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Materialising a Black Belt

*A cultural analytical approach to clothing and capital
in martial arts*

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Abstract

Materialising A Black Belt: A Cultural Analytical Approach to Clothing and Capital in Martial Arts

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This thesis analyses the material culture of karate clothing in Sweden, namely the karate belt (*obi*) and the karate uniform (*gi*). It employs ethnographic methods to observe how these objects reveal themselves in observation and interview in the karate practise hall (*dojo*), and uses a Bourdieuan framework to analyse the different types of capital which emerge; cultural, social and symbolic. This study finds that people strategically use material objects in a variety of ways in order to engage with other cultures, to support and reinforce social structures (particularly social hierarchy) and to construct their own identity. It also uses Sara Ahmed's theory of 'affect' and Marcel Mauss' concept of 'mana' to expose the potency of these objects in terms of their ability to direct human behaviour and transform mental and physical states. This study concludes that further attention should be paid to the importance of material culture within the field of sport and beyond, and the ways in which clothing and uniform reveal complex social and symbolic structures of power, on a global and local scale.

Keywords: material culture; martial arts; capital; Bourdieu; affect; mana; social hierarchy; global-local identity; karate clothing

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Chapter 1: Introduction

“What is then that men put into sport? Themselves, their human universe. Sport is made in order to speak the human contract.” Barthes (2007, p65)

If the goal of cultural analysis is to understand everyday human practises, then surely the way we choose to spend our free time; our hobbies, pastimes, and physical activities, is a fruitful place to begin, as a sphere where we see a great amount of choice: choice regarding which activities to engage with, choice regarding how far to engage, choices relating to investment of time and money, and social investment with other people. In sport, as Barthes states, we see the ‘human universe’; the wider world with its laws and nations, both reflected and changed. A blank canvas upon which society, with all its messy contradictions and tensions, is constructed in small scale. We also see the ‘human contract’; social hierarchies, agreements and disagreements over appropriate behaviour, power struggles, conflicts, group belonging and loving support. This thesis chooses to focus on the sport of karate, as practised in one organisation in Sweden, and to examine the social relations at play in the *dojo* (practise hall) with a focus on the material culture of the sport; namely the clothing which is worn, the *obi* (belt) and *gi* (uniform)ⁱ.

Why Karate? Why Material Culture?

The Swedish Sports Confederation estimates that over 3 million people in Sweden are a registered member of a sporting organisation (RF, 2020) of this 3 million, the Swedish karate association (*Svenska Karateförbundet*) estimate that around 25,000 individuals in Sweden practise karate (Karate Sweden, 2018) with many more practising other martial arts such as MMA, Judo, and Thai Boxing. Martial arts are therefore still a relatively niche interest when compared to some sports such as football or hockey but are nonetheless an important aspect of everyday life for many Swedish residents.

Karate also stands out for aesthetic and sensory reasons; the first time I entered the field I felt that I had stepped into a substantially different, self-contained, world, with ornate and complex rules and rituals. Why were people bowing to a room? Why were they speaking Japanese when we weren’t in Japan? What were these strange garments they were wearing? The construction of the cultural practise, outside of its original geographical and historical context, demanded my attention, and exposed the possibilities for a rich cultural analysis.

Early in the project, one informant, Caroline, stated that karate is “not a material sport, so it doesn’t cost a lot of money. Every social class, every social group can come here” (Interview, 16/9/20) meaning that unlike other sporting pursuits (for example, horse-riding) there was no need for a high level of financial investment into equipment or facilities. In fact, the word ‘karate’ itself can be translated as ‘the way of the empty hand’, indicating that a key feature of the sport is its lack of reliance on physical objects or props such as swords or sticks, which can be found in other martial arts like kendo. However, in my observations, the limited materials on display, the *gi* (uniform) and the *obi* (belt), were visually and symbolically significant for participants. Informants stated that in the *gi* everybody was treated the same, that karate was a pastime where anybody could come and be accepted, and that what mattered was your belt not your gender, class or other factors. I wanted to reconcile these kinds of beliefs which often arrived together; that karate was not a ‘material sport’, but also that your rank in the hierarchy was indicated largely by your possession of a material object: the *obi*.

Daniel Miller has suggested that much can be gained by engaging with materiality. He argues that precise details help us to focus from the abstract down to a specific context to understand the “specificity of material domains and the way form itself is employed to become the fabric of cultural worlds.” (1998, p6) and that “much of what makes us what we are exists, not through our consciousness or body, but as an exterior environment that habituates and prompts us.” (2010, p51) In other words, the material is also the social and symbolic field we live in. Throughout this thesis it will be clear that material, symbolic and social analysis are intertwined. As ethnologist Orvar Löfgren states in his work on ‘entanglement’, “the boundaries between the non- or pre-representational and the representational are constantly blurred” when we discuss material culture (2016, p127). In this thesis, I shall demonstrate that this approach of cultural analysis with a starting focus on materiality can be particularly beneficial when studying social hierarchies and systems, in the field of sport and beyond.

1.1 Aims and Research Questions

This thesis aims to reveal the complex multiplicity of meanings (material, symbolic and social) embodied in the *obi* and the *gi*, and in this way to explore human strategies for dealing with other cultures, and each other.

I will ask the questions:

- What is the material, cultural, symbolic and social significance of the *obi* and the *gi*?
- How and in what ways are these items powerful within the wider sporting practise of karate? How do they direct, frame and influence the cultural, sporting and social ‘habitus’ of the *dojo*?
- What can this teach us about the interrelation of sport, cultural practises, social systems and material objects in wider society?

I will expose and explore how layers of cultural meaning reveal themselves in a real-world context, by examining how these objects are represented and revealed in observation and interviews, and what narratives and strategies exist around these objects. In this way I intend to further our understanding of cultural meaning-making in relation to objects, specifically items of clothing and social relations.

1.2 Background: Karate in Sweden

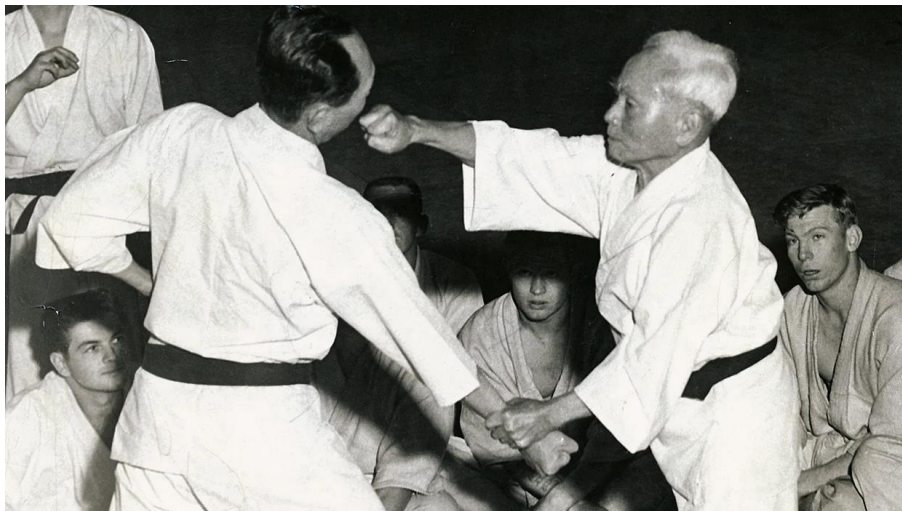


Figure 1 Photograph of Gichin Funakoshi (right) one of the major figures in the development of the sport of karate, demonstrating a karate technique, while wearing the traditional karate uniform (*gi*) and belt (*obi*) Source: <https://blackbeltmag.com/gichin-funakoshi>. Accessed 31st May 2021.

Karate in its current recognised form was developed in the early 20th century in Japan, building on an indigenous Okinawan tradition which incorporated elements of Chinese

martial arts (Britannica, 2019). A man named Gichin Funakoshi is widely considered to be responsible for this development. He changed the written characters of the word karate, in order to alter its meaning from ‘Chinese Hand’, to ‘empty hand’ (both a political and philosophical move) (Tan, 2004, Krug, 2001) Funakoshi’s style of karate was named ‘Shotokan’ karate (after his ‘penname’ *Shoto* meaning ‘waving pines’) After Funakoshi’s death, various karate organisations sprang up in Shotokan style, with new styles also being defined later in the 20th century.ⁱⁱ The organisation I worked with during this project, Shotokan Sweden, is a local branch of one of the older ‘branches’ of Shotokan karate, Shotokan Japan.ⁱⁱⁱ

Written record of the history of karate clubs in Sweden is difficult to find, usually being held by individual clubs.^{iv} This reflects a wider trend wherein the history of karate is often transmitted orally or through corporeal practise rather than written record (Tan, 2004) However, after speaking to some of those who were there, it seems that Shotokan karate ‘arrived’ in Sweden sometime in the 1960s, at the same time as a ‘boom’ in interest in all things related to martial arts was occurring in pop culture in the West, continuing to grow into a craze by the 1980s (Krug, 2001) In the 1980s, due to various political changes happening in the karate organisations in Japan, the organisation in Sweden also split into various factions with varied contact points in Japan. There are now at least a dozen different Shotokan organisations in Sweden. Shotokan Sweden is one of these, with approximately 10 karate clubs in Sweden.

The practise of karate involves three main activities: *kihon*, *kata* and *kumite*:

- ***Kihon*** (basics or fundamentals) involves the learning and drilling of basic techniques such as punches, kicks, blocks and stances, which are used in *kata* and *kumite*
- ***Kata*** (form) are a choreographed series of movements, linking together many techniques, focusing on form, power and grace. As *karateka* (practitioners of karate) proceed through the ranks, they must learn more (and increasingly complex) *kata* and must also be able to demonstrate the ways in which these movements could be applied in combat (known as *bunkai* or application)
- ***Kumite*** (sparring) is the physical combat element of karate, focusing on control and accuracy, followed by speed and power. Points are given for punches and kicks making controlled contact with the opponent in specified places on the body.

Belt Colour	Official name of rank
White	No official rank
Red	9 th Kyu
Orange	8 th Kyu
Yellow	7 th Kyu
Green	6 th Kyu
Blue	5 th Kyu
Blue	4 th Kyu
Brown	3 rd Kyu
Brown	2 nd Kyu
Brown	1 st Kyu
Black	1 st Dan
Black	2 nd Dan
Black	3 rd Dan
Black	4 th Dan
Black	5 th Dan
Black	6 th Dan
Black	7 th Dan
Black	8 th Dan
Black	9 th Dan

Figure 2 Shotokan Sweden's ranking system with associated belt colours.

A typical karate session would start with participants bowing as they enter the room. They would line up in order of their rank in front of the *sensei* or teacher, and then kneel and performing *mokusu* or meditation. This would be followed by a warmup, and a mixture of *kihon*, *kumite* and *kata*. At the end of the session, the line up and *mokusu* are repeated before participants leave the *dojo*.

In Funakoshi's karate, there were various ranks (*kyu* or *dan*) given to students, in a system adapted from Judo, with limited colours of belt (Inoue, 1998) However, Shotokan clubs outside of Japan adapted and changed this belt system

(Laughton & Nauwright, 2019) Shotokan Sweden's 'belt system' can be seen in Figure 2.

1.3 Thesis Structure

Following on from this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 will discuss previous research focusing on material culture in sport. Chapter 3 will then explain the key theoretical concepts which I utilise in this thesis. Chapter 4 will explore my methodology, including my fieldwork methods of observation and interview, the organisation and analysis of my materials, and issues of reflexivity and position, as well as further ethical reflections on the challenges and limits of this thesis.

Each of the analytical Chapters 5-7 will take as its starting point a different type of capital; cultural, social and symbolic. As will quickly become clear, these types of capital are inevitably entangled and overlapping, however by framing each chapter as focusing on a particular type of capital, we can approach the *gi* and *obi* from different angles and perspectives, in order to illuminate the significance of these items, while still acknowledging this complexity.

