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Abstract

Given the positive benefits of self-defense training for women, it is important to understand how women come to enroll in self-defense classes. Using data from a longitudinal study of university women, I explore the reasons women give for taking a self-defense class. I find that friends' recommendations, visions of the "possible selves" they could become, and fear of violence were the most frequently reported reasons; having experienced a past assault was rarely cited as a reason for enrolling. In addition, many women who had never enrolled in a self-defense class reported having considered doing so. I explore barriers to learning self-defense and find that logistical issues such as time, money, and availability of classes were the most frequently reported reasons for not enrolling.

Keywords

self-defense, sexual assault, violence against women

Introduction

Self-defense training is a powerful source of empowerment for women. Women who complete a comprehensive, feminist self-defense class report increased self-confidence, reduced fear, more comfortable interactions with strangers, acquaintances, and intimates, more positive feelings about themselves and their bodies, and a general sense of self-worth and empowerment (Cohn, Kidder, & Harvey, 1978; Hollander, 2004; McCaughey, 1997; McDaniel, 1993; Ozer & Bandura, 1990; Weitlauf, Smith, & Cervone, 2000; also see Brecklin, 2008 for a recent summary). In addition, there is preliminary evidence that self-defense training may help reduce the incidence of sexual assault,¹ by helping women avoid assault and by increasing the effectiveness of their responses if attacked² (Gidycz, Rich, Orchowski, King, & Miller, 2006; Hollander, 2004; Orchowski, Gidycz, & Raffle, 2008). For survivors of sexual assault, self-defense training can be particularly healing and

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empowering, by increasing sense of control and decreasing fear, anxiety, and distress (see Brecklin & Ullman, 2004; Frazier, 2000).

How, then, do women come to take self-defense classes? Equally important, why do some women choose not to do so? Given these positive benefits of self-defense training, it is important to understand the factors that lead women to the decision to enroll in a self-defense class—and that may inhibit them from doing so. Answering these questions may also provide clues about how women come to engage in empowering activities more generally.

Little research on self-defense addresses these questions, however. Most research on women's self-defense is silent about the question of how women come to enroll in a class. Of those few studies that do mention women's reasons for enrolling, some assume, imply, or state explicitly that most women enroll in self-defense training because of past experiences of violence or fear of future violence. Brecklin and Ullman (2004), for example, summarizing past research (largely unpublished dissertations), write that "studies have shown that the majority of self-defense training participants (44%-88%) have been physically or sexually abused in their lifetime" (p. 148). They examine the correlates of postassault self-defense or assertiveness training (their data set does not distinguish between the two) and find that women who enrolled in self-defense or assertiveness training after an assault had experienced more severe sexual assaults than those who had never completed such training. They suggest that "more violent attacks may lead survivors to enroll in postassault training, especially when their resistance was less effective. . . . These survivors may enroll in training to exercise control over future assaults occurring and as a way of healing from sexual assault" (p. 147). As this analysis is correlational and survivors were not asked to explain the reasons for enrolling in a self-defense class, these conclusions are necessarily speculative. In a related study, Brecklin (2004) found that college women who reported ever enrolling in self-defense or assertiveness training (as in the previous study, no distinction was made between the two) were more likely to have experienced child sexual assault, child physical assault, or both and were more likely to have been sexually victimized as adults than women without self-defense/assertiveness training. Huddleston (1991) compared 114 college women enrolled in self-defense classes with 116 women enrolled in other physical education classes. She found that subjects in the self-defense group were significantly more likely to have been the victim of an attempted rape or sexual assault, although there were no differences in the incidence of other victimization experiences (including physical abuse, completed rape, and child sexual assault). She speculates that "perhaps victims of attempted rape recognize their vulnerability and realize that they must take action (e.g., enroll in a self-defense course) to prevent the possibility of future attack" (Huddleston, 1991, p. 50). However, this study did not ask students whether a past assault was why they enrolled in the class.

