

“A Lot Depends On Us:” Discourses of Individual and Collective Responsibility in Polish Women’s Self-Defense Courses

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Introduction

Many of the earliest scholars of postcommunist Eastern Europe detailed the ways that the transition to a capitalist, neoliberal economic and political system have highlighted or exacerbated the sexism of Eastern European societies (e.g. Gal and Kligman 2000a, 2000b; Watson 1993; Einhorn 1993; Gal 1997). Building upon these analyses, several other social scientists have discussed the ways in which international feminist movements have sought to remedy women’s situations and their success or failure in these goals (e.g. Ghodsee 2004, Hauser 1994, Ishkanian 2004, Matynia 1995). “Violence against women” has become a buzzword for development and public programs in the region, and human rights scholars and activists have shown both that violence is a real problem in these countries (Mrozik 2000, Minnesota Advocates 2002) and an extremely successful issue for NGO and activist organization (Keck and Sikkink 1999).

More specifically, scholars such as Julie Hemment (2004, 2007), Janet Elise Johnson (2002, 2005, 2009) and Zorica Mrsevic (2000) have written ethnographic accounts of NGOs and the interventions they provide to help remedy violence against women in Russia and Serbia. These interventions have most often taken the form of “crisis centers,” battered women’s shelters, and domestic violence hotlines. In recent years, however, women in Eastern European countries have taken up what many see as an alternative solution to work against gendered violence: self-defense training for women. In urban centers of Poland such as Warsaw, for example, a growing number of women are choosing to take part in self-defense and martial arts courses for their personal safety, and often for recreation. My study of women’s self-defense participation builds upon these previous works and others, to show how ongoing processes in the context of Polish culture inform self-defense pedagogy and participation, and how participants construct identities based on their experiences in self-defense.

In many cases self-defense for women is explicitly promoted as a way for women to become empowered, but the practice’s ties to consumerism and individual self-improvement strategies may limit its efficacy. In other words, self-defense training’s discourses of individualized responsibility distract attention from structural factors which disadvantage women in Polish society. Although self-defense training has positive effects for its participants, the framing of such training as a single “cure” for the problem of violence against women is problematic. As I discuss elsewhere, two main reasons for this are its positioning as a consumer choice and a way to assert a unique consumer identity¹ and its assignation of responsibility for

the prevention of violence to individual women. Both of these limitations on self-defense's political potential are related to a neoliberal construction of personhood in postcommunist Poland.

When I use the term neoliberalism, I refer to a confluence of political and social forces connected with economic privatization and deregulation, and not the term in the strict economic sense. According to theorists of globalization such as David Harvey (2005), neoliberalism as a moral philosophy deemphasizes the importance of community solidarity and government social programs, instead focusing on the importance of entrepreneurship and individual initiative and responsibility. This wider interpretation of neoliberal philosophy is useful in understanding the ways that self-defense participants construct individuated identities through programs of self-improvement. Tomas Matza's 2009 article on Russian radio talk show programs explains how individualizing and psychoanalyzing discourses of "self-help" reflect broader economic and political trends: "...[T]herapeutic idioms such as self-esteem, self-realization self-knowledge, self-management, independence, personal potential, and responsibility have articulated with consumer desire, capitalist self-fashioning, and careerism" (Matza 2009: 492).

In this article, I will show how Polish women are increasingly incorporating and redeploying the discourses of individuation which are an important part of Poland's postcommunist transformation. Women who participate in women's self-defense courses overwhelmingly frame their participation, course preferences, and overall motivations for learning self-defense in terms of individuated self-improvement and the crafting of an agency-centered identity.² I will also discuss the implications that such discourses hold for Polish women's subjectivities; in particular, how these subjectivities are constructed by self-defense participants and by the instructors who shape self-defense pedagogy and facilitate women's participation.