The first analytical chapter, Chapter 5, will explore consumer choices made when purchasing a belt as a cultural commodity. Mainly referring to Skeggs work on class and culture it will argue that the belt is an example of *objectifying cultural capital* and that it exposes or embodies a larger preoccupation with Japan and Japanese culture, which is present

throughout the practise of karate. It will discuss how the belt is 'legitimated' as a part of this aesthetic and becomes a focal point or a 'prosthetic' as a way for participants in karate to make claims to cultural status, but also how it acts in a more subtle way as a negotiation tool to deal with and understand another culture.

Chapter 6 will move in from this 'macro' global level and explore the idea of the *obi* and *gi* as a form of social capital within Sweden. It will show how the *obi* and *gi* inscribe particular categories onto individuals and limit their options in the *dojo*. It will utilise various theoretical concepts such as the Bourdieuan concept of 'habitus' to discuss the ways in which material objects induct individuals into a particular social system and establish their place in the hierarchy. It will examine those at the 'top' of the hierarchy. Finally it will put forward how the idea of belonging is key to social systems, and how social group identities can both draw together and alienate individuals.

Chapter 7 will explore the symbolic capital of the *gi* and *obi*, focusing on the intimate relationship between human and object. It will utilise the theory of Ahmed to consider the relationship between symbolic capital and affect. It will also consider how these material objects have the power to direct people's steps, but also how their 'promise' is never fulfilled. It will then discuss the magical potency or 'mana' of the *gi* and *obi* and their power to transform, not only themselves (as cultural, social and symbolic capital) but also those who come into contact with them, something I refer to as their transformative capital.

Finally in Chapter 8 I will summarise the findings of this thesis and the ways in which they may be applicable for other researchers, or organisations, both within and beyond the field of sport.

Chapter 2: Previous Research

It is, of course, possible to take many different research angles towards sport, clothing, and clothing within the field of sport. As well as ethnographic approaches to this topic, I also found certain useful touch-points in fields of research such as sport science, history of fashion, history of sport, and marketing, which I will outline below.

Many researchers in medical and sports science have investigated the scientific or practical function of clothing and the impact it has on power or safety (Del Vecchio, 2011, Gupta, 2011, Vasconcelos & Del Vecchio, 2017). One study examined the impact of the perception of clothing on participants, showing that those who wear a blue 'gi' when competing in judo perceive that they can move faster than those wearing white, thus improving their chances of winning (Cárdenes, Lafuente, Merinero & Rubio-Ordoñez, 2018). These studies open up interesting angles on the power of clothing to transform individuals' capacity, which is an idea I take up from an ethnographic perspective in Chapter 7.

From a marketing perspective, Perry and Lee (2017) have examined buyer's choices, purchase intentions and motivations regarding martial arts uniforms, and concluded that both functional and aesthetic concerns influence purchasing patterns, however this misses many socio-cultural factors which influence purchasing choices. I focus on this in Chapter 5.

Some in the field of fashion have taken a historical approach to clothing and sport and the changing nature of sports clothing (Baptiste & Baptiste, 2017, Kim, Johnson, Lee & Ha, 2016) I found Baptiste & Baptiste's work particularly helpful due to their suggestion that clothing has a direct impact on our sensory and bodily experience of the sport, which I also put forward in Chapter 7. However, Baptiste & Baptiste do not specifically focus on martial arts, or the complex issue of what happens when we interpret historic clothing from outside of our familiar geographical context, issues which I explore in Chapter 5.

I also found historic approaches to karate helpful for both background and as part of my analysis, particularly those texts which examine the construction of karate as we know it today, including the media representation of 'martial arts' in the West and analysis of how the sport has been adapted, 'appropriated' or 'sportified' during its globalisation in the 20th century (Krug, 2001, Tan, 2004, Lawton & Nauright, 2019) which I draw on in the introduction to this thesis, and Chapter 5.

Ethnographic studies of karate and martial arts rarely focus on the *obi* or the *gi*, but many still influenced me. For example, some ethnographic studies have illuminated the deeply sensory nature of karate and other martial arts (Maclean, 2019, Paul, 2014) and others

have advocated for the centrality of bodily experiences and emotions such as fatigue, euphoria, heat, pain, and pleasure (Allen-Collinson et al, 2018, Olsson & Hansson, 2019, Langsner, 2006, Samudra, 2008, Stenius, 2015, Turelli et al, 2020). I will apply my understanding of the sensory and bodily nature of karate in Chapter 7 of this thesis.

Throughout this thesis I have used the Bourdieuan concept of ‘habitus’ to describe social conditioning in martial arts, in line with many others who have highlighted the ‘habitus’ of the *dojo* (Abrahamson & Modzelewski, 2011, Domaneschi, 2018, Sanchez Garcia & Spencer, 2013, Wacquant, 2014) including the place of the sensei (de Campos Rosario et al, 2010, Delamont, 2006, Stephens & Delamont, 2009) and the link between the embodied nature of martial arts and social ‘acculturation’ (Siah-Yeow Tan, 2014). There have also been studies of the karate hierarchy and ‘indoctrination’ into a moral code (Peters, 2020, Vicente & Carlos, 2016) including investigation of systemic abuse (Jennings, 2017), issues which I also examine in Chapter 6, but with a focus on the centrality of material objects in the social system.

In terms of the little ethnographic work on martial arts which references material aspects of the sport, some have drawn out the importance of clothing in relation to gender. Davies & Deckert (2019) title their article “Pretty Strong Women: Ingenious Agency, Pink Gloves and Muay Thai”, placing the playfulness of ‘pink gloves’ front and centre. Maclean (2018) similarly examines the pressures on women in terms of body image and examines the impact of the karate ‘uniform’, particularly highlighting the importance and impact of the belt hierarchy on social interaction. As Maclean is both a scholar and a *karateka*, I found it interesting to examine how she wrote about the *obi* and *gi*. My thesis will engage with her discussions of social hierarchy in the *dojo* in Scotland, as a frequently useful counter-point to my own work, particularly in Chapter 6. As a rare example of an analysis which highlights the **symbolic** importance of the *obi* and *gi*, Donohue (1997) explores the meaning of these items as part of a discussion of ‘importing’ martial arts to the US. This text is older but one of the few that considers the Japanese roots of the clothing of karate. Like Donohue, I draw out this aspect of the material elements of karate (particularly in Chapter 5 and 7) however in a different temporal and geographical context.

My contribution to this body of work is a stronger focus on what material objects in sport mean as commodities, or ‘cultural capital’, how this capital transforms into social and symbolic capital, and a central interest in the importance of objects within power relations and social systems in the *dojo*, including the power of materials to frame and direct human activity.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

I have been inspired by theorists who deal with materiality in different ways, including Daniel Miller, Beverly Skeggs, and Sara Ahmed. All three of these writers utilise Bourdieuan concepts, and their nuanced interpretations of the work of Bourdieu, particularly the terms ‘habitus’ and ‘capital’ have greatly influenced this thesis.

Miller builds on both Bourdieu and the work of sociologist Erving Goffman, using Goffman’s concept of ‘frame analysis’, (namely that we learn how to behave in different social spheres, or genres) but unlike Goffman, focusing on the ways in which material objects in particular frame these genres, or form “the fabric of cultural worlds” (1998, p6) which he later refers to as “worlds of practise” (p19). Miller puts forward the idea that objects, especially when unnoticed, “can determine our expectations, by setting the scene and ensuring appropriate behaviour, without being open to challenge. They determine what takes place to the extent that we are unconscious of their capacity to do so” later stating that “much of what makes us what we are exists, not through our consciousness or body, but as an exterior environment that habituates and prompts us.” (2010, p50-51). This description closely echoes Bourdieu’s concept of ‘habitus’; the ingrained, habituated social sphere which is formed through repetitive bodily practises and engagements (Bourdieu, 2020, pp315-344) but particularly highlights the silent or ‘humble’ nature of objects in framing the habitus.

Like Miller, I work closely with the notion that objects control the possibilities at play in the habitus, but I also consider the way in which objects to influence, transform and direct. To do this I draw also on the work of Ahmed, particularly her key idea that objects have ‘affect’ and that they therefore influence how we shape our “near sphere, the world that takes shape around us... we move toward and away from objects through how we are affected by them” (2010, p24).

In addition to using this concept to examine the ways in which the *obi* directs or ‘points’ people in certain directions (particularly in Chapter 7) I also argue that the *obi* can categorise people and in this way create specific identities, inspired by Foucault who states “the play of signs defines the anchorages of power; it is not that the beautiful totality of the individual is amputated, repressed, altered by our social order, it is rather that the individual is carefully fabricated in it, according to a whole technique of forces and bodies.” (1978, p217) In similar fashion, Miller also says that “it is the order of relationship to objects and between objects that creates people through socialisation whom we then take to exemplify social categories” (2008, p287) I will delve into this relationship between materials and

identity in Chapters 5 and 6. In Chapter 6 I particularly consider hierarchy and categorisation, using some further concepts of Foucault, such as his description of the way power works silently as a ‘complex strategical situation’ made up of a web of relations and resistance (1978, pp92-101) and considering how these objects of the *obi* and *gi* contribute to the categorisation of *karateka*. I was also inspired by Foucault’s description of discipline as a type of power built on repetition (1979, p218), which seemed particularly relevant when examining a sport such as karate, involving such an amount of drilling and routine. Finally, I also make use of the Foucauldian term ‘heterotopia’, referring to a space outside of normal society with its own social expectations and rituals (1986) when describing the *dojo*.

Like Miller and Ahmed, Beverly Skeggs also utilises Bourdieuan concepts. She asks how certain bodies become inscribed with certain characteristics, and how some characteristics are given value, institutionalised, and lost in processes of exchange, within social systems and relationships (2004) Throughout this thesis I will consider the characteristics represented by the *gi* and the *obi* and how these become inscribed onto different bodies through connection to, and exchange of, these objects. I use Skegg’s interpretation of Bourdieu’s different forms of ‘capital’:

- Economic capital: includes income, wealth, financial inheritances and monetary assets – what you own
- Cultural capital: can coexist in three forms: in an embodied state, i.e. in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and the body; in the objectified state, in the form of cultural goods; and in the institutionalized state, resulting in such things as educational qualifications. Bourdieu defines cultural capital as high culture
- Social capital: resources based on connection, networks and group membership: who you know, used in pursuit of favour and advancement
- Symbolic capital: the form the different types of capital take once they are perceived and recognized as legitimate. Legitimation is the key mechanism in the conversion to power. Cultural capital has to be legitimated before it can be capitalized upon, before its value is realisable (2004, p17)

The idea of transformation of capital runs throughout the whole thesis, as we look at different ways in which the *gi* and the *obi* are represented (as cultural, social and symbolic capital) and how they act in various ways to construct and support the practise of karate and the individuals within the club. Cultural capital is stressed in Chapter 5, social capital in Chapter

6, and symbolic capital in Chapter 7, although indeed many times these kinds of capital constantly overlap and interact.

Particularly in Chapter 7 it becomes apparent that objects such as the *obi* and *gi* not only transform themselves, but also the space around them, and the people wearing them, in a variety of ways. In order to discuss the power of these objects to transform spaces and people, I needed a new term to capture this type of capital which goes beyond ‘use value’. I therefore draw a parallel between ‘magical potency’ and ‘transformative capital’, inspired by classic theorist Marcel Mauss, who moved away from a definition of magic as the practising of superstition towards the idea that magic is ‘the art of changing’ (2001, p76) and also explored this fluid idea of magical potency through the term *mana*, taken from a Polynesian term, which he defines as “not simply a force, a being, it is also an action, a quality, a state. In other terms the word is a noun, an adjective and a verb...on the whole, the word covers a host of ideas which we would designate by phrases such as a sorcerer’s power, the magical quality of an object, to be magical, to possess magical powers, to be under a spell, to act magically...” (pp133-134)

Mauss describes *mana* objects as extraordinary, powerful and ‘hot’ (p138). I therefore see *mana* as related to ‘affect’ in that objects with *mana* also inspire a strong affective response from the beholder and user, and both terms are at once an adjective but also imply a ‘doing’ action on the behalf of the object. However, discussing an object’s magical potency or *mana* goes beyond ‘affect’ in illustrating the deeply transformative impact of these items for the reader. The flexibility of the term *mana* also particularly exposes what Mauss calls a ‘fundamental feature of magic – the confusion between actor, rite and object” (p134) which is central to my argument in this thesis; that objects, people and social structures are inherently intertwined.