A few published studies do ask women about their reasons for taking a self-defense class but report those reasons anecdotally or generally. In her interviews with 30 women enrolled in a women's self-defense class, De Welde (2003a), who did ask women why they enrolled in a self-defense class, found that the most common reason was that women were "tired of being afraid" (p. 81). Other important reasons were that they were "going away" (e.g., to attend college or other travel) or that they had been victimized in the past. In a

second article based on these data, De Welde (2003b) cites “curiosity” and “fear of crime” as reasons reported by a majority of women for taking the class. McDaniel’s (1993) comparison of women enrolled in self-defense and physical fitness classes also asked self-defense students why they had enrolled in the course. McDaniel reports that “women reported a variety of reasons . . . with the most common being a desire to learn physical skill to enable them to defend themselves from attack, as well as a desire to gain greater self-confidence” (p. 42). However, McDaniel neither explains how common these reasons were nor explains what other, less common reasons might have been. McDaniel also notes that at pretest, the self-defense group reported greater fear of crime and less self-confidence than they would be able to defend themselves against attack than the physical fitness group and speculates that “these initial differences in fear and confidence may explain why some women choose to enroll in self-defense classes and others do not” (p. 44).

In this article, I use data from a study of women enrolled in a university self-defense class and similar women enrolled in other university classes to provide more systematic information about why women decide to enroll in self-defense classes. In addition to collecting data on past experiences of violence, I asked participants explicitly about their reasons for taking (or not taking) a self-defense class. These data provide insight into who takes self-defense classes and why. As so little is known about this topic and because this research focuses on college students, this analysis is exploratory.

Method

This analysis is based on data collected for a study of the consequences of women’s self-defense training. The project includes repeated surveys completed by women enrolled in six sections of a feminist self-defense class offered at a major state university in the Pacific Northwest of the United States and by similar women enrolled in other classes at the same university (e.g., English, dance, education). I also conducted 20 in-depth interviews with a subset of participants and attended the self-defense class one term as a participant observer. Although the project includes two follow-up surveys, I analyze data from only the first survey (completed during the first week of the term) and the interviews here.

Feminist self-defense classes have several important features that may distinguish them from nonfeminist classes (often offered through police departments, martial arts studios, or gyms) in several important ways. Feminist classes are generally limited to women students and focus on violence against women, particularly sexual assault. They teach physical self-defense techniques especially suited for women’s bodies (e.g., using lower-body rather than upper-body strength) and suitable for rapid learning. They focus on developing options appropriate for a range of situations, from sexual harassment to rape, and involving acquaintances, intimates, or strangers. Most importantly, feminist classes include a critical assessment of gender socialization and the ways it facilitates violence against women, both by encouraging assaultive behaviors in perpetrators and by creating fear, immobility, and self-blame in targets (see Rentschler, 1999; Telsey, 2001, 2006).

The self-defense class described here has been taught by the same female instructor for more than 20 years, both at the university and in the surrounding community. The class is

currently offered through the Women's and Gender Studies Program for academic credit; it involves both training in physical and verbal self-defense and academic study of theoretical and applied issues related to violence against women. The class meets 3 hours per week, plus a required weekly 1.5 hours small-group discussion, for a total of 45 hours over the academic term. Students practice physical techniques in slow motion against other class members and full force against pads held by the instructor and her assistants. There is also considerable discussion of the psychological and emotional aspects of self-defense, for example, the fact that women tend to be socialized to discount their own intuition and focus on others' needs and desires. The class fits the criteria for effective self-defense classes laid out by the National Coalition Against Sexual Assault (NCASA, n.d.) and other writers (e.g., Madden & Sokol, 1997; Searles & Follansbee, 1984) and is similar to other feminist self-defense classes offered throughout the United States (see, for example, Cummings, 1992; Rentschler, 1999).

Students were recruited for the study during the first class meeting of the term. Self-defense students were told that the project's goal was "to understand how taking a self-defense class affects women's lives"; other students were told that the project's purpose was "to understand college women's lives, and what factors affect their experiences during their college years." All participants were volunteers and were paid US\$10 for each survey or interview they completed. One hundred and eighteen women enrolled in the self-defense classes (or 66% of the approximately 180 women enrolled in the six classes), and 174 women enrolled in other classes agreed to participate. Each participant completed a written, self-administered survey. The questions analyzed in this article focused on reasons for and against taking a self-defense class.³ Students enrolled in the self-defense class were asked, "What led you to sign up for this self-defense class?" Students not enrolled in a self-defense class were asked, "Have you ever taken a self-defense class?" Those who answered "yes" were asked for details about the class and why they had taken it; those who answered "no" were asked whether they had ever considered taking a self-defense class, and if so, what had kept them from taking it.

The mean age of the participants was 21.5 years. Similar to the demographics of the university, 89.1% were White, 0.3% were African American, 7.5% were Asian and Pacific Islander, 6.8% were Latina, and 3.4% were Native American. Just above 20% were freshmen, 18% were sophomores, 27% were juniors, and 31% were seniors; 4% were graduate students or exchange students. The self-defense participants were more likely to be older (21.8 vs. 20.7 years, on average) and to have junior or senior class standing than the non-self-defense participants.

