Fighting through emotional trials: exploring the role of karate in emotional reflexivity

Introduction

Emotional trials refer to life events that ‘occur - more or less suddenly or dramatically - during the course of a biography that put us ‘to the test’ in the sense of interrupting our routine, certainties and habits ; these events thus force us to reflect and detach ourselves’ (Rebughini, 2011: 2.1). These can include break-ups, divorce, bereavement, abuse/assault, losing a job, becoming homeless, ill physical health, and breakdowns in mental health. The recent covid-19 pandemic can be read as one of these emotional trials. They mark a shift in our previous experience of normal towards a new situation, and in doing so evoke a multitude of emotional experiences such as anxiety, sorrow, melancholy, anger, and frustration. Given the breadth of experiences that emotional trials refer to, it is likely that all of us will experience multiple emotional trials at varying times in our lives. This paper will explore the role of karate in adult Scottish karate practitioners’ reflexive movements through emotional trials within their personal life.

Leisure has been suggested to have a ‘therapeutic’ effect that can assist in supporting practitioners through emotional trials (Caldwell, 2005). Martial arts in particular been have been suggested to entail spiritual and philosophical, as well as physical, training (Jin, 1992; Matsumoto and Ha, 2006; Wile, 2016). Karate is a martial art that uses kicks, punches, throws, blocks, and strikes in both partnered and individual combative practice. Karate practice usually entails a variety of technique work, performance of set routines, pad work, sparing, and fitness drills. Participants are placed in a visible hierarchy of ability that is reflected in the different coloured belts that karate practitioners wear (Maclean, 2015). A central aim within karate is for practitioners to move through the graded belt system continually improving their karate ability. This practice is framed by karate’s underpinning philosophy of ‘rei’ – respect for coach, training partners, opponents, training area, and self (Funakoshi, 1938/2003). As such, techniques thrown and actions taken within a karate class are expected to be conducted with meaningful consideration
and effort in order demonstrate respect and discipline. Karate is practised mixed-sex and is often split into classes for children or adults. Participants range from 4 years old to over 70 years old. In 2019 there were 14010 karate practitioners in Scotland within the SportScotland recognised governing body for karate – the Scottish Karate Governing Body (SKGB, 2020). When karate practitioners in Scotland outside of this governing body are included, this figure is likely to rise by some thousands.

This paper explores the ways in which karate practice was a central process in participant’s emotional reflexivity to the trial(s) they were experiencing, the feelings they were experiencing, and moving through and past those feelings. The findings of this paper suggest that the physicality involved karate enabled both the pausing of overbearing reflexive thoughts, and mimetic expression of emotions associated with an emotional trial. This poses questions to the wider function of physical leisure more generally to assist the reflexive process of moving through emotional trials. Given the inevitability of experiencing emotional trials within each individual’s lifetime, research exploring how we make sense of and move through our emotional trials is important for understanding everyday life.

Literature review

The literature review will begin by exploring sociological understandings of reflexivity, and the role of emotions within in the reflexive process. Specifically, this section looks to outline theories on what reflexivity is and how it is done. This is followed by a discussion of emotional reflexivity within leisure contexts, and lastly reviews existing literature on the role of leisure in the experience of emotional trials.

Emotional reflexivity

Giddens (1991) suggests that a ‘reflexive turn’ emerged in, and is symptomatic of, late modernity. For Giddens, reflexivity refers to the process individuals undertake to understand themselves in relation to new knowledge of the social circumstances surrounding us. Gidden’s suggests a key element of reflexivity is constant monitoring and re-evaluation of our self in relation to new and emerging knowledge. In this view, in late modernity individuals are increasingly inward-looking with inward facing
negotiations of self. Involved within the reflexive turn in the west is a shift to therapeutic culture whereby individuals are increasingly expressive of their emotions, and simultaneously more reliant on professional to support their emotional lives (Giddens, 1991). Giddens’ work is suggestive that the emergence of therapeutic culture demonstrates a shift in the intimate sphere towards self-evaluation.