Chapter 4: Methodology

My fieldwork comprised of qualitative research methods where the researcher is present, such as participant observation and individual and group interview. These methods are often considered ‘ethnographic’ in that they examine people’s cultural practises, however as ethnographic researchers Sunderland & Denny make clear, these methods can be used in totally different ways depending on the background and intention of the researcher and the project (2007, p52) so the ethnographic label is a means of framing these processes as part of a particular way of understanding and appreciating the social realm. As Sunderland & Denny say, “for cultural analysts, there is nothing and no one that is not also culturally saturated” (2007, p52). All practises, particularly those ‘everyday’ habits and routines which often go unnoticed or unremarked upon, are of interest from an ethnographic perspective. By striving to understand the sporting and social practises of a particular group of people (*karateka* in Sweden) I am therefore not only using ethnographic methods, but acting as a cultural analyst, utilising a reflexive ethnographic or cultural analytical methodology in the tradition established by earlier scholars such as Clifford Geertz and Malinowski.

The epistemic tradition or theoretical lenses we apply and our methodology are always linked, and it is evident that my theoretical focus on materiality must influence the direction and approach of my fieldwork, as I follow the objects present in the field. In the earlier part of the 20th century, ethnography in Sweden was seen as highly linked to museums and the preservation and collection of artefacts, with one report from 1959 stating that the study of ethnology has been “mainly devoted to the study of material culture” (Izickowitz, Moberg & Eskeröd, p670). My methodological emphasis on material objects in this study could be seen as a ‘coming full circle’ in this tradition, with the benefit of a nuanced consideration of materiality in line with modern theorists outlined in Chapter 3.

I was also inspired by Löfgren’s idea of ‘entanglement’; the concept that ethnographic work starts “with the how rather than the why of social action” but that “this interest does not, of course, exclude symbolic and semiotic aspects of material objects” (2016, p127) There is an ‘entanglement’ of material, symbolic and social aspects to all ethnographic work. I found that this approach resonated strongly with my own, starting with observation and interview which focused on the ‘how’ (how do people talk about and use the *obi* and *gi*) but opening up ideas relating to the symbolic and social.

4.1 Observation

As Miller explains, observation is key to ethnography, because “ethnography tends to lead to a much deeper involvement in people’s lives than just what they say about themselves.

Ethnography used in material culture also tends to emphasize careful observations of what people actually do and in particular do with things. As such we are constantly faced with the everyday discrepancies between what people say matters to them and what they actually give their attention to” (1998, p13). In other words, some things are said not to matter, but demonstrably matter to people. Language legitimises these concerns but is less meaningful without accompanying observation.

Observations were carried out between August to October 2020, as part of a separate project with Shotokan Sweden focusing on women’s experience of karate. I observed in three different clubs in the South of Sweden, as well as attending a ‘black belt camp’. Notes took a variety of formats; written record, photos and videos, sketches, and audio recordings.

Although the focus of my observations during this initial project was on women’s experience of karate, I found that most of the fieldnotes I made did not reference gender. Instead, I ended up with a wealth of notes revealing a lot about the wider rituals and practices of karate, including people’s behaviour with the *obi* and *gi*, such as this fieldnote:

Leif (3rd *dan*) has forgotten his belt. He comes to Benny, looking embarrassed, and asks to borrow a belt. Benny hands him a white belt. Benny tells me that he used to bring a spare brown belt, but then he let a kid borrow it, and at the next session, three others ‘forgot’ their belt so that they could wear the brown belt. He says he wanted them to feel ashamed for forgetting their belt, and that giving people a white belt is embarrassing and will encourage people not to forget... (*The next day*) ...Leif is practising with a very worn belt which to me appears cream or white. I realise that this is Leif’s ‘black belt’, but it is completely worn out from use, dyed with sweat, and ratty at the seams. There would be truly little difference visually for me, but there seems to be a difference for Leif. (Fieldnote, 30/08/20-31/08/20)

These kinds of notes are evidence of my developing interest in the contradictions and complex meanings surrounding the *obi*, but they do not tell me anything definite about Leif’s views of the situation, they are only my interpretation that ‘something is happening’. As sociologist Margarethe Kusenbach explores, observations are inherently limited in this manner, as they always come from our own perspectives but cannot access the inner perception of the people we are observing. (2003, pp460-462)

In addition, as Nicholas Wolfinger has discussed in his work on writing fieldnotes, taking a ‘salience’ approach to observation (where we note things which seem important or

memorable to us, as they occur) involves a high level of subjectivity, and relies on our own tacit expectations (2002, p89) For these reasons it was very important for me to expand my work with interviews, to be critical about my own note-taking process and reflexive about my position. Naturally, I was bringing many facets of myself to this study which could all have an impact on what I observed; my identity as a cultural analyst, an immigrant in Sweden, a creative artist, a woman, a family member of somebody who does karate, even as somebody who had a sworn aversion to sport when I was at school. As scholars such as Donna Haraway have argued, it is not possible (and indeed not helpful) to attempt to take a neutral position or to present ourselves as having a ‘god-like’ neutrality, due to these many ‘selves’ which we bring to all interactions (1988). One way I chose to handle this issue was to regularly write (or record) reflective journals for myself during the fieldwork, which reflected on what I hoped to achieve, and what I had experienced from that particular observation or interview.

However, despite these limits or challenges inherent in the practise, there was a significant purpose to this observation. As O’Toole & Were have described in their work on qualitative research, small vignettes focusing on particular objects or situations (such as my observation of Leif and Benny’s interaction above) can be doorways into an understanding of organisational context, raise dilemmas and queries (which can lead to a deeper theoretical analysis) and also support the researcher’s ‘tacit understanding’ and engagement with the community they are observing in (2008, pp630-631) Without this kind of observation, the question of what the *obi* means for participants would not have even arisen.

In this thesis, the majority of fieldwork material which is used comes from interviews, but the observations I undertook were an essential stage which formed a firm background of understanding of the habitus of the dojo, and legitimised and authenticated my later work.

4.2 Interview

In this thesis I use material taken from interviews conducted with 23 *karateka*, aged between 9-73 (15 women/girls and 8 men/boys) with a range of experience with karate in terms of years practising and level of belt. Many of these were group interviews, for example parents with their children. Naturally interviewing younger informants brought up specific ethical considerations which will be discussed further in Section 4.5.

Some interviews occurred at the *dojo* and some in informants’ homes or my own home. The interviews in a home setting usually lasted much longer and contained far richer discussion (often involving straying further from the interview script) which I attributed to

the comfortable setting (See Appendix A). As Ladner discusses, visiting people's homes allows you to empathize and encourages intimacy (2014, p82).

The group interview format, often involving intergenerational family relationships (parents, children, nieces) also allowed for natural discussion between informants, including agreement, disagreement, and qualification. This was different from the kind of discussion encouraged in a formalised focus group, which are often held in a 'neutral' location, sometimes with a 'contrived' spread of participants from different backgrounds, and with a moderator or facilitator encouraging discussion or debate between participants (Fallon, 2002, p196). Instead, I was using a semi-structured interview technique, asking a question, listening, and then asking participants to expand through further exploratory questions, meaning that I was an active participant in the interview rather than merely a moderator.

This strategy also broke down many of the barriers between me as the 'researcher' and my interviewees as 'informants'. For example, inviting people into my own home to do interviews, visiting others in theirs, inevitably enjoying *fika* while we chatted, all raise the issue of my position and relationship to the informants. I discuss this further in Section 4.4.

In terms of content, interviews focused on participants' first memories of karate, experiences with karate, and goals going forward, thereby concentrating on actions and events, their 'concrete experiences' rather than only views and opinions (Ehn, Löfgren & Wilk, 2016, p13). As those interviews were connected to a project regarding women's experience of karate, they included one question which was intended to draw out issues relating to gender; "Was there ever a time when you noticed or felt your gender in the *dojo*?" however most of the questions did not specifically mention gender, instead focusing on individual's experience of karate, with the intention of identifying themes and patterns related to gender later in the analysis. Questions included, "How did you first get involved with doing karate?" "Have you ever stopped doing karate?" and "What do you feel karate has taught you?" (See Appendix A).

Just as with my observations, there was therefore a wealth of relevant material in these interviews. I did not specifically ask about the *gi* or the *obi*, or even Japanese culture within karate, in my interview script. Despite this, there were nonetheless many spontaneous references to the *gi* and the *obi*. I thus quickly picked up that these objects were significant, that the *gi* was often a first memory of joining a club, and that achieving the black belt was a significant memory for many *karateka*. In some senses then, these objects drew attention to themselves through interviews; I let myself be led by informants to understand what mattered to them (Miller, 1998, p12).

Having established that the focus of the thesis would be rooted in the material culture of karate, I decided to supplement these interviews with a further individual interview and also a group interview. These interviews were conducted in March 2021 and focused intensively on the *obi* and *gi*, giving me the opportunity to ask more questions about this topic. These interviews provided crucial material and direction for my thesis and are heavily utilised throughout all chapters. Thus, my mode of work followed a common ethnographic structure of field-analysis-field (Ehn, Löfgren & Wilk, 2016, p4) as initial material triggered the theoretical and analytical focus of this thesis which in turn prompted additional fieldwork.

4.3 Organisation and Analysis of Materials

After conducting observations and interviews, I had a range of places where data was kept: observations and sketches were usually written by hand in a notebook. Photographs, audio recordings and videos were taken on my phone. I transcribed audio recordings into word files. I also collected material using netnography during the analysis process which I copied into word documents. But even this somewhat messy collection of materials does not fully represent the wider picture of organising relevant information; as “today we live in a world saturated with text, audio and video” (Ehn, Löfgren & Wilk, 2016, p123) and in fact, I consumed a variety of tangentially related media across the year in which this research was conducted, but also before; in a sense anything I ever saw which related to karate can be listed as relevant information which contributes to my tacit knowledge (Wolfinger, 2002, p88) Therefore I had to make certain choices about what material to analyse more deeply both before and during the writing process. I focused on my interview transcripts, some material gathered from netnography (memes, website screenshots) and a couple of my fieldnotes which I considered contained the most relevant data relating to the *obi* and *gi*.

I then analysed this material through the theoretical lens of materiality, effectively turning over the material in a ‘new light’ (Ehn, Löfgren & Wilk, 2016, p21). I did this by re-reading, and noting mentions of the *gi* and *obi*. I gathered these mentions into themes; firstly divided into a section relating to the *gi* and a section relating to the *obi*, then grouping quotations together which I felt had a similar focus, for example where ‘respect’ was mentioned, or ‘cleanliness’, what ethnographer Charlotte Aull Davies describes as applying ‘low-level theoretical categories’ (2007, p235). There was initially no solid or predictable method to this, it was instinctive pattern-forming on my part, filtering through my own tacit knowledge and ideas about what terms stood out as interesting, effectively applying a

“salience” approach, describing what stood out to me “as the most noteworthy, the most interesting, the most telling” (Wolfinger, 2002, p89). Often this was something I found funny or strange, but had not yet reflected on why this was the case. In this sense I, in fact, had already made some significant choices during the analysis stage of this project (p93) which again suggests the need for reflexivity on my own position.

4.4 Reflexivity and Relational Ethics

As already discussed, I had to consider the situated knowledge I brought to observations and interviews, and also the ethical implications of my own position; both in terms of relationships to informants, and in constructing and writing this thesis. As scholars such as Davies have explored at length, reflexivity on our position runs through all stages of a research project from conception to delivery (Davies, 2007).

One particularly important aspect to consider was my personal relationship to Shotokan Sweden via a family member. I was wary of warnings from other researchers such as Carolyn Ellis about the complexities of relational ethics in ethnography (2007) and had therefore tried to put in place some ‘safety measures’ to clarify my position when first entering the field; I drew up a clear proposal for Shotokan Sweden about the terms of my project, I requested an email and social media ‘introduction’ was sent to the members of the karate club introducing me as a researcher, and I followed this up with in-person ‘introduction’ talks at club practises and a karate camp which I attended. I provided consent forms to all interviewees and discussed the purpose of my research thoroughly with them. I agreed to anonymise all informants as well as the karate organisation itself to the best of my ability. I had only previously met four of the 23 people I interviewed so I was initially not very concerned about previous relationships influencing findings.