Several scholars of the social sciences in Eastern Europe have discussed the importance of processes of individuation in postcommunist transitions in that region. Individuation is closely tied to economic processes of market formation, "privatization" and the promotion of consumerism (Mandel and Humphrey 2002, Verdery 1996). Evidence shows that in fields as diverse as government policy, advertising and education neoliberal discourse promotes empowerment and betterment at the individual level, encapsulated in language of self-help and personal responsibility (e.g. Phillips 2008, Haney 2008, Matza 2009). In the case of self-defense participation among Polish women, a logic of atomized individuality, in which women are completely responsible for their own circumstances, is preferred to a focus on collectivity and structural injustice.

Methods

During a period of ethnographic fieldwork lasting from September 2007 to June 2008, I attended a variety of self-defense courses for women in Warsaw, Poland. My methodologies consisted of the ethnographic cornerstones of participant observation and interviewing which

allowed me to observe trends and behaviors from an etic perspective, as well as experiencing these self-defense classes and learning the opinions of their participants from an emic perspective³. The various courses I attended approached the task of teaching women self-defense techniques very differently. Some of the courses were based on martial arts methods and focused only on physical resistance against violence. Others borrowed more from feminist theory and psychology, teaching participants through verbal discussions of self-esteem, confidence and “victim behavior.” For the purposes of this article, I will divide these different types of courses into those which take a “gendered” approach versus a “gender-blind” approach. Although these two types of courses differ, they tend to approach the question of responsibility in a similar fashion, both in terms of the students’ responsibilities within the context of training, and in terms of responsibility within society to resist and prevent violence. In most courses across categories, instructors employed discourses of individualized responsibility. In one instance when collective responsibility was introduced as a part of a course’s pedagogy, the reaction of participants was negative.

The role of gender in self-defense and martial arts pedagogy

Those courses that take a “gender-blind” approach are typically those that are based on martial-arts techniques and those that are mixed-sex, and therefore provide the same instruction to all their students regardless of whether they are men or women. Those that take a gender-sensitive approach are those that are for women only (although the instructors may be men) and select the teaching methods and the techniques taught in order to be specifically beneficial for women. However, there is one type of women’s-only course I attended (two series of courses called UnSafe Woman and Combat, respectively) which I will argue favored a gender-blind approach.

Gender-sensitive pedagogy

One hallmark of courses that were designed especially for women was a portion of class time devoted to ice-breaking and relaxation activities. Although these activities were not directly related to self-defense *per se*, they were designed to create an atmosphere of support and acceptance among the group of women, as well as improving self-esteem and a sense of calm for individual participants. The two gender-sensitive courses (called WenDo and Women’s Self Defense Program [henceforth WSDP]) also include some focus on visualizations, stability exercises and exercises designed to hone “intuition” about personal boundaries. While these two courses were similar in that they included some discussion of the psychological aspects of self-defense, they had quite different structures. WenDo is a self-defense course taught by women that aims to build women’s assertiveness and change disempowering aspects of feminine body culture. WSDP shares many of the same psychological principles as WenDo, but it includes the added element of a “padded attacker”—an instructor will “attack” one of the participants

wearing a heavily padded suit of armor, which allows the participant to defend herself physically at full strength, without worry about harming the instructor. WSDP includes discussion of the “psychological” principles that cause men to attack women and the cultural factors that cause women to be easy targets of violence.

WenDo focuses less on the psychology of the “rapist,” but still includes verbal exercises in which participants share stories of being bullied or harassed in everyday situations. During and after these exercises, the WenDo instructors introduced some basic points of feminist theory, relating to the ways that women are conditioned to be self-effacing and to self-objectify, although they did not ever state these points explicitly or associate them with feminism. As one WenDo instructor stated, “I want them to figure it out for themselves.” These segments of the seminar also included a discussion of the “philosophy of self-defense,” which was based in a discourse of individual human rights, rather than women’s rights or feminism. Both of these classes contain an atmosphere of relaxed conversation, community and even therapy rather than of training and discipline.