Archer (2007; 2012) takes a more nuanced approach to reflexivity. Archer refers to our ‘internal conversation’ - our thinking, reflecting, and processing of our self in relation to our social context – as central to our reflexivity. She suggests that there are four types of reflexives who engage with their internal conversation differently: ‘communicative reflexives’ who require confirmation of the internal conversation before acting; ‘autonomous reflexives’ whose internal conversation alone leads to action, often through identifying information on the internet or other resources; ‘meta-reflexives’ who are morally orientated and reflexive of their own internal conversations and sceptical about the potential for creating change in the world; and ‘fractured reflexives’ whose internal conversation causes anxiety and stress that inhibits their ability to act (Archer, 2012). Archer (2012) suggests that society has moved towards autonomous reflexivity, with individuals increasingly less likely to share their internal conversations with others.

The approaches to reflexivity by both Giddens and Archer have been criticised for being too individualistic and too rationalistic, which in turn, remove others from our reflexivity and detach emotion from the process (Holmes, 2010). Indeed, our reflexivity is messy and meshes together the words and memories of others, how we think others will/have perceived us, our evaluation of a situation, and our emotional desires. Drawing on the work of Holmes (2010), Burkitt (2012) argues that, whilst theories of reflexivity tend to overlook emotions in the process of individuals reflecting on their behaviour and choices, emotions are central to the reflexive process. He suggests that emotions are ‘a motivating factor to reflexivity, colouring and infusing reflexivity itself’ (Burkitt, 2012:459). As such, our reflexivity is more than continual self-monitoring, rather, it is bound to and built with the interpretations of how those we are emotionally engaged with will respond to our actions. In this way, emotions are more than something we have, use and experience (Sheer, 2012), but rather ‘emotions are best thought of as what we exist through’ (Brownlie, 2014:29).
Myths of the emotional duality of women and men, where women are seen as emotional and men as stoic, appear to be unintentionally replicated in the sociological reflections on emotions. Women are expected to, and do, conduct the majority of the emotional labour of attending to the needs, wants, and vulnerabilities of others (Duncombe and Marsden, 1993;1995; OECD, 2014; Müller, 2019) and engage in emotion talk (Hall, 2011). However, there remains relatively little exploration of men’s emotionality (Holmes, 2015). In particular, of problematising the emotional experience and communication behind apparent emotional ‘inexpression’ (De Bois and Hearn, 2017; Holmes, 2015). McQueen (2017) suggests that men are caught between the narratives of ‘boys don’t cry’ that discourages emotional disclosure, and the therapeutic culture mantra that ‘it’s good to talk’ which encourages (necessitates) emotional disclosure (McQueen, 2017). These two contrasting narratives make communicating emotionality, particularly vulnerability, daunting for men (McQueen, 2017). Seidler (2007) further suggests that avoiding discussion or expression of vulnerability is a tactic employed by men to hold onto power and respect as ‘rational’ actors. Here, ‘inexpression’ of emotionality can be seen as an output of deliberate emotion management. In exploring physical ways in which men, and women, conduct emotional reflexivity this article seeks to transcend myths of men’s stoicism.

As embodied beings, it is clear that our verbal thoughts and feelings do not exist in isolation of our physical interactions in the world. Yet, the physicality that surrounds, informs, and is part of our reflexivity is often overlooked. Brownlie (2014) highlights this when she asks, ‘what is it that we actually do when we are making our way (emotionally) through the world?’ (Brownlie, 2014:24). Brownlie suggests that leisure activities such as listening to music and participating in physical activity are tools adopted within individuals’ everyday reflexivity to understand, cope with, and respond to their emotions. She suggests the former can be used as a coping mechanism to ‘feel through’ a particular situation. The latter is attributed to enabling individuals to ‘switch off’ from their internal conversations – to take a needed pause in the emotionally draining reflexive process. In this paper I look extend Brownlie’s work on ‘doing’ reflexivity, specifically to illuminate the ways in which physical activity
Leisure has been identified as a mimetic field – an interactive space that often mimics other aspects of life, however, is less bound by regulation - where people can play with emotional experience and expression. Elias and Dunning (1986) argue that in societies with decreasing violence, leisure fills in the role of violence in generating excitement and creating spaces to express emotions:

‘while the routines of life in these societies, public or private, demand that people keep a fairly firm hold on their moods and drives, affect and emotions, leisure occupations as a rule allow them to flow more freely in an imaginary setting specially created by these activities and in some ways reminiscent of non-leisure reality’ (Elias and Dunning, 1986: 42).