Nonetheless, I quickly found that my pre-existing relationship with certain members of the club allowed me an ‘insider’ status, granting me access and connection to the clubs, putting me in a position where I could request to undertake a research project, and request interviews with participants who knew my family member. It also influenced the relationships that I built during the project; interviewees were easy to come by, and many informants trusted me to enter their homes, or to come to my home. As already discussed in section 4.2, I felt that there was a close and intimate relationship within many interviews, indicated by the cosy setting we were in, laughter and joking, and the way that our interviews frequently went ‘off book’ indicating a level of ease and comfort. Informants made

comments about the interviews being fun and interesting, and wanting me to come back again. Ellis asks the question of whether a researcher can be a friend, and whether relationships can persist beyond fieldwork (2002, p10). Perhaps due to the fact that the main club I worked with is in my local town, some of the contact I had with informants sparked friendships which have persisted beyond the project (For example, I still take part in community volunteering organised by the karate club and the local kommun). I was thus, in a sense, employing ‘friendship as method’ with some of my informants, where, as Ellis says, ‘there is no leaving the field’ (p13). This is true for me in other ways; as I live with the family member who practises with Shotokan Sweden, I am surrounded by artefacts of karate; diplomas on the walls of my living room, *gi* hanging to dry by the entrance to my apartment, and Japanese wood prints on the wall of my bedroom. This has provided many moments of insight and interest, but also requires me to set boundaries for myself to avoid complete cultural analytical overload. As Ehn, Löfgren and Wilk have explored, the boundary between home and field has become blurred or non-existent in the modern world (2016, pp121-123) so for me, the separation is not geographical, but usually temporal; for my own health as a researcher I have to define when I am working and when I am not.

Ethnologists such as Davies and also Robert Labaree have discussed the benefits and challenges of holding an ‘insider’ position like this (Labaree, 2002, Davies, 2007). Labaree has stated that an insider status is usually perceived as valuable in terms of access to privileged information, however this position is complicated for many reasons, particularly the perception of ‘obligations and responsibilities to those being studied that an outsider may never encounter’ (2002, p111). I experienced this myself during the project; for example, during one cosy interview where we were discussing the *obi* and *gi*, I found my interviewees were starting to explore the idea of why Japanese people are perceived as good at karate, which started to touch on generalisations and theories about Japanese bodies being more suited to karate than Swedish bodies. This is a delicate topic, which brings up sensitive issues regarding race. My informants were clearly comfortable enough with me to feel safe discussing this, and I was fascinated by their ideas, which I considered key to understanding how people negotiate difference and understand different cultures. However, I also felt an obligation or a responsibility to my interviewees to not ‘expose’ them or embarrass them for these natural, unplanned discussions which some might view as generalised or even inappropriate. I have chosen to use some of the content of these discussions in Chapter 5, but with a sensitive description of the context in which these conversations occurred.

4.5 Further Ethical Reflections

Some restrictions of my fieldwork included that, due to the current covid-19 pandemic, I was not able to observe *kumite*, as the clubs I observed in had chosen to limit physical contact due to the pandemic. Some had also banned *kiai* (a traditional shout) for the same reason. By November 2020, many clubs had taken training online, following guidance from the Swedish Karate Association. This could have affected the quality or reliability of my observations, however the majority of my observations had already been conducted before November. I was also able to conduct one further group interview following safety recommendations from the Health Authority. Discussion of *kumite* or *kiai* is rare in this thesis, but where it is discussed I relied on information gathered through interviews and online research.

A limit of the scope of this thesis is that it does not focus on issues of diversity in karate, in terms of gender, class or race. The vast majority of the participants in Shotokan Sweden were white Swedish citizens, which is highly representative of the general local population. Within the informants available to me, however, I have highlighted a diversity of views on the topics discussed, to show that there are indeed tensions and mixed opinions even within what might appear initially to be a homogenous group. The key findings of the thesis regarding human strategies for dealing with objects, and each other, would greatly benefit from further intersectional analysis, however this was not the focus of this thesis.

As mentioned above, some of my interviews were with families with children who were under 18. All informants were given a consent form before interviews, and for those under 18, a parent or guardian was asked to read and sign the form as well. Under-18s were never interviewed alone, always with their parent or guardian present (usually the parent/guardian was also a *karateka* and was also answering questions).

One final aspect of how I talk about informants that I had to consider was reproducing classifications. I noticed that I had been writing the name, age, and belt level of informants next to quotations. As my focus was on exposing, not reproducing, the social hierarchy at play in the *dojo*, and also protecting individuals' privacy, I decided to only use people's pseudonyms and not include the belt level. I also, where possible, avoided calling people "low belts" or "high belts" in my work, again, attempting to avoid reproducing the conflation of person and object which I saw happening a lot in the *dojo*. However, there are times in my analysis where it seemed important to note somebody's belt level, perhaps because it exposed a pattern or relationship, or challenged such a pattern. In these cases, where I was able to still protect informants' anonymity, I have mentioned this in my analysis.

Chapter 5: Cultural Capital

5.1 Material Choices

Miller describes how “by not only reading an object as a text, or semiotic, accepting the more mundane sensual and material qualities of the object, we are able to unpick the more subtle connections with cultural lives and values that are objectified through these forms, in part, because of the particular qualities they possess.” (1998, p127) Inspired by this, I will begin by focusing on the ‘mundane sensual and material qualities’ of the *obi* and then will draw out the objectification of particular ‘cultural lives and values’, in this case the presence of Japan.

The belt is about 4cm wide, and usually around 2 metres long. It is made of cotton, either plain white or dyed with a colour. This cotton ‘base’ can be overlaid with black satin or coloured cotton, embroidered with gold or orange thread (often with the name of the owner). It can cost 150 SEK or over 1000 SEK. It can be manufactured by artisans in Japan or in a factory. Figure 3 shows varied examples of brown and black belts, made with different materials.

A *karateka* evidently must make various materially grounded choices when selecting their belt, as various options are available to them. As museum studies scholar Susan Pearce explains, the difference between things we consider part of the natural world and things we call ‘objects’, ‘artefacts’ or ‘goods’ is the aspect of selection, which brings something into the world of human values (1994, pp9-11). Crucially then, making a material choice always involves a value judgement. I therefore wanted to understand the choices being made by *karateka*, and what this tells us about the values behind these choices. I started exploring this in my interview with a member of Shotokan Sweden, Benny, who had been practising karate for over 30 years and was a 5th dan black belt. Benny had owned two black belts. I asked him about the choices he had made when purchasing these items:

Rebecca: Was there something about that belt that made it particularly nice?

Benny: The nice thing about satin is that it didn’t fade or turn grey, it stayed black, for as long as the satin was there. But as soon as the satin started to break down, it went downhill quite fast.



Figure 3 From left to right: Brown belt (dyed cotton), black belt (dyed cotton), black belt (satin overlaid on white cotton), black belt (black cotton overlaid on white cotton)

Rebecca: So it started to degrade?

Benny: Yeah, but that took a couple of years

Rebecca: And how long did it take you before you ordered a new one?

Benny: 15 years. For two reasons. One, it was dissolving, even the white was breaking up. And two, I changed organisation and I had the old organisation on the belt. I think it's a bit offensive walking around with the old organisation belt with a Shotokan Japan instructor even if I started training and got the black belt before Shotokan Japan even existed. And three, my club said everyone who is teaching can have a new gi for free, and I said "I'd rather have a new belt" so the club paid for it.

Rebecca: Ok. And what was your logic with the belt you have now? Why did you choose that one?

Benny: I wanted cotton this time because it lasts longer. And that belt is also a Shotokan Japan belt, the label is a Shotokan Japan label, so I suppose it is supporting them... or us.

Rebecca: Yeah. But why spend a lot of money on this belt? The 'normal' belts are also cotton?

Benny: Because its a Shotokan Japan belt, and because the embroidery is made in a way where you can't see the back side of the embroidery – it's double folded, so the stitches can't be seen on the other side – whereas on the cheap belts you see the embroidery on the back side of the belt. It's quality. I won't just send my belt to a factory for 200kr [mimes throwing the belt], I will pay 800kr and wait for them to embroider it in Japan. (Interview, 2nd March 2021)

Already within this discussion, we can start to see the 'entanglement' of the material and social, as different kinds of capital emerge; economic, cultural, social and symbolic (Skeggs, 2004, p17) Benny is concerned with material aspects of the belt which give it economic value, including the fabric's durability, how 'colour-fast' it is, and the visibility of the stitching. Pearce has argued that the more we perceive something to be made by skill, the more 'human technology' has been applied, the more likely we are to consider something a high-status commodity (1994, pp9-11). Benny is expressing this value judgement. He is also vacillating between material and social concerns, instinctively linking the material to his identity as a member of 'Shotokan Japan'. This can be seen in his assertion that it would be offensive to retain his old organisation's label on his belt, and that a major motivation for the purchase of the newest belt was to support Shotokan Sweden/Japan. In this way the belt also acts as symbolic and social capital, not only in terms of the literal label reflecting membership of an organisation, but also in terms of its economic and material value, which directly reflect the esteem which Benny holds for Shotokan Japan. The capital overlaps.

Benny's words also reveal the *obi* as cultural capital. He conveys that it could be considered disrespectful or illegitimate in some people's eyes (Benny's, other *karateka*) to send the belt to a local factory, almost like throwing it away. This deserves further interrogation regarding the perceived importance of Japan within the Swedish karate

community, and the way in which this link is embodied in the *obi*, which I will now focus on further.

5.2 “It’s a Japanese Sport”

As anthropologist John Donohue observed in his work on American *budo* (martial arts) in the 1990s, many martial arts highlight connections to the founder of their sport, with some visibly displaying these linkages in their *dojo* in the form of name boards connecting students, the instructor, the superior in the country, the present head of the art, and the art’s founder (1990, p57). My research indicated this was also the case in Shotokan Sweden. The head of Shotokan Sweden was good friends with the former head of Shotokan Japan (now deceased) who studied under Funakoshi, and this connection was regularly mentioned in interviews. However, nowadays, this kind of ‘linkage’ is more likely to be presented in online web pages or social media rather than on the walls of the *dojo*.^v

In addition to the linkage to the Japanese founders of the sport, I observed that the influence of Japan was perceivable in many other ways in the *dojo*. Every punch, kick, stance and technique in the *dojo* has a Japanese name. The *sensei* also counts in Japanese. Each *kata* (sequences of techniques) has a historic link to a particular Japanese practitioner of karate which is often stressed by the *sensei* during teaching. Other rituals could be argued to be Japanese according to cultural anthropologist Kevin Tan include bowing to each other, bowing to the ‘head wall’ (*shomen*) as you enter the *dojo* (where historically pictures of revered figures of karate would have been kept, similar to a shrine which may be reminiscent of certain aspects of Japanese Buddhism) the use of the Japanese phrase “*oss*” to signal assent or respect, the practise of *mokusu* or kneeling in meditation which happens at the start and end of sessions, and even harder-to-define rules of ‘emotional conduct’ when fighting, for example the idea that you should not show physical discomfort when hurt.^{vi} Perhaps most relevant for this thesis, of course, is the wearing of the *gi* and *obi* (Tan, 2004).

However, despite clear references to Japan and Japanese culture in the *dojo* of Shotokan Sweden, determining the true cultural roots or ‘ownership’ of karate is complex. As Tan has explained, it is difficult to trace the history of karate, and any discussion of the ‘Japanese history’ of karate must consider the complex interplay of Okinawan, Chinese, Japanese and Western discourse which influenced the development of the sport (Tan, 2004).