“Gender-blind” self-defense pedagogy

I also attended two courses that were mixed-sex and were explicitly gender-blind. These were both martial-arts based classes. The first was Karate, a traditional martial art which was not explicitly advertised as a means of self-defense, but which attracted participants who had some interest in learning self-defense techniques. The second was Krav Maga, an Israeli fighting system that borrows from several martial arts and is designed to help its students defend themselves in practical situations. Both of these methods had a relatively low proportion of women participating, and there was no women-only option available at the studios I visited. When I saw the low proportion of women in the first Krav Maga session I attended and asked the instructor whether there was a women’s-only session, he made the gender-blind philosophy of the class clear. He stated: “We don’t have training just for women, that is kind of senseless for self defense... but if you don’t want to exercise with men, you can find a girl to partner with.” Later, in an interview, this instructor made this rationale more clear:

A closed group of women causes a lack of skill in getting away from a situation, without stress and without fear. Training has to be very close to what is happening every day. If during training you exercise with a big guy, later it is not a stress to fight with such a guy in a real situation.

Finally, the courses known as UnSafe Woman and Combat were funded by Warsaw’s *Straż Miejska*, or municipal police force, and were taught by martial arts instructors who also had experience teaching mixed-sex martial arts courses. Although these courses were open only to women and taught techniques that relied on leverage and pressure points rather than muscular strength, they made no mention of the social factors relating to violence against women,

contained no discussion of domestic violence, and used very similar pedagogical techniques to the mixed-sex martial arts courses I attended. For these reasons, this women's only course is best classed as gender-blind, especially in terms of its training and disciplinary techniques, to which I will turn my focus in the next section.

The role of discipline: Motivation or denigration?

In both gender-sensitive and gender-blind courses, individual responsibility was used as a motivating factor and as a strategy for applying discipline. Although the gender-sensitive courses did not utilize discipline or formal etiquette as a part of their course proceedings, they nonetheless followed the standard that each participant was responsible only for herself, inside and outside the context of the course. The gender-blind courses tended to use forms of discipline reminiscent of sports or military training, expecting students to take individual responsibility for laziness or rule breaking. However, in rare instances, a principle of collective responsibility was introduced.

Karate and Krav Maga followed the classic model for discipline from martial arts and sports; an individual who broke the rules (i.e. being late to class, talking while the instructor was talking, answering a mobile phone, standing around instead of exercising) received a shout from the instructor and was told to complete a series of exercises (push-ups, sit-ups or jumping jacks) as punishment. This was seen by interviewees who participated in Krav Maga or Karate as a method of discipline that was fair, and not overly harsh. It prevented chaos in the classroom without disrupting the flow of the training.

WenDo was a self-defense course that did not focus on discipline *per se* because it was designed to "build women up" and increase confidence and self esteem; therefore a rigid hierarchy or rules were seen as counterproductive. Nonetheless, a rhetoric of individual responsibility and mutual respect was stressed. The course was based on feminist principles, but rather than framing its message in terms of women's rights or even "sticking together" as women, the course was full of phrases invoking individual integrity, making independent choices and protecting one's personal (bodily) boundaries. This strategy of training, advocated by feminist martial arts experts such as Hoppe (1998), Wiley (1994), and Siegel (1992) is built on the assumption that because of cultural factors of subordination women benefit from different training regimes than men, a philosophy which I discuss below.

UnSafe Woman (*Niebezpieczna Kobieta*),⁴ which was offered cost-free to residents of Warsaw, and *Combat*, an ongoing, paid course taught by the same instructors are more complex in terms of their philosophies of discipline and the role of gender in self-defense pedagogy. These courses were heavily martial-arts based, including a small number of practical safety tips: as I have mentioned before, there was not much discussion of gender or the psychology of violence in this course. In a large class session, sometimes as many as 50 participants gathered inside a school gym. The atmosphere of the class was relatively lighthearted, and although most students took the courses seriously, talking and laughing could be heard throughout the room,

even when the instructor was speaking. At times, when the noise level was too high, or if some students were deliberately ignoring instructions, the instructors deemed it necessary to stop the flow of the class to chastise the group about hard work and discipline, or to have the whole class do calisthenics.