The mimetic framing of leisure creates an arena of excitement where some forms of expressive emotionality is accepted. Emotionally expressive qualities have been attributed to playing and listening to music (Sinclair et al., 2019), dancing (Van Dyke et al., 2017), crafting activities (Pöllänen, 2011) watching television (Bartsch, 2012) and physical activities (Tamminen and Bennett, 2017). As such, leisure is a rich area for exploring emotions and reflexivity.

Sport in particular has been noted as a field where men can legitimately express emotions without having their masculinity drawn into question or receiving social sanctions (Dunning 1999). Emotions within sport, as within any sphere, are socially negotiated and performed in relation to real and imagined others (Tamminen and Bennett, 2017). As such, the expression and legitimacy of men’s emotional expression in sport is socially negotiated in relation to past and present teammates, opponents, spectators, officials, and coaches. Examples of the ways in which men can legitimately express emotion in sport include displaying anger or aggression towards an opponent, the opposition’s fans, or the athletic task to be defeated (Young, 2019), expressing care for teammates or training partners (Maclean, 2020), jumping with euphoric joy when scoring a point or winning, and crying when the team they support wins or loses (Bairner, 2014).
Whilst some of these emotional expressions in sport fit with conventional expectations of men’s emotionality – such as aggression – others contradict conventional expectations of men’s emotionality – such as crying. Proponents of inclusive masculinity theory suggest that increasingly sportsmen favour openly discussing their emotions with their teammates (Murray and White, 2017) and in doing so challenge stoic notions of masculinity. Increasingly elite sportsmen are employed in campaigns to encourage men to discuss their emotions and mental health, however, very few elite sportsmen discuss their own, and when they do, they have often retired from sport (Souter et al., 2018). Men in sport walk a tight line, where expressions of vulnerability within sports settings can result in ridicule (Bairner, 2014) or be feared to signal weakness (Souter et al., 2018). As such, there is a plethora of emotional expression and management within men’s sport that continue to inform and contest notions of masculinity.

Much of the literature on emotions in sport takes emotional expression as the point of analysis. There is much less written on how people reflect on their emotional experiences within sport, and how emotions emerge in reflections of sporting experiences. Discussion of the latter does emerge in the literature on injuries within sport. The experience of an injury often causes a friction in individuals’ sense of being a sports practitioner that draws into question past, present, and future selves (Sparkes, 1996). In her collaborative autoethnographic study of women runner’s experiences of injury, Allen-Collinson (2005) suggests that the experience of injury is an experience of a myriad of emotions: fear, anxiety, frustration, hope, and anger. During this process, she suggests that the injured body part becomes thought of as separate to the runner and their sense of self. The injured body part becomes disembodied and blamed for the negative emotions experienced. Laurendeau (2014) further suggests that the experience of injury can not only isolate a specific body part from sports practitioners’ sense of self, but rather, position the whole body as oppositional to their sense of self. This body of literature suggests that sports practitioners’ emotional reflections on sporting experience and their sporting body are part of the process of thinking through who we are and how we feel about ourselves.

Leisure and emotional trials
There is a significant body of research that suggests that leisure can be ‘therapeutic’ for addressing or overcoming negative life events such as emotional trials (Caudwell, 2005). Indeed, occupational therapy as a discipline identifies leisure as a means to good physical and mental health (Chen and Chippendale, 2018), and the discipline of medicine identifies physical activity in particular as beneficial for mental health (Reber et al., 2015). Leisure has been suggested to provide therapeutic affects at three key points of an emotional trial: prevention, coping with, and transcendence (Caldwell, 2005; Klieber et al., 2002). It is the latter two that this article focuses on.

Specifically exploring the use of leisure in emotional reflexivity, Brownlie (2014) suggests that the act of doing leisure activities enables individuals cope with everyday emotional trials by enabling them to ‘switch off’ from their inner talk. At times of difficulty, actively engaging in ‘trivial pursuits’ enables individuals to escape their thoughts. As a tool for coping with an emotional trial, leisure has been identified to: create spaces to develop friendships and social support (Glover and Parry, 2008); provide distraction from negative life events (Hutchinson et al., 2003); and develop feelings of being in control (Chun and Younghill, 2010).