Previous experiences of sexual violence were assessed using the Sexual Experiences Survey (SES; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987). This measure, frequently used in research on sexual assault, asks 10 behaviorally specific questions about the participant's sexual assault history. Individuals are then classified into categories⁴ based on the most severe experience reported. This measure has demonstrated good reliability and validity (Koss & Gidycz, 1985).

In-depth interviews were conducted with 20 self-defense students to gain a richer understanding of their experiences. The interviewees were chosen based on willingness to

participate in an interview. Students were interviewed at different points during and after the class to capture the process of learning self-defense and its consequences for students' lives. Five participants were interviewed halfway through the class, 10 within 1 month of completing the class, and 5 between 4 and 6 months after completing the class.⁵

It is important to acknowledge the limited generalizability of this study due to its focus on college students, who are less heterogeneous than the national population in terms of age, race, and class. However, college students are an important population for research on violence prevention. First, college-aged women are at particularly high risk of sexual assault (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000; Koss et al., 1987). According to the National Women's Study, nearly a quarter of all sexual assaults occur between the ages of 18 and 24 (National Victim Center, 1992). Second, many sexual assault prevention programs are found on college campuses, which are required to implement sexual assault prevention efforts to receive federal funding (Anderson & Whiston, 2005). Unfortunately, few of these programs have been evaluated, and of those that have, most have been found to be ineffective at reducing the incidence of sexual assault (Anderson & Whiston, 2005; Breitenbecher & Gidycz, 1998; Breitenbecher & Scarce, 1999). Finally, university students are one of the major target audiences for self-defense classes, many of which are offered on college campuses. Thus, although this sample has limitations, it is a useful starting point for evaluating self-defense training.

The analysis below is exploratory and proceeds in the following manner. I first assess whether women enroll in self-defense classes because of past experiences of violence. I compare rates of assault reported by women in the self-defense and non-self-defense groups and then examine the reasons women provide for enrolling in self-defense classes, both at the university and elsewhere. I look at these reasons both quantitatively (i.e., patterns of responses) and qualitatively (i.e., the major thematic components of these reasons). Then, I turn to the question of why some women do *not* take a self-defense class. Do they wish to learn self-defense? If so, what barriers prevent them from doing so? I conclude by asking what these results imply for how to encourage or enable more women to learn self-defense skills.

Results

Do Women Enroll in Self-Defense Classes Because of Past Experiences of Violence?

Because past research has suggested a connection between prior assault and the decision to enroll in a self-defense class, I begin my analysis by examining this relationship. One way to address this question is to compare the rates of past sexual assault reported by women enrolled in the university self-defense class and those enrolled in other classes. Women were categorized as having experienced three levels of assault: none, sexual contact or coercion, and attempted or completed rape. Women enrolled in self-defense classes did have somewhat higher reported rates of sexual assault: in each category, a higher percentage of self-defense students than non-self-defense students reported experiences of assault (see Table 1). However, these differences were not statistically significant, $\chi^2(2, N = 292) = 4.968$,

Table 1. Comparison of Sexual Assaults Reported by Self-Defense and Non-Self-Defense Students

Highest Level of Assault Reported	Self-Defense Students		Non-Self Defense Students		All Participants	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
None	28	23.7	62	35.6	90	30.8
Sexual contact or coercion	36	30.5	49	28.2	85	29.1
Attempted or completed rape	54	45.8	63	36.2	117	40.0
Total	118	100	174	100	292	100

$p = .083$. This result is particularly notable given that the self-defense students were on average older than the students who had not taken self-defense and had therefore had more exposure to the risk of sexual assault. In addition, it is probable that women who enroll in a self-defense class are already sensitized to the issue of sexual assault and may therefore be more likely than other women to report an assault, making the similarity in reported assault rates across the two groups even more surprising.

Moreover, having experienced sexual assault is clearly not a distinguishing feature of the two groups. Nearly a quarter of the women enrolled in self-defense classes reported *no* past assault experiences. Similarly, many women not enrolled in the self-defense class reported rape (24.1%), attempted rape (12.1%), and other experiences of sexual coercion and unwanted sexual contact. Perhaps the reason for the assumption that women take self-defense classes because of a prior assault is that most such studies have looked principally at self-defense students, who, like all women in this society, have shockingly high rates of assault. Although it may seem intuitive that women take self-defense because of a prior assault, this commonplace assumption is not supported by these data.

