

Karate Women's Embodied Subjectivities

Subjects: Others

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Karate can be both a martial art and a combat sport. Male and female karate athletes attended the Tokyo Olympic Games 2020 (2021). Elite sport often portrays female athletes through the sexualization of their bodies, while the martial environment leaves them open to accusations of masculinization. In the process of constructing themselves as fighters, *karateka* women do produce new ways of performing femininities and masculinities, which is a hard-work process of negotiations, leading them to the construction of a particular *habitus* strictly linked to their performativity within the environment. They take part in a contested terrain that mixes several elements that are often contrasting.

Keywords: subjectivities ; embodiment ; negotiations ; belonging ; gender

1. Introduction

We know that women's place in elite sport is problematic for a number of reasons. Female athletes face diverse stereotyping to reach a position in the contested terrain of sports ([Jackson and Scherer 2013](#)), especially in environments understood as masculine, such as the *karateka* world. By mixing a combat sport and a martial art, karate can host several patriarchal features that challenge women's determination to become fighters, and perhaps even more so for Olympic *karateka* athletes. In the context of sport as a male preserve ([Theberge 1985](#)), elite sport often portrays female athletes through the sexualization of their bodies, while the martial environment leaves them open to accusations of masculinization, which is linked to lesbian performativity ([Bennett et al. 2017](#); [Butler 1990](#)). In the process of constructing themselves as fighters, *karateka* women do produce new ways of performing femininities and masculinities ([Channon and Phipps 2017](#); [Edwards et al. 2021](#); [Maor 2018](#)). However, this is not a process free from consequences, in relation to peers and to oneself. The construction of a female *karateka* embodied subjectivity ([Foucault 2016](#); [Merleau-Ponty 2005](#)) is demanding on women, requiring them to negotiate the construction of a particular *habitus* ([Bourdieu 1990](#); [Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992](#)) that is strictly linked to their performativity within the environment.

The lack of recognition of women's capabilities coupled with the inferiorization of their athletic performance is already known in sports that are understood to be hyper-masculine, such as football, rugby, and combat sports (e.g., [Mierzwinski et al. 2014](#); [Turelli et al. 2022](#)). This is so to the extent that if, on the one hand, women entering male-dominated environments can achieve levels of excellence and feel empowered, on the other hand, they need to deal with sanction and control ([Edwards et al. 2021](#)). Not unlike several other sports at the Olympic setting, karate retains and reproduces gender normativity. Following such an approach, studies taking into account male performances in karate have been carried out (for example, [Alinaghipour et al. 2020](#)), though not from a sociological perspective. As such, on an unproblematic binary gender order, general female performativity in karate has not been extensively researched. There is a literature on women in combat sports—for example, boxing ([Carlsson 2017](#); [Tjonndal 2019](#)), judo ([Guérandel and Mennesson 2007](#)), and mixed martial arts ([Jakubowska et al. 2016](#); [Mierzwinski et al. 2014](#))—in addition to sociological reviews of the literature on the topic (e.g., [Channon and Jennings 2014](#); [Channon and Matthews 2015](#); [Follo 2012](#)), and women's self-defence from a physical feminism point of view ([McCaughey 1998](#)).

Notwithstanding, the specific literature on women's karate is still limited. Studies by [Guthrie \(1995\)](#) and [Maclean \(2015, 2016\)](#) have approached the gender theme, though neither includes women elite athletes within the Olympic context. In this regard, the study makes a contribution to the social sciences, gender, and female sport, specifically deepening knowledge in the female elite *karateka* context, where female embodied subjectivity struggles in interaction with a martial *habitus*. There are several studies exploring the concept of *habitus* in martial arts and combat sports (MACS), with [Wacquant \(2002\)](#) being a pioneer (see also [Spencer 2009, 2012](#)). However, the research focused on women in high-level karate taking the opportunity of the exclusive time, to date, of karate in the Olympic Games, Tokyo 2020 (2021), and specifically looked at embodied subjectivity, with *habitus* working as one strongly present parallel concept. It is also relevant to say that researchers decided to work with the concept of embodied subjectivity rather than identity considering that the former is a broader concept due to its sociological roots, expanding the psychological perspective of the identity

topic. Also, in addition to knowing about the identities that *karateka* women can represent through belonging to karate, researchers are more interested in knowing how they build their subjectivity in such a contested terrain to deal with its several issues. Researchers are considering the definition of contested terrain of [Jackson and Scherer \(2013, pp. 888–89\)](#) 'as a site of struggle (...) involving key interest groups with varying resources and material interests, and competing ideas and beliefs'.