Leisure’s role in transcending an emotional trial is itself suggestive of emotional reflexivity. Whilst not using the language of reflexivity, Kleiber et al. (2002) identify four ways in which leisure can facilitate individuals to move through an emotional trial: 1. By providing distraction from negative emotions associated with the negative life event, 2. Creating optimism about the future through experiencing positive emotions, 3. For those who engaged in a leisure pursuit prior to the emotional trial, leisure participation enables participants to feel a sense of continuity, and 4. By presenting an avenue to change direction and reconsider values. Whilst the first two aspects could be categorised as coping mechanisms, the latter two can be seen as ways in which, through leisure, individuals come to reflect on and understand themselves during emotional trials.

What is missing in Kleiber et al’s account is empirical data demonstrating how individuals use leisure for reflecting on, reconfirming, or redirecting their understanding of themselves. Whilst Brownlie (2014) predominantly discusses ways
in which leisure can act as a coping mechanism during everyday trials, she highlights that music held a particular capacity to not only enable individuals to escape the thoughts surrounding their everyday trials, but to also reflect on and consider who they are (Brownlie, 2014: 165). Many people listen to music as a way of coping with everyday difficulties (Semenza, 2018). Music has been suggested to support reflection by reminding people of previous times and past selves (Batt-Rawden, 2010). As such, the reflexive process involved in listening to music is primarily one that looks to consider and understand the self in relation to the past and present. The expressive qualities in quilting have been used by women in a similar fashion to enable participants express a painful past, such as a hysterectomy, mastectomy, or miscarriage (Dickie, 2011). The process of making these expressive quilts provides the space for women to think through and understand their experience, emotions, and reach a feeling of emotional balance (Dickie, 2011). Craft and artistic forms of leisure, such as quilting, sewing, painting, drawing, and making soft furnishings, have also been identified as providing spaces for individuals to express themselves differently after or during an emotional trail (Chun and Younghill, 2010; Fullagar, 2008). In exploring women’s use of leisure in recovery from depression, Fullagar (2008) suggests that women saw leisure as an important space to consider and develop a ‘new’ self. In this process, leisure was seen as a space to reflect on their own emotional needs and desires that they often subordinated to those of others.

Much of the literature on physical activity and emotional trials has explored men’s experiences. Enberg et al. (2012) found that after becoming divorced, men engage in more physical activity, suggesting that physical activity plays some role in men’s coping with emotional trials. Carless and Douglas (2008) suggest that sport and exercise provided a space for men experiencing ill mental health to re-story their lives. Within this space men can attain small achievements – such as developing sporting skills, scoring points, and winning matches – that enabled them to write achievement into their story of themselves. Magee et al., (2015) exploring the experiences of men with ill mental health in a football-for-recovery programme suggest that sporting spaces developed specifically for those in recovery from ill mental health can both enable the development of social support amongst those in a similar situation and reduce feelings of stigma associated with ill mental health.
Whilst there is little academic work on emotions more broadly within martial arts, there is a substantial body of work that positions martial arts as curative of negative emotions. This includes reducing stress (Jin, 1992), building resilience (Matsumoto and Ha, 2006; Sanchez-Garcia, 2016) reducing anger or aggression in boys (Kim, 2004; Reynes and Lorant, 2002), and supporting women’s recovery from violence (Guthrie, 1995). Oulanov (2009) suggests that karate’s therapeutic potential is drawn from its parallels with many processes involved in counselling: developing techniques to calm emotions, to focus, to experience and cope with tension, and to dissipate conflict.

It is important to acknowledge that intensive leisure practice can in certain circumstances provoke additional emotional trials, for example centred on the need to be successful. This is particularly so in elite sport (Souter et al., 2018).

Whilst most of this literature does not use the language of reflexivity, and instead often focuses on health outcomes, this literature does present evidence that leisure can and does assist people in coping with and moving through emotional trials. In this paper, I look to extend Brownlie’s contention that leisurely activities ‘are a way of engaging in reflexivity, that is, thinking and feeling through an activity’ (Brownlie, 2014:158) by exploring the role of karate practice in reflexively working through emotional trials.