Moreover, simply reporting a history of sexual assault does not necessarily mean that this history was the main or the only reason a woman decided to learn self-defense. To better understand this issue, it is necessary to examine the reasons women themselves give for this choice. Table 2 shows the distribution of reasons women gave for taking the university self-defense class. Note that a previous assault was given as a reason for taking the class by only 12 students (10%), although 54 (46%) had experienced a rape or attempted rape and an additional 36 (31%) reported experiences of unwanted sexual contact or coercion.

Did women who had experienced a prior assault give different reasons for taking the class than women who had not? Table 3 shows the pattern of results across students, by highest level of assault reported.

Clearly, women who reported having been raped were much more likely to say being attacked was one reason they enrolled in the self-defense class.⁶ However, only a minority of those reporting an assault, including rape, gave this as a reason for enrolling in the self-defense class.⁷

Table 2. Self-Defense Students' Responses to the Question "What Led You to Sign Up for This Self-Defense Class?"

Reason	Number of Mentions	% of Participants (N = 118)
I heard it was a good class	85	72
I wanted to learn how to defend myself physically	74	63
I wanted to become more assertive or self-confident	64	54
I wanted to learn how to defend myself verbally	58	49
I heard stories about women who were attacked	25	21
I wanted the physical workout	23	20
I felt fearful	21	18
It was for my major or minor	18	15
Changes in my personal circumstances ^a	13	11
A friend was taking it and asked me to join	12	10
I was attacked	12	10
Someone I know was attacked	11	9
Other ^b	6	5
It fit my schedule	3	3
I don't know or don't remember	1	1

a. This category included living alone for the first time, traveling alone, or starting a new job.

b. "Other" reasons included encouragement from a parent or boyfriend/girlfriend, future job safety, "feeling small and helpless," being "interested in women-centered classes" or "building connections with other women," or having "always been interested."

However, perhaps there is something unusual about a university self-defense class, such that something in the university context encourages women with no experience of sexual assault to enroll in a self-defense class, although such experiences are most important in other contexts. To explore this possibility, I turned to data from the students surveyed who were not currently enrolled in the self-defense class (and had never enrolled in this particular class) but who had taken a self-defense class in the past. There were 48 students in this category, who had taken classes ranging from a 1-hour workshop to many hours of martial arts training. Table 4 shows the reasons these students gave for enrolling in a class. While the pattern of responses here was different than for the university self-defense students, a previous assault was mentioned by only one participant as a major reason for enrolling in a self-defense class, though 21 of the 48 (44%) reported experiencing a rape or attempted rape and 13 more (27%) reported unwanted sexual contact or coercion (though with this group of participants, the temporal ordering of an assault and enrolling in a self-defense class is unknown).

Table 3. Reasons Given for Taking a Self-Defense Class by Level of Assault

Reason	Highest Level of Assault Reported (%)				
	None (N = 28)	Sexual Contact (N = 18)	Sexual Coercion (N = 18)	Attempted Rape (N = 20)	Rape (N = 34)
I heard it was a good class	75	67	78	70	67
I wanted to learn how to defend myself physically	68	56	72	60	59
I wanted to become more assertive or self-confident	46	72	67	55	44
I wanted to learn how to defend myself verbally	46	44	72	50	41
I heard stories about women who were attacked	22	11	33	20	21
I wanted the physical workout	22	17	17	20	21
I felt fearful	0	22	17	25	27
It was for my major or minor	11	6	11	10	27
A friend was taking it	11	11	17	15	3
Changes in my personal circumstances	0	17	11	5	18
I was attacked	0	6	0	5	29
Someone I knew was attacked	4	6	22	20	3
Don't know/remember	0	0	6	0	0

Why Do Women Enroll in Self-Defense Classes?

If prior assault is not the most important reason why many women enroll in a self-defense class, then what is? The reasons given by the university self-defense students fell into three major categories, which I discuss in the following sections.

"I heard it was a good class": Word of mouth. The most frequently reported reason for taking the university self-defense class was having heard positive things about the class from others. More than 70% of the women in this sample heard about the class through word of mouth: friends had taken it, found it valuable, and passed that information on. As

Table 4. Past Self-Defense Students' Responses to the Question "What Led You to Sign Up for This Self-Defense Class?"