Such a disciplinary approach can also be reminiscent of military training or team sports contexts. Part of the reasoning behind this type of training is to create a group consciousness or a form of solidarity among the members of a military group or a sports team. It teaches that the group's well being (i.e. surviving in the military context, winning in the sports context) is more important than individual feelings of tiredness or pain. Some authors have criticized this type of discipline in martial arts training, since it may counterproductively lead to a sense of resentment for less-skilled participants, and can lead to an overly authoritarian position for the instructor of the class (Schine 1995).

The women I interviewed who were participants in UnSafe Woman or Combat found enforcement of group responsibility in self-defense courses to be particularly unattractive. This may seem counterintuitive because of frequent attributions of relational and self-sacrificing thinking among women (Gilligan 1993), discourses that have been replicated by conservative discourses in Poland. However, the authoritarian implications of collective responsibility are the aspect that is most off-putting to the Polish women I interviewed. In general, these women seemed to be intimidated by popular depictions of martial arts courses and instructors. In some cases, the use of collective responsibility as a disciplinary tactic seemed to imply to the participants that the instructor had a level of authority over them that some of them were not ready to concede.

Other participants in the Combat course as well as the free UnSafe Woman courses complained about the approach of the trainers who tried to create a sense of accountability among the students through the use of collective responsibility. The participant who expressed this dissatisfaction most clearly was Zosia, who attended the free Saturday morning UnSafe Woman class. She stated:

I mean this happened in one of the classes... some of the girls did not want to exercise and so then we all had to do push-ups.... I think that if somebody doesn't want to exercise, then she doesn't have to, she can leave and this will be enough motivation for the rest, that if they don't want to exercise, they can just leave, and that's all.

Statements such as Zosia's reflect a conception of the participants in the self-defense course as atomized individuals, not as members of a cohesive group. The participants in this course might have attended the course together with one or two friends or acquaintances but aside from this, members of the course did not seem to socialize or mingle with each other outside of class. Because of this lack of group consciousness or feeling of group solidarity participants felt

responsible for only their own performance and learning, and assumed that other participants would be responsible for their own.

Even participants in courses that did not employ tactics of collective responsibility expressed relief when their experience of the courses did not fit their expectations of harsh or intimidating discipline. “I thought it was going to be like a boot camp instructor. I thought there would be all this shouting. But the instructor is a very modern, very civilized guy,” Gosia, a Krav Maga participant, said. However, none of the instructors I encountered in the course of my fieldwork could be described as using “drill sergeant” tactics, although some were harsher than others in their application of discipline and some implied collective responsibility by punishing the whole group for one student’s negligence.

These negative reactions of women in self-defense and martial arts to authoritarian/collective approaches corroborate arguments by many scholars in gender studies who believe that women in martial arts and in self-defense courses respond better to less authoritarian training techniques. Hoppe (1998), McCaughey (1997) and Wiley (1994) especially state that because of the unequal status of men and women in society, most women do not benefit from the kinds of discipline that often appear in martial arts courses which assume a universal male participant or take a gender-blind approach.

Women’s overconfidence and discipline: Polish discourses

Although most participants in Combat and UnSafe Woman felt that the collective responsibility approach was unnecessary or insulting, one participant, Alicja, felt that it was necessary for the discipline of students who were overconfident, arrogant or aggressive. Alicja felt that such overconfidence and aggression was a common characteristic among young Polish women. She felt that women interested in self-defense have to learn “to distinguish when we are too self-confident, because when it comes to that moment where we have to defend our actions, if we go overboard in self-defense we will not get the benefit of the doubt just because we are women.”

Although no other participants in UnSafe Woman or Combat expressed a positive evaluation of the disciplinary techniques involving collective responsibility, several students included statements about women’s overconfidence, aggression and their need to be discouraged from false confidence, perhaps by sparring with a stronger partner or having an instructor demonstrate how her self-defense techniques are ineffective. Zosia stated “sometimes these things are embarrassing, but good, because it teaches you that you can’t manage yourself in such a situation, that you still have more to learn.” Jolanta, a Krav Maga participant, stressed the damaging effect of a halfhearted attempt at martial arts, because many women take Krav Maga or another martial art for a few months and gain too much confidence: “This can be damaging...because it seems like you can do something, you can defend yourself, but this is really artificial confidence and it can betray you.”