Methodology

The data that this paper draws on emerged by accident during a sensory ethnographic study of gendered embodiment in karate. The ethnographic study sought to explore the ways in which gendered embodiments were ‘done’ or ‘undone’ through the sensory interactions between women and men in karate classes. Data collection involved 9 months of participant observations at three karate clubs – two based in Scotland and one based in the North East of England – alongside 15 photo-elicitation interviews with karate practitioners and coaches (6 men, 9 women). It was within the photo-elicitation interviews where stories of emotional trials in participants private lives primarily emerged, and the role and meaning of karate practice during these times was discussed. This paper draws on the data discussing emotional trials
that emerged from 4 of the photo-elicitation interviews and 7 participant observations from across the two Scottish karate clubs. This equated to data relating to 8 participants.

The photo-elicitation interviews involved asking participants to bring with them to the interview photographs that say something about their experiences of karate. The photographs were then used as discussion starting points in the interview. Photo-elicitation interviews were chosen for the original study for a number of reasons. Firstly, it enables the participants to lead the conversation (Wang, 1999) giving the participants greater agency in the research process. Secondly, by participants leading the conversation, participants could highlight meaningful elements of their karate practice that the researcher may have overlooked (Padgett et al., 2013). Thirdly, photographs can evoke memories and emotions that can facilitate the processes of reflection (Meo, 2010). Finally, the photographs provided concrete examples for the researcher to use as bases to enquire about gendered or sensory experiences, making such questions seem less abstract. The level of voice afforded to the participants within the photo-elicitation interviews, alongside the emotive potential of photographs, unintentionally appeared to create the reflective space for participants to discuss karate practice in relation to deeply emotional struggles within their private lives. Participants were not asked to discuss emotional struggles, rather, these stories were brought to the forefront by participants during discussions of the ways in which they felt karate affected their body, perspectives, and (gendered) relations – their embodiment. Due to the sensitivity of the stories being told, I did not ask follow-up questions to enquire further into their experience, however I did give them space to tell their story.

My ‘insider’ position as a fellow karate practitioner, training partner, and to some participants, a friend, will also have impacted the data collected. Insider researcher positions, where the researcher is known to and/or part of the communities they research, have been recognised to positively affect the building of rapport between researcher and participants (Kanuha, 2000). This in turn can facilitate longer and more detailed interview discussions. Researching from a point of friendship in particular can help participants feel listened to, respected, and understood (Tilman-Healy, 2006). My position to my participants thus may have enabled participants to
feel comfortable and able to share such intimate stories. This also involved a great feeling of responsibility to ensure that trust is not abused by the researcher and that participants deeply personal stories are represented in an ethical and honest way. This involved following a detailed narrative analysis process to minimise any of my own preconceived notions of the relationship between karate and emotional reflexivity, and produce anonymised stories reflective to the emotional experiences, processes, and meanings expressed by participants.

**Data Analysis**

The first step of data analysis involved coding, and pulling from the project dataset, all data that referred to emotional trials. Once this data had been pulled from the project dataset, a narrative analysis was conducted. Specifically, this followed the narrative analysis techniques outlined by Gregg (2006) that centre on the ways in which individuals’ story, and make sense of, their lives. This involved 1) separating each participants data, 2) splitting the each participants story into ‘episodes’ that create the structure and plot of their story, 3) removing data that is not relevant to their stories plot – such as technical details of karate moves or events - 4) exploring the links and contrasts within and across episodes. This facilitated an exploration of how karate is woven into how participants’ told stories about their emotional trials.

Given the sensitive nature of the stories told, and the trust my participants have in me, particular consideration to ethical representation of this data was required (Ellis, 2007). The karate clubs I attended are close-knit communities, and as such, a pseudonym alone might not preserve participants anonymity from other club members who may read this article. As such, within this narrative analysis I took the role of the ‘storyteller’ (Pheonix et al., 2010) who collects and combines narratives. This creates a further two stages of data analysis: 5) identifying commonalities, ‘episodes’ and linkages between episodes across participants stories, 6) combining elements of participants stories based on this analysis into composite stories. The stories told have been grouped together into four ‘composite stories’ (Willis, 2018): divorce, depression, domestic abuse, and suicide. Each story combines more than one participants’ quotes to both make individuals less identifiable in the story (Willis, 2018), but retain the emotional negotiations, reflections, and strategies – the ‘storyline’ - discussed in relation to each topic. Each story is also given a character
name reflective to the gender of the participants who explicitly discussed each issue. Given the gendered expectations embedded within emotional experience and verbal reflection (Holmes, 2015), this is important for enabling gendered analysis of emotional narratives to take place.