Additionally, there is debate over whether one nation or culture can ever truly ‘own’ a sport, and what this really means. Is ownership determined by history, geographical origin,

achievement within sporting competitions, development of the physical practise, or something else entirely? Various scholars have discussed the ‘sportification’ or ‘globalisation’ of karate and the implications this has for the ownership of the sport (Krug, 2001, Lawton & Nauright, 2019). Some, such as Tan see the post-war interaction between Japan and the United States as particularly significant in the development of the sport, as it took a practise which had been relatively marginal at that time in Japan, made it part of the standard instruction of US military personnel stationed in Japan, and then brought this practise back to the US where its commercialisation became a huge part of Japan’s post-war recovery from economic devastation (Tan, 2004, p185) again blurring the boundaries of ownership of the sport. In interviews with *karateka* from Shotokan Sweden, I noticed that informants stated that the sport was imported ‘exactly’ from Japan, but simultaneously acknowledged that there were significant differences in the practise:

Agata: It’s a Japanese sport, they have Japanese rules and so on, so we’re just following them. And maybe that’s one reason why we can go all over the world and train, because everybody’s doing the same thing. You have the same code everywhere, so there will be no problem going back to Japan. Maybe they think that we’re a bit sloppy? I don’t know! Maybe! But I think we’re good.

Liselotte: No, I remember when Kieve was in Japan, he was in a Japanese dojo, and he said we were!

Agata: We were sloppy?! Ok! (laughs)

Liselotte: Yeah! He had done something with his legs for one hour and he couldn’t even walk after it! (laughs) So I think we are... when they train...

Agata: They train a lot harder than we are. (Interview, 3rd March 2021)

There is also a historical context of orientalism and negative portrayal of Japanese and Asian people to be reckoned with in any discussion of the ‘cultural capital’ of Japan. Cultural Studies scholar Gary Krug argues that the process of importing the sport out of its original context led to a ‘mythologisation’ of the sport, which was viewed as an essentialised form of Japanese culture, “in a sense, frozen in a cultural moment...removed from the cultural systems that created and defined it” and “transplanted into new meaning systems” (Krug, 2001, p399). He traces how Japan and a more generalised ‘Asianess’ was represented on screen and in popular culture in the West from the 1930s to 1980s. While the 1970s saw more ‘sympathetic’ portrayals of characters from Asian countries, there was often an ambiguous concept of ‘The East’ and a sense of ‘secret knowledge’ which is reminiscent of Orientalist ideas (pp400-401). I came across some similar ambiguities in discussions with my informants, even now. For example, following on from the earlier discussion where Agata

and Liselotte were praising the toughness of Japanese *karateka*, Liselotte, in a humorous manner, attempted to explain this ability:

Liselotte: And you know babies? They have short legs and arms, and a longer torso. And Japanese have that too! They are not built like us, so I think the sport is kind of developed from the physics they have, because we are not built like them. They are so good. You can see it when someone who is Swedish but has some Asian inside, they are good from the start. *Titta på* (look at) [names friend] my friend, she is so good.

Agata: Yeah, and she's adopted.

Liselotte: And there are others [names somebody else]

Agata: Yeah, they have something in their body that just makes sense, maybe the whole control of their body? (Interview, 3rd March 2021)

Despite clearly having only admiration for the Japanese *karateka*, both informants somewhat fell into the trap of conflating 'Asian' and 'Japanese' and also perpetuated the orientalist idea of a secret, innate ability due to race or nationality (Said, 2008). This is important because firstly it reflects a common instinct (across all cultures) to use cultural 'shortcuts' to explain something which is strange in our context. Secondly, as will become apparent in Section 5.4 and 5.4, it reflects a common feature of cultural capital, the essentialisation of particular characteristics into material commodities or practises, so that these become representative of the whole culture.

Alongside these pop culture representations of martial arts and 'Asianess', in the 1970s and 80s many new karate 'schools' were appearing around the world, global competitions and tournaments were emerging, and the original 'founding fathers' of karate were dying off, leaving power vacuums in the system which were filled by a variety of Japanese and non-Japanese organisations claiming legitimacy (Krug, 2001, pp403-404). The sport began to develop its practises to be more entertaining or exciting for spectators, with a greater focus on *kumite*, becoming seen more as a sport than a cultural practise (Lawton & Nauright, 2019). As Tan points out, this 'sportification' did not only originate in the US; Japanese figures in the sport saw the potential to gain a share of the market abroad (2004, p 186) and approved many of these global changes to appeal to a wider audience. A profitable industry around karate persists to this day in Japan, with many karate organisations (including Shotokan Sweden) having a financial relationship with overarching Japanese organisation, often involving large payments made for gradings and training sessions. The stereotypes and 'essentialising' of Japanese culture seen in the growth of karate in the West therefore both harm and supports Japanese organisations and individuals involved in the sport, something Skeggs has suggested is very common when cultures are commodified in this way, and where

there exists “a symbolic economy where the inscription and marketing of characteristics onto certain bodies condenses a whole complex cultural history” (2004, p1). The relationships of power between those who take a certain culture, and those who are taken from, are rarely straightforward.

This is the highly convoluted and complex history of karate which acts as the backdrop for modern practitioner’s engagement with the sport, including the purchase of the *obi* and *gi*. Within this context the practise of karate can be characterised as an *embodied* form of ‘cultural capital’ and the *obi* and *gi* can be defined as an *objectified* form of cultural capital (Skeggs, 2004, p17); a way of purchasing something which represents this long history and geographical origin of the sport; a way for you too to ‘own’ karate.

5.3 Made in Japan

There are various material ways in which a connection to Japan is ‘objectified’ in the *obi*. These include the label which often indicates the place where the belt was made (see Fig. 4) and the kanji characters which many *karateka* embroider on the belt. Skeggs suggests that these features are a form of *legitimation* of the object’s authenticity and meaning. As she puts it “cultural capital has to be legitimated before it can be capitalized upon, before its value is realizable” (2004, p17). Just as the visible connection of student to teacher to ‘head’ of the sport legitimises a karate school, the visible connection of an *obi* to specific regions in Japan gives authenticity and power to the wearer. This is why sending the belt to a local factory is not as meaningful (or powerful) as hand-crafted traditional embroidery from Japan.



Figure 4 Various labels on brown and black belts, highlighting their geographical origin and connection to Japan.

Further evidence of how Japanese culture is objectified in karate more generally can be seen on commercial websites selling martial arts uniforms. Some shops have Japanese words in their name, such as ‘budopunkt.eu’ or ‘ippon-shop.com’. Japanese brands are highlighted, clothing is often ‘approved’ by well-known Japanese karate champions, and you can find

goods such as a ‘dojo cherry blossom racquet set’ which refers to a famous event in Japan, the *sakura* (cherry blossom) festival (see Fig. 5). Many brand websites also have sections dedicated to the history of the brand in Japan.^{vii}



Figure 5 Goods found on budopunkt.eu/en/sports/karate. ‘Approved’ uniforms and cherry trees. Retrieved 5th April 2021

All these commercial marketing strategies, highlighting the ‘genuine’ or ‘authentic’ roots of the objects, and locating them in a wider cultural context, point to the legitimation of cultural capital. However, as Skeggs states, “it is not just the volume and composition of the right sort of cultural capital (for national belonging) but, rather, that the right sort of capital depends on the *processes by which it is acquired and displayed*” (2004, p20, my emphasis). For *karateka* this is two-fold; the challenges they face learning *kata*, fighting, and demonstrating their knowledge at gradings is one ‘process’ to acquire a belt. Simply buying a belt does not give you the right to wear it (something which will be discussed in the following chapters of this thesis). But also, the belt should have an authentic provenance. The more of these visible symbolic links, the more meaning the object has.

5.4 Local-Global Strategies

Thus, the *obi* has a function of signalling the owner’s ‘global-local identity’. It tells the observer something about how far that individual invests into the sport and the culture it relates to. One pattern that became clear in my observations was that most *karateka* used a plain, relatively cheap brand of belt while progressing from red belt up to brown belt, but once they reached brown or black belt, some *karateka* started to invest more money in buying a belt. One reason for this is because it usually takes a lot longer to progress through the levels of brown belt, and once you reach black belt, you might never change it again as you

have reached the last colour. It would not make as much sense to personalise or invest in a ‘lower’ rank of belt as you may only have it for six months. But this pattern also suggested a relationship of investment, where those who invested deeply in the practise of karate (in terms of time and effort) sometimes also invested capital into the *obi*.



Figure 6 Traditional Japanese wood print (by Yoshitoshi) framed and hung on Benny's wall.

This deep investment into both the practise and the cultural capital of karate is exemplified by Benny, who is a high-ranking member of the club and who practised for 30 years. I could see that Benny's investment in the cultural capital of Japan spilled over into other areas beyond the *obi*; he had travelled to Japan on multiple occasions to practise karate and take gradings, he had purchased, framed and hung his grading certificates (beautifully decorated with Japanese text) on the wall, he had purchased a traditional wood-cut print depicting (he said) a Japanese folk tale about a samurai (See Fig. 6), and he expressed an interest in owning a samurai sword (*katana*).

Skeggs critically describes this kind of collecting as ‘cosmopolitanism’, the practise of demonstrating “knowledge about other cultures and the display of one’s access to the culture and resources of others” (2004, p148). She suggests that we are living in a world of aesthetics, seeking out “the real” by “plundering” other cultures, stating that “the ability to be reflexive via the experience of others is a privilege, a position of mobility and power, a mobilisation of cultural resources” (p129). She calls this the *aesthetic/prosthetic* or AP self, capturing the sense of objects being ‘prosthetics’ that we attach to ourselves; “The AP self moves from figure to figure, reliant upon knowledge about what figure to appropriate, what to attach, what choices to make” (p147). However, this description seems to imply a cold and calculated strategy of appropriation, which somewhat misses the context of the complex reciprocity of the relationship between Japan and Sweden discussed earlier in this chapter. In fact, in my interviews with *karateka*, there was no cool and detached self-awareness, rather a feeling of making your way towards an understanding through these objects; more of a negotiation or an engagement than a ransacking. For example, one informant, Agata, said;

So, thinking about the gi and the obi. So karate is from the army at first, right, because they were not allowed to fight with weapons, so they developed karate? So maybe the gi and the obi is? I don't know, I think Leif knows. But I'm just thinking maybe it's an army thing,

because in the army you look the same? And well, still you have the grades [of belt], but you still look the same, maybe that's why the gi is used, because everyone looks the same. Maybe, I don't know? I never thought about it, everybody just has the white gi." (Interview, 3rd March, 2021)

Searching for the meaning of the objects, Agata speculated about their history and roots, but acknowledged that this was a vague understanding, and that she hadn't previously considered it. She thought that perhaps Leif, another Shotokan Sweden member who practised for many years might know this history better. This example clearly shows a gap between the history of these objects and what is known and reproduced in Sweden, which is highly understandable given the complexity of that history. But despite not being entirely certain of the history, Agata manages, in a very natural way, to use the objects to build their understanding of the sport, 'filling in the gaps' around objects from her partial perspective and in this way constructing a sort of a hybrid Swedish interpretation of the sport.

Like Skeggs, Miller also acknowledges that we create an 'aesthetic' for ourselves through our choices regarding material objects, but he sees identification with a particular aesthetic as an "overall desire for harmony, order and balance" (2008, p5). He also mentions cosmopolitanism, but in a less critical manner, arguing that within material culture we "objectify the presence of a space-time that evokes a global world of possibility held against a highly constrained set of domestic obligations and responsibilities... one of the key struggles of modern life is to retain both a sense of authentic locality, often as narrow as the private sphere, and yet also lay claims to a cosmopolitanism that at some level may evoke rights to global status" (1998, p19). This description more sympathetically captures the struggle which is unconsciously taking place when we engage with other cultures; a struggle to understand our own place in the world, in which we naturally use objects as a tool for this negotiation.

As Miller also states, our understanding of people's relationships to material objects "provide a nuanced sense of just how these encounters [between local and global] are experienced and how what have been represented as grand clashes of meta-symbols become the mundane reality of everyday life" (1998, p19) Every day we meet other cultures, and with the afore-mentioned globalisation of many sports this is particularly common.^{viii} The way in which we interact with objects can reveal extremely common and natural strategies in which these engagements occur.

Benny's strategy of investing deeply in both the practise and the culture of karate seemed to be shared by others in Shotokan Sweden who held leadership positions of some kind in Shotokan Sweden (eg. teaching, being on the committee of the club, holding grading

responsibilities) However, I also noticed, through interviews, that there were exceptions to this pattern. For example, Caroline, a 2nd dan *karateka* in her 30s, who held teaching responsibilities in her club, said the following:

Caroline: It feels like the 1st dan, the milestone begins here. 2nd dan, a bit more. But 3rd or 4th, I feel like they are reachable. I feel like they are reachable, absolutely – 3rd is absolutely reachable, 4th might be for me, depending on how much time I spend. But after that, it's just “no, not for me at all”.