Reason	Number of Mentions	% of Subjects (N = 48)
I wanted to learn how to defend myself physically	16	33
It was part of a class or group activity (e.g., sorority)	12	24
Other ^a	9	19
I wanted the physical workout	8	17
I wanted to become more assertive or self-confident	8	16
A friend was taking it and asked me to join	5	14
I wanted to learn how to defend myself verbally	4	8
I heard it was a good class	4	8
Thought it was a good idea	4	8
Parent required it	3	6
Someone I know was attacked	2	4
I heard stories about women who were attacked	2	4
I felt fearful	2	4
Changes in my personal circumstances	1	2
I was attacked	1	2
I don't know or don't remember	1	2

a. "Other" reasons for this group were diverse and included an employer's suggestion, "it was free," "I was interested," and "I like to fight."

one interviewee said, "I've always heard good stuff about the self-defense class." In a number of interviews and surveys, participants made clear the passion with which others had recommended this class:⁸

I met a fascinating girl in one of my freshmen seminars and she told me this class had changed her whole life—she made me swear to take it before I graduated.

One of my friends, . . . she took this class [on campus]. And after she finished it, she was like, "Oh my gosh, you have to take this class. It's so great."

I heard it is life changing for women. It allows you to have more confidence and higher self esteem. It has been recommended by everyone I know who took the class.

Another 10% of the sample reported taking the class because a friend had suggested that they sign up together.

These responses make clear that deciding to take a self-defense class is often a *social* process: It is through connections with others—as role models, as sources of information, and as friends—that women arrive in self-defense classes. The encouragement and testimony of others may help women overcome any barriers to enrolling in self-defense, a subject I take up at greater length below.

Possible selves. The next three most frequently cited reasons for enrolling in the self-defense class were: “I wanted to learn how to defend myself physically” (with 63% of the students endorsing this reason), “I wanted to become more assertive or self-confident” (54%), and “I wanted to learn how to defend myself verbally” (49%). These all seem like straightforward reasons to enroll in a self-defense class. However, it is important to note that common to all three of these reasons is a sense of a desired future self, one who is more independent, capable, and confident than the present self.

Markus and Nurius (1986) term these conceptions of oneself in the future *possible selves*. These are “the ideal selves we would very much like to become. They are also the selves we could become, and the selves we are afraid of becoming” (p. 954). For example, self-defense students frequently made comments like the following:

I’m a small person, so I just wanted to be able to just walk around and just know that I have the skills to take care of myself. I don’t have to rely on somebody else to be there with me. So that’s why I decided to take it.

I’ve heard it’s life changing and I wanted to feel more confident of myself and learn how to use my body to its full potential.

I wanted to be more self-confident, to know I don’t have to refrain from doing things I like because I might be attacked.

Each of these quotes includes a vision of the self in the future, as someone who is assertive, self-confident, self-reliant, and able to move freely in the world.

Several of the participants also made reference to past or current selves, which serve as points of departure for the future self. For example,

I’ve always had a problem with being assertive and saying what I really think, thinking about what I want, what I need, what I feel, even when it came to members of my family. And that’s something that I’ve been wanting to work on for a while.

I had an ex-boyfriend/fiancé that assaulted me a little over a year ago. I have never felt so helpless and weak as I did at that point, and I never want to feel that way again, so I took the class.

These past and current selves serve as important motivators for action: They represent the selves that women wish to leave behind as they develop and change.

An important aspect of many possible selves described by the self-defense participants was a new conceptualization of gender. Being self-confident, assertive, and, perhaps most

significant, capable of protecting oneself rather than relying on others are all unconventional traits for women, who are more frequently expected to be passive, compliant, and dependent on others because of their supposedly inherent vulnerability (Hollander, 2001; McCaughey, 1997). Choosing to take a self-defense class represents a choice to follow a different gender path. As McCaughey (1997) writes, learning self-defense involves gender transgression: "Self-defense transforms the way it feels to inhabit a female body. It changes what it means to be a woman" (p. 2).

Often this path was chosen after hearing a brief presentation by the self-defense instructor in another class.

I really enjoyed [the instructor's] presentation in my Women's and Gender Studies 101 class. And I thought it sounded like a cool class.

Well, I took Women's and Gender Studies 101 last spring. . . . And I loved that class. It was awesome. I had a great teacher and I learned so much that I was totally not aware of about everything having to do with women. [The self-defense instructor] came to our class and shared some of her stories and did a couple of little moves with us. I guess I just kind of decided at that point that I wanted to take the self-defense class. [Q: She was there for, what, an hour?] Yeah. [Q: And that was enough to really inspire you?] Yeah, just one day.