**Findings: Composite Stories**

The most common emotional trial that participants discussed was divorce. It was only men who told this story, most likely because of the demographics of the karate clubs – men between 30-50 made up the majority of the adult class members - making it more likely that more men than women in the clubs would experience divorce. Below is a composite story that combines the narratives of those men who discussed their divorce. I have called this character, who combines multiple characters, David.

*Out of the blue my, now ex-wife, the mother of my children, said they were moving out, and that she wanted a divorce. I didn’t see it coming, and the panic and anger it gave me was all-consuming. The divorce hurts of course, but my big worry is the kids who are 4 and 7 – when will I see them? What do they think about this? Is this going to change my relationships with them? It feels like everything around me is falling down and there’s nothing I can do. Since then, strangely, I’ve felt great at karate. It gives me something else to focus on. When I’m having a bad day or I get more shit through from my ex, it’s something to focus on and forget about the mayhem. I’ve found myself practicing a lot in the house actually, which I never used to do.*

*At karate I feel I can release of all the anger and stress. The competition was a good example - the confidence I got from that was incredible! I went into it with no expectations at all, I hadn’t really slept, I didn’t really know what I was getting into. But at that point there’s nothing else you can do than get into it - you couldn’t do anything but focus on your fights. In my first fight we ended up having to fight solid for 3 minutes because neither of us could manage to score a point on each other. And that was an experience! 3 minutes of non-stop fighting is quite full on. All the fights, they were really physically demanding, and it all seemed to go so fast, but I*
kept managing to get through the rounds. It was great fun. And then, in the final the
guy just took me apart. And that was fine - I got a trophy and went home smiling.
And that was a well-timed confidence boost. A very well timed ‘okay this has all
happened, but here is something nice, something you have achieved all by your own
accord’. It’s not that other people didn’t help, but it was me in the end who fought the
fights and managed to take home a trophy, and that felt good.

Afterwards, once I sat down in the car with my dad, I realised… It all kind of hit me
like: ‘Jesus Christ I’m going to cry.’ Because the adrenaline all goes, things calm
down again, and what’s going on in life comes back. I think the easiest thing in the
world would be to hide in the house, and get a bottle of whiskey, and that’s the fall
back for a lot of people. I’m making a real conscious choice not to go down that road,
and karate is part of that. It’s another focus, it’s another reason to be doing
something, to keep myself going, and it’s helping the time pass while I get used to
everything.

Depression was also raised by participants as an emotional trial that karate had a
role in facilitating their way through. Unlike divorce, that was seen as a trial that
would pass, depression was often positioned as a long-term, ongoing, trial. These
stories been combined to create Sandra’s story:

I’ve done karate most of my life, and I’ve done well with it, but to be honest…it’s
much more than that (doing well) to me. Like, I’ve had, well, I’ve got depression. The
depression comes and goes but I’ve found that, when I go to training, I had
something – a routine that I always had. I saw friends there, and even those people
that I don’t know all that well, there’s just this really welcoming f

everyone. Everyone will speak to you, and try to help you, and everyone is there for each other.
Things like that help. It gives you this kind of constant place that’s always there. Like,
if I am having a crap time everywhere else in my life, I always know I can just go to
training – it’s almost like stepping out of reality. And once I am there, who cares
what’s going on anywhere else? No one else knows about what’s going on in my
head, I don’t need to talk about it, and I don’t need to think about it.
Over the last few years, it would be a bit strong to say that it’s given my life direction, but it gave me a purpose to focus on – something to do – at a time where I really needed something to focus my mind. I go to karate and there is always something new to learn, or something to work on and improve. And with karate, what you give to karate it will give you back. In my work and stuff, I’m just happy to do what I need, the minimum, to get by. Whereas in karate it’s very much ‘you get what you give’, and I like that. You have an element of control of how good it feels. You put in everything into your training and you can see the benefits – like getting stronger, moving faster, techniques working better. But you have to put it in.