Rebecca: Is that because of the amount of time you would spend?

Caroline: Yeah, and there's a theoretical part that comes in, you have to write an essay, and you have to go to Japan, and like... I'm not really... I don't think the Japanese culture is a big thing for me. I think it's a culture like anyone else, and it's exciting and it's an old culture, which makes it exciting, but it's not more exciting than any other culture. That's my point of view.

Rebecca: Yeah, I guess some people buy into some parts, but I don't think you have to?

Caroline: No I don't think so. I buy into the karate part, that's it. But I also think that is a divider between male and female, because 5th dan and above, I have not met many women [names 2 women] but I don't know of anyone else really. (Interview, 16th September 2020)

This exchange potentially highlights a gender difference relating to investment in cultural capital, as Caroline believes that there is a certain point in the karate hierarchy which few women persist past, and interestingly this point correlates to the stage where *karateka* are expected to go to Japan to do gradings. The requirement that the Head of Shotokan Japan must oversee gradings of 5th dan and above usually means that aspiring 5th dan must go to Japan, unless the Head happens to visit Sweden. This can be seen as part of the cultural capital of the practise; you must usually go to the ‘home’ of karate in order to proceed. By saying that she doesn't see herself doing that, Caroline reveals a different strategy to deal with the Japanese roots of her chosen sport, which she might see as investing in the sport, not the culture. She separates the two (“I buy into the karate part”) which I interpreted to mean the physically challenging movements of the practise, but in doing so, and rejecting the culture of Japan, she potentially loses the opportunity to progress past 4th *dan*. It is also debatable whether anybody really can separate the culture from the sport, despite the idea that karate has become ‘sportified’, because of the elements of Japanese culture which persist throughout every practise session, from bowing as you enter to the wearing of the *gi* and *obi* (Tan, 2004) But for Caroline, paying to travel to Japan is a step too far.

Another female informant, Liselotte (1st *kyu*) demonstrated a similar strategy; she refused to spend a lot of money on an item from Japan, as she felt that the belt was perfectly functional from a cheaper brand, stating “Especially black belts, they order them from Japan. But... you can't wash it...” suggesting that not everybody seeks status from cultural capital,

or perhaps that issues of global-local status sometimes take less precedence than practical concerns. She had also identified the pattern that those with black belts were more likely to invest in an item from Japan. However, she seemed in no hurry to progress up the ranking system further herself, considering her current rank a great achievement, stating “I didn’t think I would ever do anything more than the red belt. And now I can see that maybe I will even have the black one, and that’s amazing, I can’t believe it.” (Interview, 3rd March 2021)

It therefore seems possible to reject cultural capital, but there is also a correlation between those who reach the highest ranks and those who invest in the cultural capital of Japan, and that perhaps by rejecting the cultural capital, you also reject a certain amount of social status. Connections to Japanese people, having been to Japan, or having attended sessions run by Japanese teachers, and having a belt which has been hand-embroidered in Japan, are all common practises for those with the most apparent social status in the organisation, not for those lower in the ranks.

Regardless of their stated interest in Japan (or lack of interest) each informant is still doing something each time they talk about these objects, because they declare in some way how far they are willing to invest in the object, and therefore how much they invest in the ‘home’ culture of the sport. This is an ongoing process of negotiation; cultural capital is not static, but reliant on these ongoing relationships and evaluations.

5.6 Concluding Thoughts

This chapter asked what happens when we examine a particular item, in this case the karate belt or *obi*, as a material commodity? The answer is that we quickly understand the significance of individual material choices, and what these represent in terms of status and power on a ‘local-global’ level. We can see how, in an increasingly globalised world, objects regularly take on status as *objectified cultural capital* and expose force relations between different nations. We can also see that there is an ambiguous relationship of power between these nations of Japan and Sweden, which is pointed to by this object and its material qualities. The karate belt illuminates real-life examples of the strategies which people use when interacting with and interpreting cultures different from their own, constructing a local world of practise.

Chapter 6: Social Capital

6.1 Your Place in the Line

In this chapter I will argue that in addition to acting as cultural capital, both the *gi* and the *obi* also act as social capital. Cultural and social capital are highly related; there is a connection between the material label of Shotokan Japan, and the idea of belonging to the organisation of Shotokan Japan. In addition, cultural capital relies on the evaluation of value by a wider community; as Skeggs states;

The attribution of value always depends on the perspective that is taken: for whom is something valuable or not? If we want to understand exchange we need to know from whose perspective and interest is value attributed. Who decides what is valuable, what exists as a resource or asset and what can be exchanged? And what relationships make this exchange and valuation a possibility? (2004, p10)

In all discussions of the value of objects, we must also consider who is viewing the object, and why they attribute value. This chapter is concerned with exploring the social network of relationships and perspectives which exist around the *obi* and the *gi*, in order to illuminate how cultural capital transforms into social capital, and how these social relationships and hierarchies are visually represented and reinforced by the *gi* and the *obi*.

Figure 2 in Section 1.2 shows the relationship between the belt and the social hierarchy of the *dojo* in its most simple and direct form: each belt colour links to a rank, effectively categorising the person by their belt. In conversation with informants, describing somebody by their belt was common. Many *karateka* refer to individuals as ‘low belts’, or as a ‘white belt’ or ‘black belt’, actually conflating the person with the object, the category literally being inscribed upon their body, which indicates the *obi*'s power to categorise bodies.

Although we are primarily discussing social capital in this chapter, we must still acknowledge the importance of the symbolic qualities of the *obi* and *gi* such as their colour. The white belt, absent of colour (like the *gi*) represents a state where the person has no rank. The belt gets darker, similar to how it would darken with use. The colour progression is therefore symbolic, suggesting, as Donohue says, “an accretion of knowledge, the belt serving as a type of litmus which changes its color as the student develops” (1990, p58). If read in this manner, the belt symbolises skill and experience, values which are held in high regard by the community, thereby acting as both social and symbolic capital. The mechanism by which this symbolism is imparted into the *obi* will be explored further in the next chapter of this thesis, but suffice it to say that social and symbolic capital often intertwine in this manner.

On the relationship between symbolism and social hierarchy (using an example of a military jacket in a museum) Susan Pearce uses concepts from Saussure and Barthes to discuss the idea of *parole* or act, and *signe* “the union of signified and signifier... the social construct which members of the group can recognize and understand” (1994, p21). She explains that:

Saussure shows that the structuring process means that *parole* works not in discrete pieces but in sets, in which meaning depends upon relationships, and categories are created by the distinction which divides one set from another. The rank which the jacket expresses would be meaningless if there were not other, higher and lower, ranks with which it forms a set. (p21)^{ix}

The categories we see at play in the *dojo* are symbolic ‘ranks’ indicated by the belt, with people grouped together as ‘red belts’ ‘blue belts’ etc, and they rely on social distinctions between higher and lower ranks to be meaningful. As Foucault explores, power relations often come from “cleavages in a society that shift about, fracturing unities and effecting regroupings, furrowing across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remolding them, marking off irreducible regions in them, in their bodies and minds” (1978, p96). The belt acts as a marker of these fractures, literally ‘cutting’ across an individual’s body and placing them into a particular group, with particular limits.

This visual categorisation in the *dojo* presents openly in every karate session. Every session has a moment at the start and end where participants are called to line up facing the *sensei*. Participants line up in order of their belt rank, making the hierarchy extremely visible at this moment, framing the practise in this manner. When I asked Agata about the feeling of getting a new belt, she mentioned the line-up:

Agata: Yeah, every time. It is. [a good feeling]. Even though when you have the blue belt you don’t change it, so you get 1st blue, then 2nd blue, but you are still proud because you know you can tell them [others] and you get to go further up the line when you line up.

Liselotte: You get to be like “excuse me” (mimes stepping into a place in the line) and you can go on the other side of them! (all laugh) (Interview, 3rd March 2021)

These words tell us a lot about the importance of acknowledgement of your place in the hierarchy for some *karateka*. They also indicate that the relationship between the belts as a symbol and the social hierarchy in place in the *dojo* is highly related, but not entirely exchangeable; the belts indicate your place in the line to an extent, but sometimes, even though the belt does not change (because there is more than one grade at that colour of belt) your place in the line does change. The belt acts as an integral visual part of the system, but the system is nonetheless bigger than the belt.

Skeggs suggests that “in many circumstances essentializing and spatializing work together” (2004, p18). The belt does not only mark a person as a particular rank

(‘essentialising’), but this has consequences in terms of limiting their physical movement and proxemics or relationships to others in the *dojo* (‘spatialising’) In effect the belt tells people “this is your place, and this is what you can do there”. Examples which I noted included:

- The highest-ranking person in the line gives the command to kneel, to meditate, to stop meditating, and to get up, during *mokusu*. They are also often chosen by the *sensei* to lead a warm-up.
- During the practice groups will often be formed based on belt, for example one teacher might take red belts to one side of the *dojo* to practise a *kata*, while another teacher might do drills of basic techniques (*kihon*) with the green and blue belts. In breaks, these groups will usually remain together.
- Certain sessions were marked out as only for red to green belts, others for blue to black, while the black belts also had their own special practise once a week.

Examining the work of ethnologists who practise karate such as Chloe Maclean, I saw further examples in her work of essentialising and spatialising within the *dojo*. Maclean describes how, in three *dojo* in Scotland, belt level controlled where people stood while practising, with those holding low belts being reluctant to take up space or move freely across the space used by higher belts (2018, p130). She also discusses practises of deference such as white belts holding open doors for black belts, and leaving the *dojo* backwards so as not to turn your back on the *sensei* (p216). She states that lower grades may be anxious about talking to or interacting with black belts (p89) and also, significantly, finds that the level of belt has a direct relationship to the ability to touch others, both in terms of corrective manipulation of the body to improve technique, and physical contact during fights (p174). Maclean does not critique the fact that the belt hierarchy has this effect of controlling where people move in the space, how they interrelate socially to each other, and even how they touch, based on grade, although she does reflect on how her social status as a black belt within this hierarchy smoothed the way for her observations. Her perspective, which is shared by many *karateka*, seems to be that this hierarchy is fundamentally fair, because it is essentially a meritocracy, based on skill and experience (rather than other factors such as gender, race or class) and is also generally limited to the *dojo*. As Benny said, “Outside the *dojo*, you wouldn’t get a doctor taking orders from a lift repair man, or a student telling a police officer to do 10 push-ups” (Interview, 2nd March 2021) but in the *dojo* what matters is your karate practise, not your identity outside the *dojo*. The *dojo* can thus be seen as a kind of heterotopia (after Foucault), a place where new social rules exist which mimic but

somehow overturn or invert social rules outside the space. However, I also heard historic examples of where this kind of essentialising and spatialising went beyond the *dojo*:

Do you remember training camps, back in the 90s? The changing room would have a sign saying “9-7 kyu” one changing room, “6-3 kyu” one changing room. You wouldn’t mix brown belts with red belts, even in the changing room. We were divided into different changing rooms. And when we had dinner, the black belts and Gary would be at one table, and everyone else would be around at other tables. You wouldn’t go and sit next to Gary and say “hello Gary” that was impossible. They didn’t want a good mood. (Benny, Interview, 3rd October 2020)

This example shows what happens when this essentialising and spatialising goes to the extreme, where the colour of somebody’s belt affects where they can physically move in the space, even outside the *dojo*. I also heard historic stories where this power difference between ranks became physically abusive. An old ‘tradition’ was spoken of where, when a *karateka* went up a belt level, there was a ‘hazing’ initiation where everybody in the club stood in a line and punched the student. There were stories of ‘higher belts’ bullying lower belts and using the justification that they had experienced this themselves when they had a lower belt.

Something very complicated is obviously happening to allow people to accept this power dynamic even to the point of physical abuse. One element of this acceptance could be because karate, as a sport, is physically tough and involves pain, so there is already an acceptance of a certain level of discomfort in the *dojo*. For example, some informants said that they had accepted bullying behaviour from their *sensei* in an old club because they thought this was just karate. However, there are also many other reasons why such a system can be accepted which we will continue to explore in this chapter, such as the way in which people are ‘encultured’ into the system, and the value placed on social belonging.