When I asked interviewees whether Polish women are overall assertive, the most common answer was “no”, because most women were either passive, or aggressive. According to my interviewees, it was difficult for most Polish women to find a middle ground, but that many younger women mistake aggressiveness for self-confidence. Zosia, a participant in *UnSafe Woman*, stated that “a lot of women are in denial about their kind of physical weakness, that they don’t have the kind of strength that guys have, they create this kind of fantasy that they will be able to defend themselves....” She went on to say that,

Teenagers [girls] in Poland are often unusually aggressive, and sometimes at the school... they get into fights over who is prettier and things like that. They are fighting and clawing with nail extensions, pulling hair, and they just throw each other to the ground.

According to Sandra Bartky, training centered on collective responsibility is based on the assumption that for the “universal male subject...emotions of shame and guilt...are indeed occasions for moral reaffirmation” (Bartky 1990:97) and such techniques have been utilized by modern institutions such as schools and the military as teaching tools (see also Foucault 1978). According to the philosophy of military and martial arts training, men are socialized to be individualist and to have large egos which would need to be broken down in order to work effectively as a team or to engender a respectful spirit and a sense of community. Women, on the other hand, according to Bartky and many other feminist writers, are taught in these same societies to be conscious of others’ needs, cooperative, and to subsume their own will: therefore it is not helpful or necessary to break down their egos. Although these assumptions seem to make sweeping generalizations about men and women, they have been adopted by many instructors of martial arts and other “masculine” sports.

In light of this evidence, one may ask: Why can’t a gender-blind approach that treats men and women the same be applied to mixed sex martial arts courses as a way for women to gain empowerment and equality with men? Authors such as McCaughey (1997) and McCormick (1995) answer this question by countering that many women, at some point in their lives, have experienced verbal harassment, degradation and punishment unrelated to any sports or military training. Because of an inherent tendency in society toward the subjugation of women, training intended to break down the ego can be interpreted by some women participants as just another manifestation of this oppression. However, if the statements about “overconfidence” and “aggression” in Polish women shared by many of my interviewees are true, training techniques involving collective responsibility in the martial arts courses might not be particularly harmful.⁵

Ideologies of individuation and personal responsibility

The preference for individual rather than collective responsibility in their training is not the only way in which Polish women participating in self-defense courses are embracing

neoliberal discourses of individuality and personal responsibility. Many of the self-defense participants I interviewed shared narratives of discovery of their own personal “power” and “control” over situations in their lives through their practice of self-defense or martial arts. “I really liked that you can finally see that women do not have to be passive, and that they don’t have to agree to everything. You can apply this in every activity of your life.... This was the most important part for me,” says Ania, a participant in WenDo. WenDo is a self-defense course based on feminist principles that focuses heavily on verbal self-defense and the development of self-confidence and assertiveness. Ala, a participant in Krav Maga, discussed the more physical benefits of this self-defense method:

I’ve found some holds which I really feel that I can take advantage of in some way... like if somebody really attacked me.... I personally think that from lesson to lesson I gain more and more confidence.

Joanna, a participant in the Combat courses, stated how a small physical accomplishment can become the basis for a greater sense of personal control:

I have never been able to do push-ups. And here, in this course I had to force myself just to do one or two push-ups. Now I can do a lot more.... This course has been a kind of an inspiration, because now I am trying to do something in my own life.

Finally, Hana, a WenDo participant, states that her training in physical and psychological self-defense has given her a feeling of “...self-confidence, and a greater feeling of safety... I have this kind of consciousness, that I always have a chance to do something. I know that a lot of it depends on us, just this kind of safety, psychologically, I feel, let’s say, calmer.”