A small number of participants shared that they had attempted to commit suicide. It was only men who disclosed this. Whilst these men did also discuss ongoing feelings of depression, their stories focused on the role of karate in their recovery from attempting to commit suicide. Combined, they make up Ewan’s story:

I’d done karate when I was a laddie up until I was in my late teens. I loved it at the time, I’d never miss a lesson, and I was good at it. Then my pals started going out, drinking, and meeting girlfriends and all that kind of stuff… the karate just stopped. I came back to karate… well basically because my doctor told me to. I’d been suffering with depression for a long time really, but a couple of years ago I done something silly (attempted to commit suicide), and I was found by police just in time. I’m really really lucky to be here. So, I went to the doctor and they asked me if I had any hobbies, and I’d said how I used to do karate, and so she was like ‘do that, do something for yourself’. And so that’s how I ended up back in a karate hall.

There’s things in my life that still aren’t right, and I often come to karate ragin – like a proper anger underneath. Sometimes I feel like my head could burst with all the anger that I’m keeping down. Other days it’s the complete opposite – I don’t feel anything, there’s no life about me at all, and I can’t be arsed moving. But I ken that getting in there, hittin a few pads, or even just going through the basics – but bursting yourself with them – I’ll feel a lot better. To be honest my emotions are all over the shop, right. Sometimes I’m high, or it’s a bottom of the pit low, and it switches like that. When I’m at karate they (emotions) find a middle ground, and that’s where I want to be. I can get rid of those extremes (emotions) and pour them
out into the pad. After the class I’m calm and can think clearer. So, I’ll no miss a class – I hate missing a class. If I miss a class I feel shit, like I’m all tense on edge, gonna snap. Every session, I am there. I need it.

Lastly, a small number of women discussed experiences of domestic abuse. These have created Una’s story:

I’m getting stronger, but not just my kicks and my punches – me. People used to walk all over me for years. I was always scared and timid and would just do what anyone asked me to do, even if I didn’t want to. Like, I genuinely just thought nothing of myself really, didn’t think I was worth standing up for myself. But I’m not scared anymore. I started karate and that was a brave choice that makes me proud of myself. I feel more confident (since starting karate) cause I’m like, doing all these things that I would have never thought I could do, and I can see I’m getting better at it.

Walking through that door was a big step for me, a massive thing. That was me saying ‘right, I’m moving on’. And I tell you what, see now, no man will ever hit me again.

Discussion

The findings above demonstrate a number of ways in which karate practice was embedded within participants’ emotional reflexivity processes that enabled them to think and feel through difficult times. These reflexive paths express three key elements: providing an alternative emotive focus, releasing emotions, and moving forward. The stories of divorce and depression particularly speak to karate providing an activity to devote attention to, and in doing so, gain rest from conscious considerations surrounding the ongoing painful emotions involved in participants’ emotional trials. The materiality of the body and the dangers it faced within sparring or in partnered work created emotions of excitement and fear. Defending from the kicks and punches of opponents and/or training partners required sustained concentration to avoid injury, whereby reflecting on the inner conversation places the
practitioner in danger. In this way, corporeal danger forces karate practitioners to pause their inner conversations and focus on the physicality of their partnered karate practice, and the emotions evoked within this activity. The combative activities within karate thus provided a temporary alternative emotive focus removed from reflexive thoughts related to divorce, depression, and suicide. This alternative emotive focus was a desired outcome of karate practice for many interviewees, and a central way in which they managed their emotions during negative emotional trials.

Within such dangerous activities, surface or deep acting to present emotions that fit the expectations of a given setting (Hochschild, 2012) is suggested to be disrupted, replaced with attention to the immediate corporeal situation of the body (Walby and Spencer, 2020). Emotion management tactics to hide karate practitioners’ emotions related to negative life events did not always fall back into place after karate activities were completed. This disruption in emotion management tactics created unintended spaces for emotional expression and reflection. This is most stark in David’s of unexpectedly crying after a competition. The competition provided a catalyst to expressing, recognising, and reflecting on emotions surrounding his divorce. In this way, physical leisure can simultaneously appear to pause and fast forward the reflexive process.