It is also evident that the social categories indicated by belt colour, and the relationship between skill, experience, and belt, can be characterised as a pattern, a way of imposing order on the world, in the sense that anthropologist Mary Douglas describes; “In a chaos of shifting impressions, each of us constructs a stable world in which objects have recognisable shapes, are located in depth, and have permanence” (1996, p37). The belt system shown in Figure 2 can be identified as the “public, standardised values of a community” which “mediates the experience of individuals” (p39) in the ways described above, controlling the options for movement, and physical and social contact.

It is also important to note that in Shotokan Sweden, the ‘bad old days’ of the 80s and 90s were spoken about with a certain awe but also as something which should not be replicated today (“they didn’t want a good mood”) and I saw that the leaders of the clubs,

who often had started karate in a time when this kind of spatialisation and categorisation was taken to the extreme, had consciously worked to soften some of the social rules at play.

Liselotte and Agata confirmed that this was experienced by participants:

Agata: I think, if you are a black belt coming to another club, they welcome you... you get into the...

Liselotte: black belt club!

Agata: The black belt club, the black belt community, a lot easier. So I think... and the blue belts, they stick with each other, the blue and brown, and then the red and orange are together.

Liselotte: But I think [Shotokan Sweden club] is unique because, of course they have the black belt club! (A: they do!) They do. But when you are in the dojo you can, I can, when I was red [belt] walk to some of the black [belt] and talk, and I don't think it's like that in many of the other clubs, because the black is with the black, blue, brown, and then like that. But it's not like that in our club. (Interview, 3rd March 2021)

Here we can again see the issue of categorisation, but we also see a certain amount of resistance. This is something Foucault claims is always inevitable wherever there is power; he states “We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy” (1978, p101) and also reminds us that “there can exist different and even contradictory discourses within the same strategy” (p102). This seems to be the case with karate; not only in terms of individuals challenging the hierarchy (for example, by walking up to somebody with a black belt) but also from a leadership perspective; there is a certain discourse that says that the belt hierarchy is built on solid and valuable principles of merit, skill and experience, and that therefore one should accept their place in the hierarchy and the power relations that come from that, but there is also a counter-discourse, allowed and even encouraged by ‘high status’ members of the community, which states that these power dynamics are only a form of performative play inside the *dojo* and should not be taken too seriously, indicated by another informant’s joking words “Inside the *dojo* I’m your *sensei*. Outside I’m just a taxi driver, why should you bow and say “*oss*”?” (Björn, Interview, 12th September 2020) The hierarchical ‘norm’ co-exists with a certain amount of ironic awareness and even scepticism. Nonetheless, the hierarchy still exists, is still accepted, and is reinforced in every session, starting and ending with the line-up.

6.2 Repetition and Reinforcement

I will now explore further into how the *obi* and the *gi* act to support the stabilisation of this social ‘habitus’ in the *dojo*.

Many informants were surprised by my questions about the *obi* and *gi*, saying things like “I never thought about that before” or “You just don’t think about it when you are in it”. Building on Goffman’s concept of ‘framing’, Miller has argued that:

By learning to interact with a whole slew of different material cultures, an individual grows up assuming the norms that we call culture. The child doesn’t learn these things as a passive set of categories, but through everyday routines that lead to consistent interaction with things (2010, p53)

This means that these categories are not often considered or thought about but are learnt as if natural. In fact, the more appropriate the ‘framing’ is, the less we see them;

The less we are aware of them, the more powerfully they can determine our expectations, by setting the scene and ensuring appropriate behaviour, without being open to challenge. They determine what takes place to the extent that we are unconscious of their capacity to do so (p50)

In this sense, we can observe the Bourdieuan infusion of the physical body with social structure (2020, p315). Clearly, from the moment a child sets foot in the *dojo*, they begin a process of conditioning which sets up the ‘rules of play’; both in terms of the physical practise, and the many social rules and rituals required of them, to the point where it becomes instinctive. The *gi* and *obi* are significant parts of this conditioning.

Take, for example, the routine of putting on the belt. It is not as easy as it looks. The belt is usually around 3 metres long and has to go around the waist multiple times. Ida said;

I was just thinking about the belt and how you tie it so much it becomes like, you don’t think about it when you do it. But when you go away from the club for a while and you come back, and you try to do your belt, you have forgotten. It’s like you don’t know what to do with your hands any more. (Interview, 3rd March 2021)

In his work on affect and luggage, Löfgren discusses the importance of the personal connection, and affect between people and objects;

The reassuring look at the contents before departing, the feeling of security when gripping the handle during the journey, the suspense of opening a closed, dusty trunk up in the attic, or vague sensations of unease and exposure at border controls or security points (2016, p148).

He discusses how objects are ‘charged’ with possibilities and associations in this entangled relationship; “There are the constant routines of packing and unpacking, where deft hands, planning minds and an empty suitcase on the bed work together. A process of habituation is at work here” (p149). The same could be said for the objects of karate; the feeling of excitement when tightening the belt, the constant tying and re-tying, the shame when turning away to adjust it after the sensei points out it is loose, the distraction when fidgeting to pull the leg of the *gi* down, the feeling of fabric clinging to you in a hot and sweaty practise. The

repetitive motion of tying the belt becomes instinctive and natural, and along with this, so do the social norms tied to it.

Foucault has also described this kind of repetitive process as “discipline”, a repetitive normative regulation which hides itself in plain sight, and increases both the “docility and the utility of all the elements of the system” (1979, p218) highlighting the relationship between this process of repetition and enculturation, and underlying power dynamics. For example, I asked Liselotte how she learned how to tie a belt:

Rebecca: But you remember somebody telling you how to do it, and you copied them?

Liselotte: Yes, and they put on Facebook pictures of how to do it. And I think it’s on the home page too so you can see it. I think on Youtube as well. But we have to show how to do it, and it’s a lot to show. I know when I have the ‘floor swimmers’ you have to show how you get inside, how you bow, how you talk, when you don’t talk, using “*oss*” and everything” (Interview, 3rd March 2021)

Her words show how much effort goes into this ‘enculturation’ or ‘discipline’ of individuals. These rules become more visible when we talk about the *obi*, as Liselotte links teaching the “floor swimmers” (an affectionate term for the kids who spend a lot of time playing on the floor) to the wider rituals and rules of the *dojo*, such as when you can and cannot talk, and bowing as you enter the room. For children, the hierarchy is, at this point, in practice, rather than established. It requires this constant performance and discipline process, or it will perish.

Further social conduct ‘rules’ related to cleanliness and tidiness are also established with reference to the *gi* and the *obi*:

Liselotte: You have to be clean and don’t stink! (all agree) When you come to... you have to be clean.

Agata: You need to look good, like you can’t, you need to put on your suit right and tie your belt right

Liselotte: Yes, and before you line up, they always tell you to put your *gi* and *obi* right. You don’t do that in front of your trainer, you have to turn around and do it, and then you are proper again.

Agata: You turn around. (Interview, 3rd March 2021)

The idea of turning around to ‘hide’ the shame of breaking a certain social expectation reminds us once again of the visual nature of the *gi* and the *obi*. They rely on being seen, and crucially, being evaluated as correct. If not, the individual has to turn away from sight before correcting the issue. Another implication of this focus on cleanliness was that it acts as a social communicative act:

Liselotte: You can tell if you care about how clean you are (A: yes) and if it’s someone... I don’t know how they wash them because they are always grey! (A: yes!) and you can tell that not everyone washes it every week (A: no) so you can tell a lot about the person.

Agata: Yeah I would say so to. Some are more careful.

Liselotte: And how you wear it, because some don't care, they just put it on (mimes the cuff being turned up) and some are very strict and correct.

Ida: And the detergent, some people smell really good.

Rebecca: (laughs) "Oh I like your detergent"

Ida: "You can come a little bit closer" (Interview, 3rd March 2021)

Keeping the *gi* clean can thus be seen as a practise of deference as described by Goffman, an element of "deportment, dress, and bearing, which serves to express to those in his immediate presence that he is a person of certain desirable or undesirable qualities" (1956, p489).

However, we can also see that this idea of respect goes beyond the individual, to the wider social system:

Rebecca: Is the being clean and hygienic rule there because it's nice and practical, or does it come from something else?

Agata: I think it comes from the 'respect'

Liselotte: Yes I think so too, because other sports, you sweat, and you do here as well, but it's very like... respect to everything.

Agata: Yeah, to everyone you're training with.

Liselotte: And respect to the sport, in one way. (Interview, 3rd March 2021)

Considering anthropologist Mary Douglas' idea of dirt and order, we can argue that cleanliness in this context is not only a socially acceptable practise, but also "a positive effort to organise the environment" (1996, p2). Douglass states, "rituals of purity and impurity create unity in experience...by their means, symbolic patterns are worked out and publicly displayed. Within these patterns disparate elements are related and disparate experience is given meaning" (p3). In other words, the pure, clean *gi* binds everyone's disparate experience together into a semblance of social order. Respect (not only to other individuals, but to the sport) is a key word in this discussion because it reinforces that some people, and indeed the sport itself, deserve deference.

Another strategy I used to try to expose these underlying processes was to ask what would happen if somebody 'broke' the rule, by going to the *dojo* without their *gi* or *obi*:

Rebecca: And what would happen if somebody did that? Would people judge them? Would the atmosphere change or...? (all pause and laugh)

Agata: That's a tricky question!

Liselotte: I think they would say "why don't you have your *gi* and the *obi*?" I think that's not ok.

Agata: Yeah I think also it's a lot about rules and respect, and so on. Like we have a lot of codes in karate. So I think its part of that.

Liselotte: You can see if somebody is coming in their clothes but not the belt, it's like (puts head in hands) "oh no, I forgot my belt"

(all excitedly interrupting)

Agata: Oh yeah! It's **so** embarrassing to forget your belt!!!

Liselotte : Yeah! Some [who forget the belt] don't line up, they stand with the children and (mimes embarrassment, puts head down) "I forgot my belt"

Rebecca: So they actually stand in a different part of the room when they forget their belt?

Liselotte: Yeah. It's very funny when you think of it! [short pause]

Agata: Yeah it is interesting. I've never thought about it. But now when you start to think about it.. like... the most important thing must be that you're actually coming to the dojo and doing the training, because you can do the exact same thing without the *gi* and without the belt. But then again, I'm just thinking... I ride horses too, and yeah you can ride in other clothes, but mostly you change to your riding pants. So you have special equipment for that too. I don't know so maybe it's the same thing, it's just like, the equipment you use.

(Interview, 3rd March 2021)

As Foucault explains, power is most effective when it masks itself (1978, p86). This extract highlights how integral these material objects are to the masking processes and strategies of power which are at work. Firstly, it highlights that wearing the *gi* and *obi* has become completely unnoticed ("That's a tricky question" "I've never thought about it.") Secondly it, it shows how this messaging even becomes internalised; people self-police and make themselves 'subjects' by controlling their own movement when they break the rule ("They stand with the children") and finally, it gives a great example of a moment of unease for Agata as she tries to understand why this is important "you can do the exact same thing without the *gi* and without the belt..." but then reconciles this issue by comparing it to another sport "So maybe it's the same thing, it's just like, the equipment you use".

This last statement brings us back to cultural capital. It is not, in fact, the case that any item would stand in for the *gi* and the *obi*; they are not just 'the equipment you use'. This is particularly obvious when you consider the *gi*'s practicality. Many informants spoke about how the *gi* rides up, gets sweaty, you are always tugging it and adjusting it during sessions. As demonstrated throughout this thesis, the *gi* and *obi* hold cultural, social and symbolic significance which goes far beyond their 'use purpose'. However it is true to say that many sports, and many social spheres, have uniforms, formal or informal, which interact with underlying systems of power. Karate simply displays its uniform very openly (to outside observers), giving us a chance to unpick the mechanisms happening around these objects.

6.3 Pandemic Problems

The covid-19 pandemic has shaken everybody's normal life up, and the karate *dojo* is no exception. Interestingly, the pandemic gives another opportunity to see strategies that people use to make decisions around social rules and expectations, relating to the *gi* and the *obi*.