In seeking to understand this process, researchers carried out a study with the women's Spanish Olympic karate team. The experiences they have embodied through karate, having practiced it since childhood, shape their experiences of themselves and of the world. In this research, researchers' aim is to present the factors identified with the athletes that affect the construction of their embodied subjectivity in the contested terrain of karate as an Olympic sport. This is important to be known because, by breaking down the process they went through, researchers can develop strategies to work in favour of women's sport, helping to make it a place where the objectification of women athletes is undermined. It must be said that there are several factors that help in shaping such embodied subjectivity, like personal struggles against hunger to be kept in weight categories, or overcoming pain from training sessions and injuries, and suffering from the pressure to win. However, researchers are focusing here on two not-so-explored topics in the literature, as far as we know, that link belonging to authenticity as *the real deal*, and a produced martial gendered *habitus*, to an ideal of the warrior. Researchers chose to focus on these topics because, although complex, they are new to the body of literature specific to women's karate, and present the potential of innovation for the area of women's combat sports.

2. Women's Embodied Subjectivity

Embodied subjectivity is a dynamic concept that refers to the processes of the production of oneself ([Foucault 2016](#)) in an individuality sense, leading the person to become an embodied subject able to experience empowerment. A person's embodied subjectivity is built in the encounter of their lived experiences that capture the world through sensory perceptions with the reflexive processes ingrained in such living ([Merleau-Ponty 2005](#)). In this situation, karate could work as a technology of the self ([Foucault 2016](#)) supporting the process of empowerment, as it is reported in studies carried out in other combat sports (e.g., [Maor 2018](#); see also [Pedrini and Jennings 2021](#)). However, high-level sport entails the risk, inevitably, of a view of the body-as-machine ([Vaz 2001](#)), while women athletes run the risk of being sexualized (see [Toffoletti et al. 2018](#)), with both processes feeding their objectification. A reflection on lived embodied experiences, therefore, is required as a component of self-cultivation ([Foucault 2016](#)), taking into account that we have/are selves that overlap in constituting our subjectivity.

Even though feminism has undeniably led to changes in the social and historical condition of women in many societies, secondary roles remain prevalent for them ([Roth and Basow 2004](#)). Patriarchal structures are organized and reorganized to maintain the hegemonic order ([Connell 1995](#); [Williams 1977](#)). With that, women *karateka* may disrupt the gender order to some extent; however, in so doing, they face various adversities, be it in the general social context, in the sports world, or in the very traditional setting of a martial art.

Researchers adopt [Butler's \(1990\)](#) concept of performativity to express our understanding of gendered embodied subjectivity. In performativity, repetition plays a central role, leading to reposition, so there is fluidity, and nothing is fixed. In having karate as a central element of life, the women athletes in this research *embodied* karate, although in different proportions, but enough to shape their performances, often in searching for authenticity as a way to feel and be seen as genuine through belonging to an environment that challenges their very situation as women ([Young 1980](#); for an updated version, see [Young 1998](#)). They seem to find such authenticity in performing as *karateka* women, which is read as a genuine performance and is therefore more valued than something that could be considered a theatrical performance; but this comes at a cost. They need to claim a position among fighters, belonging to the *karateka* subculture, which requires a set of negotiations, and this cost is increased further by reaching the Olympic scene, which makes karate more public and athletes more visible. To belong to the very small circle of *karateka* that could experience Olympic karate, or to be close to that by being part of an Olympic squad, positioned the researched athletes in a select place. Considering this, next, we briefly explain some elements of the process of belonging to an elite sport with a strong martial art background, which asks for surrender and adaptation to the local *habitus*.

3. Finding Your Place—The Comfort of Belonging through Habitus Embrace

In his work about techniques of the body, [Mauss \(1973\)](#) addresses the theme of imitation, which is a constant in sports contexts, with new practitioners becoming *mirrors* in the attempt to assimilate with the environment and resemble its respected members. When embodying an environment's *habitus*, a concept first mentioned by [Mauss \(1973\)](#) and

developed as researchers use it here by [Bourdieu \(1990\)](#), the person forges themselves and becomes a constituent part of the group, which also accepts and incorporates the person ([Mauss 1973](#)). Then, the process of belonging is elaborated in a dynamic two-way street that is constantly being remade.

According to [Spencer \(2009\)](#), *habitus* can be conceptualized as an acquired ability and faculty, and is in place when the embodiment of body techniques happen. From this perspective, the embodiment of *habitus* refers to the habits or corporeal schemas described by [Mauss \(1973\)](#), notwithstanding, in expanding the focus of the somatic to an embodied subjectivity, and researchers recall [Foucault \(2016\)](#) on his technologies of the self. Karate does not detach from its background of martial arts even when becoming an Olympic combat sport. It retains invented or selected martial traditions ([Hobsbawm 1983](#); [Williams 1977](#)) and philosophies that affect ([Green 2011](#)) athletes, as much as the general social and cultural learning process ([Bourdieu 1990](#)), setting up power dynamics.

In order to belong to elite-level karate, the athletes interviewed need to differentiate from amateur practitioners or traditional martial artists. At other times, however, the same high-level *karateka* recapture the roots that keep them connected to the martial art, perhaps romanticizing the traditional warrior's fraternity or sorority. There could be, therefore, a beneficial double-belonging, or yet a messy feeling of betrayal, to one of the scenarios, putting in evidence aspects of the contested terrain that sports karate at the same time takes part in and constitutes.

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