Whilst karate may have been used by participants to shift their emotional focus, it was simultaneously seen to have a role in releasing negative emotions associated with their trial. This came across most prominently in men’s discussions of going through divorce or recovering from attempted suicide. Men talked about releasing accumulated anger and stress through activities such as pad work where they were able to hit pads without having to hold back strength as they would when sparing with a training partner. This form of activity thus presented a legitimate space to mimetically (Elias and Dunning, 1984), or not so mimetically, express anger and aggression. This form of emotional expression performs control, power, and strength, and as such, is an emotional expression that coincides with conventional expectations of masculinity (Seidler, 2007). These moments provided the men interviewed a way to understand and work through feelings of helplessness in relation to their emotional trial. Physical practices of pad work enabled men to maintain a sense of power and control through their vulnerability.
In the story of suicide, karate practice was seen to both release and balance emotions. Much like women’s use of quilting (Dickie, 2011), the practices involved in karate were seen to provide a physical way of expressing painful emotions and facilitate a calming of their intensity. A calmer intensity of emotion was suggested to enable participants to consciously think through their emotional trails. Positive emotions of excitement created during sparring or feelings of support when receiving advice were further seen to add ‘balance’ to negative emotions occurring out-with karate.

Throughout each of the story types participants linked karate practice with creating a positive future past their emotional trial. This idea was generated through a number of different aspects of karate practice. For some, karate practice provided a feeling of continuity amongst the upheaval of the emotional trial they were going through. It provided a space that felt stable where similar faces, practices, and enjoyment could be experienced whilst other aspects of their life were in transition. Alongside this, much like the findings of Glover and Parry (2008) and Magee et al. (2015), the feeling of being part of a community of karate practitioner and supported by training partners enabled those experiencing depression to feel positive emotions of feeling connected and cared for. By positioning karate as a cornerstone of stability, karate appeared to take on a key role in participants vision of a positive future.

Achievements made in karate, such as learning a new technique, improving the execution of techniques, being awarded a higher graded belt, or winning points in a competition were drawn on as visual and tacit symbols of personal improvement. Such achievements not only made participants feel positively in that moment, they also worked as markers that participants drew on to ‘re-story’ (Carless and Douglas, 2008) or redirect their understanding of themselves in a way that saw movement past their emotional trial. Una’s story in particular demonstrates the ways in which physical achievements in karate were reflected upon to inform participants understanding of themselves. In Una’s story, achievements within karate changed how women who had experienced domestic abuse felt about themselves, and the type of person they saw themselves being. The strength that they felt in their body was symbolically attached to their conception of themselves, and used to mark
contrast to their past self who suffered abuse. As such, karate practice was deeply woven into participants reflexive understandings of their current trial, themselves, and who they want to become.

Conclusion

This article contributes to two primary sets of literature: literature on emotional reflexivity, and literature on the role of physically active forms of leisure within individuals’ everyday lives. The former has often overlooked physical activity in the reflexive process and the latter rarely draws on the concept of reflexivity or theories of emotion to understand the meaningfulness of physically active forms of leisure for individuals’ everyday lives. This article partially bridges these gaps.

This article has sought to expand Brownlie’s contention that everyday pursuits, such as physical leisure practices ‘are a way of engaging in reflexivity’ (Brownlie, 2014:158). By drawing on interview data from karate practitioners, this article has shown that ‘doing’ karate practice was central to participants reflexive processes during times of emotional trial. Participating in karate enabled participants to pause their negative emotions by providing something to focus their full embodied attention to, to release their emotions, and to see and feel a vision of a positive future and a positive future self past their emotional trial. At times of emotional trial, where individuals lives-as-normal have been disrupted, karate practice assisted participants in coping with, thinking through, and moving on from their trials. It should be noted that this study explored reflexive processes of karate practitioners in relation to emotional trials whose source was external to karate practice. This is not to suggest that emotional trials could not develop within karate practice too, however, such trials did not surface in this study.

Whilst much of the literature suggests that men use sport and physical activity to escape their internal conversations surrounding emotional trials, this research has shown that much like Brownlie’s assessment of music, physical activity can enable participants to become both ‘lost and found’ (Brownlie, 2014: 163). Karate practice provided both mechanisms for pausing thoughts and for thinking through self in relation to the trials experienced. This nonverbal approach to dealing with emotions
supports De Bois and Hearn’s (2017) call for a more complex understanding of men’s apparent ‘non’ emotionality. It also aligns with the findings of Holmes (2015) and McQueen (2017) that men often prefer expressing emotion in non-verbal ways. Further, this research has shown that women too used physical elements of karate practice to express and work through their emotional trials. This suggests that measures of emotionality and of emotional reflexivity must consider non-verbal methods of reflexivity and communication. This may be particularly useful for understanding men’s emotionality, however, is also important for understanding women’s emotionality.

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**References**