How could a 1-hour presentation be so effective? My interviews suggest that this presentation drew people to the self-defense class because it presented and modeled a new view of gender. When I asked the interviewees what it was about the brief presentation that caught their interest, their answers made this clear:

[Q: What was it about [the instructor's] presentation that grabbed you so much?] For me, whenever I heard "self-defense," I was like "kung-fu," you know, kicking people's butts, that kind of stuff. And then when she talked about it, she just brought a whole more like, what it really is, into it. . . . And talking about how it's like a whole confidence in how you carry yourself. And she talked about it as taking up space and [she talked about] how girls walk and I realized I walk like that all the time. Like I walk like with my arms around myself, and . . . I've never really thought of how it looks to other people. And . . . she just shed light on a subject that I was sort of closed off to. So I thought it just sounded really interesting.

[Q: What was it about the presentation that really grabbed you?] I think it's because she's this small woman that came in and told us about her experiences, and it was really just kind of empowering that she had dealt with certain situations but had come out of them, and she was okay. And really just the idea that, just because I'm a girl, I can take care of myself. I don't need to depend on someone else to do it.

[Q: What grabbed your attention [about the presentation]?] Well, I thought about taking self-defense before but I was kind of intimidated just because I'm a pretty passive

person and karate and stuff sounded really intimidating. But her approach that a lot of it's preventative and just knowing about your surroundings and how, like, anyone can bring down a large man. That sounded interesting to me and it made me realize that her class was geared toward people like me who felt like they couldn't defend themselves.

Here, the self-defense instructor's brief presentation sparked new ideas, both about how gender inequality is manifested in everyday life (taking up space, body language) and what might be possible in a different gender regime (women being able to protect themselves). The instructor's small physical stature clearly was important for some students too; potential students reported thinking that if she could be successful at self-defense, then perhaps they could too. Her presentation illuminated a path—and a possible self—that students did not know existed for them.

Fear of violence. The third major cluster of reasons for taking self-defense centered around the threat of violence. As noted above, only 10% of the participants selected "I was attacked" as a motivation for taking the class, although 75% reported some form of sexual victimization. More than actual experiences of assault, the fear or threat of sexual violence motivated some women to enroll in the class. Women reported deciding to take the class because someone they knew was attacked (9% of the sample), because they had heard stories about women who were attacked (21%), or because they felt fearful (18%).

My friend's house was off-campus last year and he was dating my roommate. So a lot of times we'd go together and then I'd walk back by myself, and it's right by the cemetery and all that stuff. I'd heard all the stories about girls being raped there and everything.

I think just being in college, being away from home and knowing people in my dorm who were having problems with harassment, and having dealt with it when I was in high school and never really feeling like I had any control over it because it was always, you know, going to somebody else, trying to get them to take care of it.

I've been off traveling for the last year and I often felt held back by fear or insecurity of how to react to violent situations.

Sometimes, the student was not fearful; rather, someone close to her, such as a parent or boyfriend, feared for her safety and therefore encouraged her to enroll:

I run a lot by myself so that was a big thing for me, that I would feel safer, I think. And it made my mom feel safer too, because she worries a lot. . . . Just knowing that it's not safe to go out there as a woman, and—that frustrates me to no end that it's not safe—but to know that I at least know how to protect myself a little bit. It's reassuring.

My dad was very in favor of me taking it, just because he was very concerned with all the attacks that were going on on campus.

Table 5. Reasons Given for Not Enrolling in a Self-Defense Class

Reason	% of Participants Mentioning (N = 96)
Time	86.5
Money	24.0
Availability of classes	19.8
Motivation	11.5
No need	9.4
Fears about self-defense	5.2

Clearly, the prevalence of sexual violence and the desire to feel safer lead some women to enroll in self-defense classes.

This finding accords with the research literature on fear of crime, which finds that women report experiencing far more fear than men (Gordon & Riger, 1989; Stanko, 1992). Although personal experiences of violence produce fear, vicarious experiences are important too: knowing others who are victimized, being warned by others about violence (Burt & Estep, 1981; Hollander, 2001; Stanko, 1996), and, perhaps most importantly, hearing narratives about violence, often through media (Gordon & Heath, 1981).

Fear of violence has far-reaching consequences for everyday life, and these costs are borne disproportionately by women. Most obviously, many women respond to this fear by restricting their behavior: staying home, avoiding particular places, activities, people, and times of day believed to be dangerous, and buying "safety" devices such as mace and alarm systems. As Sheffield (1987) has argued, fear of violence is a form of social control of women. Many of the things women do as a consequence of fear restrict their lives; self-defense training is one of the few prevention strategies with the potential to empower women, rather than constrain them.