All of these women’s narratives include a sense of empowerment and a greater amount of control over their lives where before had been feelings of passivity and fear. They see themselves as overcoming some of the more restrictive norms of outward feminine comportment and behavior (see Brownmiller 1976, Bartky 1992, Young 1990). However, at the same time, none of my participants professed an interest in “feminism,” “women’s rights” or “women’s empowerment” as a political project. In fact, many of these interviewees had a very negative association with feminism or rather erroneous conceptions of what feminism and women’s rights actually entail. The most common misconceptions about feminism among my interviewees were that feminism advocated a complete denial of gender difference (or even “getting rid of” men), or that it was no longer necessary because women’s equality had already been achieved in Polish society.

In light of these negative associations with feminism among Polish women, when beginning my dissertation research project I wondered whether participation by women in such

self-defense and assertiveness seminars could serve much the same function in women's empowerment in Poland as political change and feminist organization has in other countries. Through the ethnographic evidence I collected over the course of my dissertation fieldwork, I have concluded that women's embrace of individualized empowerment rather than empowerment for women as a group can have benefits for individual women but cannot replace women's political organization or feminism.

Assuming that problems of gender oppression will be solved through the individual empowerment of women through self-defense (or any other self-improvement regime) deflects attention from larger structural issues of women's oppression. It begins from the faulty assumption that all women are equally structurally empowered, and it is only their cultural proclivity towards weakness or passivity that prevents them from achieving. Secondly, the rhetoric of self-defense courses dovetails with neoliberal conceptions of individualized personhood that place responsibility for the health of a society on the actions of individuals. Although society is indeed comprised of individuals, much of the discourse of women's self-defense continues to place responsibility for gendered violence firmly on the shoulders of women themselves.

Interviews with WenDo instructors, as well as instructors of WSDP, a padded attacker self-defense course, indicate that they see their methods of self-defense as a vast improvement upon the previously available self-defense options for women in Poland, which they describe as "lectures by policemen...they make women feel stupid. These policemen are telling women they should not do this, they should conduct themselves in this way..." Magdalena, a WenDo instructor, also said that martial arts courses for women are not sufficient for self-defense: "It is still chiefly men that go there, and if a woman is there she is still discriminated against...many women in such classes do not feel well there because they are overlooked. Here [in WenDo] they are raised up."

The courses I encountered during fieldwork in Poland in fact do present women with opportunities to learn fighting skills and to gain greater control over their personal safety. However, the rhetoric of these courses by definition may result in placing sole responsibility for gendered violence on women, especially if these courses were to be taken by a large proportion of Polish women. In the pedagogical language of both WSDP and WenDo, there are many references to "patriarchal training" and "victim behavior." The instructors use these terms in explaining the cultural factors that cause women to constrict their movements, make themselves physically small, and to be self-effacing in interpersonal relationships. In WSDP's self-defense publication *Always Safe: The Psychological Aspects of Self-Defense* (2003) the descriptions of "victim behavior" are explained in very great detail, delving into the "psychology of the rapist" and explaining how a rapist selects victims (it is helpful to note that the co-authors of this text and co-creators of WSDP have backgrounds in psychology). The book purports to give women "power" by making them aware of this psychological process, but the only real benefit they gain from this information is to know what behavior to avoid.

On one level, the recommendations given in this book are interesting interpretations of feminist ideas—for example, “Women in our culture are taught to have a completely flat stomach, so wherever you go, you stand there holding your stomach in. But the stomach is the center of your strength and it grounds you to the earth. By unnaturally constricting these muscles you put yourself off balance and place you out of touch with your strength” (70).

However, some of the “safety tips” offered by this volume are similar to those contained in explicitly patriarchal self-defense discourses of decades past: “Avoid clothing that makes you appear as a victim, such as childlike clothing,” “watch out for clothing that can be used as a weapon against you, like a scarf or a hood,” (104) and “avoid getting into an elevator with a strange man.” The book even includes a story from a former participant who was raped after getting into a car after a party with a male coworker (87). Although this advice is presented as encouraging women to let go of excessive femininity, to be strong and capable and to trust their instincts, the content of the advice tends to focus more on what women should not do than on providing empowering solutions to violence.

