance more generally, requires that we see women as strong, powerful, potentially violent, smart, and complex human beings. It requires that we see men as something other than invulnerable. These are difficult changes to make for those steeped in mainstream gender ideology. But my research and the research of others who have studied women's resistance and self-defense make it clear that this *is* the reality.

Women can and do defend themselves every day, though we often do not recognize their behavior as self-defense. For example, I was recently in San Francisco for a conference, where I presented an earlier version of this article. Dining alone one night, I fell into conversation with two women eating at the table next to mine. They asked me what I was doing in town, and I told them about the conference and my research. In the space of 5 minutes, they each told me a story about a time they had successfully defended themselves. One woman had been hitchhiking and was picked up by a guy who “got weird”; she jumped from a moving car to escape him. The second woman had been forced into an alley by a group of men; she was able to escape without harm. After telling me these stories, one of the women turned to me and said wistfully, “I'd really like to learn self-defense.” The fact that neither woman recognized her own successful resistance as self-defense makes clear how women's resistance is invisible—even to those who practice it.

I believe that this invisibility helps to explain why the research on resistance is not better known or acknowledged. Even among researchers and practitioners of violence prevention, this small but very significant body of research, showing that women's resistance is both possible and effective, is rarely cited or discussed. Because the findings challenge people's preexisting understandings of gender, they fail to seek out this research; even asking questions about the efficacy of women's resistance requires that one acknowledge it as possible. When people do hear about resistance research, they may not fully attend to or remember it; schema-inconsistent information is less easily processed and remembered (Howard, 1995). Should they attend to the findings, they may not believe them; people hearing about my research have not infrequently responded with disbelief and skepticism.

What is needed to change current conditions, to make research on women's resistance better known, and to reduce resistance to women's self-defense? Unfortunately, the task before us is daunting. To increase people's openness to and understanding of resistance and self-defense, we must change beliefs about gender. We must come to see women as strong, powerful, and effective and see men as something other than inevitably dangerous. Certainly this is possible; changing ideas about gender over time make clear that such shifts are possible, though slow.

In the meantime, however, one avenue for change would be to increase the visibility of women's resistance, to help develop schemas for women's resistance. What would happen, for example, if news media were to report all attempted as well as completed rapes—and if they were to report them as instances of successful self-defense and escape rather than of victimization? Would women—and men—begin to believe that women's resistance is possible? Would research on women's resistance become better known or better understood? Once the reality of women's resistance becomes clear, it will be hard to maintain the myth of women's vulnerability. One of the self-defense classes I taught many years ago produced, as a class project, T-shirts with the slogan, "I FIGHT BACK." What if all women began to wear these T-shirts or otherwise made this message visible? I suspect that resistance to women's self-defense—as impossible, as risky, or as victim blaming—would begin to crumble.

Notes

1. I should note that since my first investigation of this literature in the mid-1990s, there has been a remarkable increase in the published research on self-defense training (e.g., Brecklin & Ullman, 2004; Cermele, 2004; Clay-Warner, 2002, 2003; Gidycz, Rich, Orchowski, King, & Miller, 2006; McCaughey, 1997, 2000; Weitlauf, Cervone, Smith, & Wright, 2001; Weitlauf, Smith, & Cervone, 2000).

2. The feminist self-defense classes I have taken, taught, and observed focus especially on preventing sexual assault and rape committed by acquaintances or strangers, both male and female. The classes do discuss intimate partner violence (including intimate partner rape), although they acknowledge that the dynamics in intimate relationships may make physical resistance less possible or effective.

3. By *feminist self-defense training*, I mean classes that focus on sexual violence against women, that teach skills appropriate for women's bodies, for rapid learning, and for sexual assault situations, and that

address gender socialization and other psychological issues that make self-defense challenging for many women. Feminist self-defense classes also teach options rather than prescriptions for responding to assault and focus on prevention and interruption of assault as well as physical self-defense (see Hollander, 2004; Telsey, 2001). There is evidence that feminist self-defense classes may be more effective for women than more traditional self-defense classes (Kidder, Boell, & Moyer, 1983).

4. On my own campus, for example, an excellent feminist self-defense class has been offered for many years but is buried within the academic offerings of the Women's and Gender Studies Program, serves only 30 students per term, and is not widely seen as a part of the campus's sexual assault prevention programming. A more limited course is offered through the Physical Education Department but, according to students who have taken both classes, is much less useful. At the campus where I took and later taught self-defense, Stanford University, the very popular course was shut down after an anonymous Title IX complaint the university chose not to fight ("U.S. Drops Investigation of Stanford Self-Defense Class," 1993).

5. However, it is important to say clearly that although active resistance increases women's chances of escaping sexual assault, this does not mean that all women *should* resist sexual assault in all situations or that women who do not resist or do so unsuccessfully are somehow responsible for an assault. I address these points further below.

6. Although the results of this research are not the focus of this article, a brief description of the project may help contextualize these and subsequent quotes. The project is longitudinal and involves repeated surveys of women who enrolled in a university-based self-defense class, together with interviews of a subset of participants and participant observation in the class itself. Participants were all students at a major state university on the west coast of the United States, with a mean age of 21.8 years. Similar to the demographics of the university, 89.1% were White, 0.3% were African American, 7.5% were Asian or Pacific Islander, 6.8% were Latina, and 3.4% were Native American.

7. Model Mugging (now Impact) is a self-defense program in which well-padded mock "attackers" serve as targets for women's self-defense practice.

8. The question of whether women's self-defense should be considered violence parallels the debate about whether battered women's use of force against abusive partners constitutes "mutual battering" (see Dasgupta, 1999; Osthoff, 2002; Renzetti, 1999). In both cases, context, motives, and outcomes are important in determining the meaning of violent behavior. I would argue that women's use of force in self-defense is qualitatively different on all three dimensions from an assailant's use of force to perpetrate an assault.

9. It is interesting that the one circumstance in which women are expected to be fierce and strong is when defending their children from threats. In this case, however, women's active defense of their children is seen as instinctive, based on their maternal status, rather than as logical or agentic. I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for this insight.

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