Barriers to Learning Self-Defense

Understanding women's decisions to enroll in self-defense classes also entails exploring why some women choose *not* to do so. One hundred and twenty-six women in the non-self-defense sample had never taken a self-defense class. However, fully 96 of these, or 76%, reported having considered doing so. Only 18 (14%) said they had never considered it (12, or 10%, did not respond to this question). These numbers themselves are significant: the vast majority of women in this sample had either taken a self-defense class or considered doing so.

Participants who said they had considered taking a self-defense class were asked what had kept them from doing so. Their responses, which fell into six categories, are summarized in Table 5.

Time issues were by far the most frequently cited. Eighty-three of the 96 participants (87%) mentioned "time," scheduling conflicts, being "too busy," or the time commitment involved in taking a class as a factor that kept them from enrolling:

I haven't found the time in my schedule yet but I do think it would be a good investment of my time once I get all these other classes out of the way!

I have considered it here at the [university], but have never fit it into my schedule. Hopefully I will soon.

I was either too busy or there wasn't one offered that fit into my schedule.

My class schedule had timing that conflicted with the schedule of the self-defense class.

Other logistical issues were also important, especially the cost of the class (mentioned by 24%), or availability of a suitable class (mentioned by 20%):

Time, suitability/accessibility of the classes investigated.

I haven't found one that is cheap enough (free) that fits my schedule.

Money, busy schedules, location of classes (not one in my area), forget about looking into it.

Scheduling problems. Most of them fill up fast. It's hard for 1st-year students to get into them.

Time, money, and transportation.

In addition, 12% of participants cited motivation issues: they "just haven't gotten around to it" or are "too lazy" to enroll.

A small but articulate minority of women (9%) said they already felt adequately prepared to protect themselves and therefore had not enrolled in a self-defense class. For example, these women said,

Haven't had time and felt pretty confident about my instincts and self-protection abilities based on my 4 years in Aikido and a few months in Karate.

I am a pretty confident strong girl and think I would already do what they would teach me.

Time restrictions. Plus, I kind of consider karate a form of self-defense. I have also talked with people who have taken these classes and learned info from them.

These comments are similar to those from women who explained why they had never considered taking self-defense:

I don't really fear for my safety that much. I've taken some kickboxing classes which are kind of similar to self defense, but right now I don't really see the need to take an actual self-defense class.

I don't feel I need to. I don't think it would help much. I already feel empowered and I think I have good common sense—meaning, I don't go to places I find unsafe or dangerous.

For these women, learning self-defense seemed unnecessary because of their prior knowledge, their confidence in their own abilities, or their perception that they are unlikely to need these skills in their daily lives. It is important to emphasize, however, that these women were a very small minority of participants in this study; the overwhelming majority felt the need for self-defense training.

At the opposite end of the spectrum were a few women (5%) who decided not to take a class because of fears about the class and themselves. One woman, for example, said she was “somewhat intimidated by the activities in the course.” Two women reported that they had no one to take it with and didn't want to take it alone. Finally, two women (one of whom reported never considering taking self-defense) mentioned more serious fears about the class:

Don't think I am strong enough, scared of the class and what it brings up, would feel weird, never seen one advertised or really convenient.

I think while useful, it may make me feel like I have more power than I actually do. I don't want to live in fear. I just try to avoid situations.

The fears expressed by the first woman are similar to those reported by Rosenblum (2007), a psychologist who encourages sexual assault survivors in her clinical practice to take self-defense classes as a form of therapy. Many clients resist taking self-defense because of fear, perceived “inexperience with physical confrontations,” or a belief that resistance is impossible. Those fears expressed by the second woman above are similar to those voiced by feminist women who had decided not to take a self-defense class (Russell, McCarroll, & Bohan, 2007); these women chose not to do so, in part, because they feared they might lose control or use the skills they learned inappropriately. For the vast majority of women in this sample, however, such fears were not important barriers to taking self-defense. For most women, logistical issues such as time, money, and availability of classes were more important. Relatively few women feel no need for self-defense training; the vast majority is interested in learning to defend themselves from violence.