Even so, the book states that, “Women should not be blamed for provoking an attack by any means. We live in an unsafe world and everyone should do what keeps them safest” (9). This discourse is not gender specific but it still places responsibility on potential victims to prevent violence. Piotr, a WSDP instructor, insisted that the content of the courses does not blame women for allowing violence to happen, and it is possible that the pedagogy presented in the in-person courses differs from the content of *Always Safe*.

Piotr’s defense of WSDP’s courses focused on comparing them to “courses run by the police” which, he stated, used to be the only form of self-defense available to women in Poland. By focusing on the psychology of violence, WSDP seeks to place blame on the *men* who perpetrate violence. Overall, he said, courses like WSDP and WenDo represent a vast improvement over previous methods of teaching self-defense:

...I disagree with such courses run by the police, they perpetuate a certain patriarchal stereotype and really they make women feel stupid....maybe there are some policemen who are really cool but in general they have to restrain their own aggression, they are often associated as perpetrators of domestic violence, so they are not a very good group to be teaching women.

As this quote explains Piotr believes that violence can be re-inscribed by the pedagogy of police-run self-defense courses, through a teaching style that tends to dismiss women’s experience and continues to blame their behavior for incidents of violence. The source of this re-inscription lies in the patriarchal perspective of the instructors themselves, and by using instructors trained in feminist theory and psychology, his courses (as well as WenDo) avoid such counterproductive teaching methods.

Conclusion

In self-defense courses in Poland, instructors often deploy discourses of individualized responsibility and self-improvement as a part of the course content. In discussing their motivations for participating and evaluating the effectiveness of the courses, participants tend to use similar rhetoric. These principles of individualized empowerment embraced by Polish self-defense participants and instructors may reflect a broader societal shift from collective to personal responsibility, and trends toward atomized, neoliberal conceptions of personhood.

These discourses of personhood flatten structural inequalities and discourage attention to the disadvantages of certain groups, because they create an illusion of equality of opportunity. For this reason some feminist scholars (e.g. Bromley 1982, Lorde 1984, MacKinnon 1989) have been wary of programs which offer women empowerment on an individualized level, outside of feminist organization, as “macho feminism” which values personal achievement over the status of women as a whole.

In the context of women’s self-defense in Poland, the application of concepts of individual responsibility and self-confidence are on one level beneficial. Feminist organization is of limited use without individual empowerment, because organizations are made up of individuals after all. Women without a strong sense of self-worth and confidence are unlikely to participate in activism to engage in helping other women. However, the ties of self-defense to processes individuation and concepts of atomized personal achievement are problematic upon deeper analysis of their effects on gender politics in the specific context of Poland. The ethnographic evidence I have collected implies that self-defense training is perhaps beneficial but not sufficient to begin to unravel the problems of women’s empowerment in Poland.

Notes

¹ For a theoretical discussion of Polish women’s practices of self-investment see Marody and Giza-Poleszczuk (2000).

² See Giddens (1991) for a discussion of “body projects” as a symptom of late modernity.

³ My methods for this project consisted of participant observation in four beginning-level WenDo seminars in Warsaw, Krakow and Katowice, and of 13 in-depth, informal interviews conducted with WenDo participants and trainers (4 interviews with participants; 9 with trainers). Additionally, four other participants responded to an e-mail questionnaire. Other aspects of my dissertation project involved participant-observation in self-defense seminars such as Karate, Krav Maga, Women’s Self-Defense Program and Unsafe Woman courses, and 25 interviews with the participants and trainers of these courses. In addition to participant and interview data, I collected magazines, newspapers and other cultural artifacts to provide context about Polish culture and society.

⁴ This title can be interpreted in one or two ways. The Polish word *niebezpieczna* can have either the meaning “in danger” or “dangerous.” This title implies both that women are in some way “unsafe” or threatened, and also that by learning self-defense they can make themselves both “safe” and “dangerous” because they are learning to inflict harm and protect themselves.

⁵ Nonetheless, aggression and overconfidence does not characterize the attitudes of the women the ethnographer observed participating in self-defense courses, so more research is needed in this area.

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