Conclusion

Although several past studies have implied that women take self-defense classes because they have been attacked or assaulted, this research found that a past assault is not a major motivation for most women to enroll in self-defense training, at least in this young, well-educated sample of women. Differences in rates of prior assault between self-defense and non-self-defense students were not statistically significant. Moreover, although some

self-defense students did report a past attack as a reason for signing up for the class, most students who had been assaulted did not list this as a reason, and many women who enrolled in the class reported no past sexual assault or unwanted sexual contact of any kind.

Women reported three clusters of reasons as central to their decision to take a self-defense class. First, many heard about the class through word of mouth, and the powerful personal testimony of class graduates brought many women to the class. Second, many women signed up for the class because of their visions of the “possible selves” they could become—selves that were more assertive, confident, and capable and which, as a consequence, did not conform to traditional gender expectations. Finally, the fear of violence, often transmitted through second-hand experiences and stories, was a major motivator for many women.

One of the most surprising findings of this project was how many women are interested in self-defense training. Of the 292 participants, only 18 (6.2%) said they had never considered taking a self-defense class. This pattern speaks to the importance of the threat of violence in women’s lives and also the potential for resistance and empowerment. Women are interested in learning self-defense; important barriers include mostly logistical issues such as time, expense, and the availability of classes.

How then could women be encouraged to take self-defense classes or to get involved with other forms of empowerment? Word of mouth is clearly important. Hearing self-defense graduates discuss their experiences helps women locate classes and overcome the motivational or fear barriers to enrolling in a class. Personal testimony also helps women develop a sense that they, too, could be successful in learning self-defense (and indeed, in defending themselves against violence); these “possible selves” are important motivators. The fact that most women decided to sign up because they had heard positive things about the class via word of mouth suggests that efforts to encourage self-defense training might target communities and groups of women, not simply individuals. Finally, it is crucial that self-defense classes be widely available, affordable, and accessible to all women. Although the class I studied was a 10-week university class, shorter classes in a variety of community locations would make self-defense training more widely accessible, thus affording many more women the positive benefits of self-defense training.

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Notes

1. It is important to be clear that although the research suggests that women who actively resist an assault are more likely to escape without being raped (Ullman, 1997, 2007), this does not mean that *all* women should actively resist assault in *all* circumstances or that women should be held responsible for preventing assault. Perpetrators are always responsible for their behavior, and no woman should feel obliged to resist or be blamed because her resistance was ineffective.
2. Recent research is unanimous that active resistance can help women avoid rape and assault (see Ullman, 1997, 2007, for summaries of this research). There is little research, however, that investigates the question of whether self-defense training increases women's effectiveness at defending themselves from violence.
3. The survey also included questions about fear of violence, beliefs about violence, perceptions of danger, use of safety strategies, physical activities, body perceptions, media exposure, and beliefs about women and gender. The surveys included both closed- and open-ended questions, and both original measures and preexisting scales (including a modified version of the Self-Defense Self-Efficacy Scale [Weitlauf, Smith, & Cervone, 2000], the Rape Myths Acceptance Scale [Payne, Lonsway, & Fitzgerald, 1999], the Physical Self-Efficacy Scale [Ryckman, Robbins, Thornton, & Cantrell, 1982], and the short form of the Liberal Feminism Ideology Scale [Morgan, 1996]).
4. Following Koss et al. (1987), I divided the participants into five groups based on the highest level of assault reported. The groups labeled *rape* and *attempted rape* were based on the legal definition of these crimes; women in these groups had experienced attempted or completed vaginal, anal, or oral intercourse obtained by force, threat of force, or the administration of drugs or alcohol. The group labeled *sexual coercion* included women "who engaged in or experienced sexual intercourse subsequent to the use of menacing verbal pressure or the misuse of authority" but not physical force. The group labeled *sexual contact* included women "who had engaged in or experienced sexual behavior such as fondling or kissing that did not involve attempted penetration subsequent to the use of menacing verbal pressure, misuse of authority, threats of harm, or actual physical force" (Koss et al., 1987, pp. 165-166).
5. In general, respondents made similar comments about the class regardless of when they were interviewed, except that some interviewed while taking the class reported being somewhat less confident and somewhat more fearful than those interviewed after completing the class. This difference is unsurprising as these students had not yet experienced the full benefit of the class.
6. Unfortunately, the relatively small number of cases does not permit testing this association statistically.
7. Of course, women may be reluctant to report having been assaulted or may be reluctant to acknowledge their experiences as assault, especially if the perpetrator was an acquaintance or intimate.

8. Quotes included in this article have been edited for readability but are otherwise reproduced verbatim.

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Bio

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