Figure 7 Karate in the snow: a karateka wearing their belt over their winter jacket. Source: Facebook, 23rd May 2021

For example, due to covid-19, one club (referred to as Club A) chose to do gradings outside in February. They invited another club, Club B, to join them. The temperature was approximately -10 degrees Celsius. Here, formal expectations clashed up against the practical issue of the cold, and each group and individual had to decide how far practicality outweighs the issues of respect/code. Club B chose to wear *gi* layered over many other clothes. Club A chose to wear outdoor clothing without the *gi*. However one of the *sensei* gave a 'nod' to the rules, wearing his black belt outside his coat. (Fig. 8) This is an example of negotiating the normal rules of the *dojo* in an unprecedented setting, and again highlights a performative element in the use of the *obi*.

Goffman would likely call this a 'front stage' behaviour, something which is visible to an audience and which conveys a certain impression on the viewer (as opposed to 'back stage' behaviours which are private) (1959).

Another consequence of covid-19 was that many clubs opted to run karate sessions on zoom. Liselotte's club took this option. She said that in the early days of zoom karate, most people wore normal training clothes, such as sportswear. However, the *sensei* for each session still wore the *gi*. Over time, she noticed more and more club members were switching to wearing the *gi*. After a few months, it was only her left, not wearing the *gi*. Liselotte is still resisting wearing the *gi* because she feels like it restricts her movement but she expects somebody to say something, stating "Now everyone has except me, and I have thought of it, and thought – is somebody going to tell me "why don't you have it?" They haven't yet, but I just wait for it." (Interview, 3rd March 2021) The group has tacitly decided that the new rule is that people should wear the *gi* even when practising at home. This again highlights a blurred 'back stage' and 'front stage' caused by the ambiguity of webcam karate; are you 'on display' or not? It seems that initially some *karateka* interpreted their homes as a private space where the wearing of the *gi* and *obi* was not required, but others (specifically the *sensei*

who is the focus of attention on zoom) were still acting in a ‘front stage’ manner, performing that role for the attendees, and eventually everybody followed suit. The pandemic thus gives us an amazing opportunity to see how people ‘learn’ social behaviour.

6.4 “The Black Belt Club”

These examples highlight the importance of the role of *sensei* in the social hierarchy. The *sensei* is at the very top of the hierarchy, along with the others who have reached the ‘senior’ ranks indicated by the black belt. As Skeggs states, categorisation and spatialisation rely on the idea of belonging; “In order to produce spatial exclusion a centre has to be constructed that represents ‘real’ belonging, and those who really belong have to display and embody the right characteristics and dispositions” (2004, p18). In their words about interaction between belt-wearers in the *dojo*, Liselotte and Agata suggested that one centre of belonging, the group which represents the ideal, is the “black belt club”. We should therefore examine this most immediate and local power relation (Foucault, 1978, p97).

As discussed earlier, the black belt has meaning as a potent form of cultural capital. Now we add another discourse, related to the first, of the social capital of those with black belts. Skeggs explains how cultural capital transforms into social capital;

Different bodies carry unequal values depending on their position in space, on their cultural baggage – the capitals they embody. Inscribed bodies literally embody entitlements. They move in space ‘as if they own it’, which in the tradition of possessive individualism or in the conversion of propriety into property, they do! (2004, p17)

Just as the ‘green beret’ label sticks to the US special forces, the ‘black belt’ label inscribes the status of an elite group on those with the black belt. This was evident in my observations:

When the *sensei* calls everyone to line up, they all run quickly, except for one or two of the black belts who keep chatting a bit longer and take their time getting to the line... during the session the black belts practise in one part of the hall and the rest practise nearby. There is a mood of focus, sometimes broken by a comment or question or joke from the black belts. (Field Note, 8th September 2020)

Those with black belts were not subject to the same expectations as those without. Their level of time in the club, strong friendships, and the respect afforded to them had leant them a confidence and social ease in this setting, enjoying themselves hugely, and very much owning the space. They therefore performed in a certain way, which seemed to reflect a very specific identity which they ‘wore’ in this particular context.

We can return to Goffman, who discusses the idea of a ‘special self’ in certain contexts, for an explanation of why this identity becomes sacred to individuals:

The self is in part a ceremonial thing, a sacred object which must be treated with proper ritual care and in turn must be presented in a proper light to others...if the individual is to play this kind of sacred game, then the field must be suited to it...deference and demeanor practises must be institutionalised so that the individual will be able to project a viable, sacred self and stay in the game on a proper ritual basis. (1956, p497)

This reflects the cycle that happens in the ‘field’ of the dojo; a new *karateka* steps into the dojo and is inducted into the rituals and social rules through repetition and observation of others. The rules are imparted and reinforced by the highest-ranking members. As the *karateka* moves up through the ranks, they learn to ‘swim’ in the social habitus. They display the appropriate behaviour, and gain social status, constantly making judgements of the others around them, and forming an idea of themselves as somebody who follows the rules. They take on responsibilities in the eyes of others. In turn they induct new members into the habitus. As Goffman says, “When an individual becomes involved in the maintenance of a rule, he tends also to become committed to a particular image of self” (p474). The image that the high-ranking person has of themselves, and the image that others have of them, both reinforce each other’s idea of who they are in the system.

Sport is a great field to observe this in, due to its performative nature. As Barthes said about sport, “Man has made his victory a spectacle, so that it might become the victory of all those watching him and recognizing themselves in him” (2007, p9), capturing this cyclical experience of performance and recognition which is happening around the black belt club.

Material objects are crucial in the discussion of a performative ‘self’, as we often use them to negotiate and broadcast our identity. This could be through the accumulation and use of cultural capital (As discussed in Chapter 5). Another way is through framing our story. As Ahmed says, “the biography of a person is intimately bound up with objects” (2010, p27). Skeggs also suggests that people use objects “to create a coherent biography in a fractured world” (p53). This would certainly seem to be the case for the black belt community, as Liselotte explains;

Liselotte: I think it’s so special for them, because they can say “I got my first black belt on...” and they know the date, they remember. And they know when they got the 3rd and the 2nd

Agata: It’s like, when they got their children, when they got married, and when they got their black belt – the three most important days

Liselotte: I think the black belt is first!

Agata: You think?! Maybe for some people, no names![all laugh]

Rebecca: That’s funny! Was there any that stood out to you in that way?

Agata: No! But I think if I would get the black belt one day, I think I would remember that day too. (Interview, 3rd March 2021)

When Pearce describes the red coatee from the Battle of Waterloo, she depicts its importance as relating to the historical moment of which it was a part; “the story of the event contains big and small details, and the coat is one of these. It has an extremely personal meaning, it makes an important event coherent, and it “acts as the validation of a personal narrative” (1994, p20). In museums this is called the “power of the real thing” (p26) which suggests why the object of the belt is so significant, as it represents a key moment in someone’s biography.

One of my informants, Benny, even referred to his belt as a museum artefact; “This one is going to be in my museum. When I have my own dojo, I will have a collection of my most precious trophies, and this can be there” (Interview, 2nd March 2021). Here we can see a blurred boundary between use and display, on the one hand the object is still in use as a practical garment, but on the other hand it is already viewed as a historic artefact to be preserved. In her work on football, ethnologist Katarzyna Herd has exposed how sport often feeds on and produces living narratives of continuity and history, and how fans can thereby act as “human museums” by narrating their “football-framed life journey” (2018, p114). In the karate world, the *gi* and the *obi* act to support this framing of an individual’s journey in the wider context of the sport. In addition, by using the ‘museum’ metaphor, where we imagine the *obi* on display inside a glass case being viewed by visitors, Benny once again re-emphasises the social capital of this item. As Skeggs explores, objects can have use-value or individual value outside a relationship of exchange (gaining value by their individuality and the relationship of use experienced by the individual owner) but they become an asset only if they receive the attention of another (2004, p11). Through that reciprocal viewing/performance cycle, the “black belt club” and the black belt itself are linked and perceived as a ‘centre of belonging’.

6.5 The Karate Family

However, we should not forget that the *obi* is not the only object which encourages a sense of belonging. I regularly heard from informants how important the *gi* was in terms of a sense of belonging to the club. Take the following two quotations:

At first you’re just in your regular clothes (A: yes, normal clothes) and it feels like you’re more a part of it when you have your *gi* on. (Ida, Interview, 3rd March 2021)

...

I saw my friend practising, and I wanted to practise too. But the club only took people every six months. So I bought myself a *gi*. I put it on and looked in the mirror. I did that for six months, waiting for my chance to start training.” (Björn, Interview, 12th September 2020)

The examples above were only two of many characterising informants' 'entry' into the practise of karate as the moment when they put on the *gi*. Unlike the belt, which is sometimes materially marked as belonging to an individual with an embroidered name, or which categorises and ranks individuals, the *gi* signals a wider community identity. It usually has a patch on it representing the club, and many will pass their *gi* on to younger *karateka*, trade or re-home old *gi*. The *gi* even gets involved with a deeper and more visceral form of sharing; the swapping of bodily fluids, which often end up on other *karateka*'s *gi*. Maclean paints this exchanging of bodily fluids during karate as a bonding experience which breaks down social boundaries and forms an intimate connection (2018, p177). In many senses, the *gi* 'circulates' and is shared. Ahmed talks about the idea of the 'promise' of an object thus; "When objects are promising, they are sent out or sent forth; to promise can mean to pass around a promise." (2010, p39) I would argue that the *gi* promises belonging.

Also related to the idea of breaking down boundaries between participants, it has been suggested that the white 'uniformity' of the *gi* in martial arts symbolises a blank slate which erases visible signs of privilege or difference between participants. Donohue states:

White symbolises death and emptiness in Japan. Its use in the *dojo* generally relates to conceptions concerning the practitioner's spiritual state. The white coloured uniform of the *judoka* symbolises this purity, absence of ego, and unity with the *void*" (1990, p58).

My informants did not reference the spiritual aspect of the *gi* however, as mentioned earlier in this thesis, they did suggest that all classes and backgrounds are welcome and that the community in the karate *dojo* does not hold onto the distinctions felt outside the *dojo*. For example, Kerstin explains how the *gi* and *obi* therefore work together to first erase distinctions and then to re-establish new power relations;

We have so many people practising from different nations, with different ways of looking at women. But as an instructor, I think you become like a superstar. You are not even a human I don't think, and especially not a female human, in their eyes! Because you stand there, and I think this *gi* is good, because everybody looks the same. And because of the hierarchy in karate, there's so much hierarchy. So that's quite easy because if you are there, you are there, no discussion. Of course, you have to prove it. (Interview, 8th August 2020)

Kerstin identifies the *gi* as a leveller ("everybody looks the same") and the hierarchy (indicated by the belt) as replacing other concerns such as gender ("especially not a female human") it is evident that the symbolic elements of these objects do have a significant impact on the social hierarchy; As a blank white canvas the *gi* reduces signs of difference, and then a new place in the hierarchy is granted (indicated by the *obi*). However it is crucial to remember that as Kerstin says, there is still a need to 'prove it'. As stated at the beginning of this chapter, the relationship between the belts as a symbol and the social hierarchy in place

in the *dojo* is highly related, but not entirely exchangeable. You still must be seen to be at the ‘highest level’, which involves community agreement that you do, indeed, deserve that position. As Mary Douglas puts it, social systems only have “authority, since each is induced to assent because of the assent of others.” (1996, p40) Social approval is extremely important.

The karate community was often compared to another social system by informants; the family. Ahmed has critically discussed how the concept of ‘family’ acts as a “social good” or a source of alignment, which “binds and is binding” (2010, p45) It suggests a unit which must be preserved, it is a source of happiness, but also encompasses a sense of duty, it is a “pressure point”, considered to be necessary to live a happy life; “the family becomes a happy object through the work that must be done to keep it together” (p46). As Ahmed says, “happiness involves here the comfort of repetition, of following lines that have already been given in advance” (p48) Karate involves a great deal of repetition and discipline to establish these lines. However there is a complex social structure beyond these ‘headline’ categories, involving friendships, romantic relationships, parents and children, which interact with and sometimes conflict with the ‘belt hierarchy’ system.

For example, some informants expressed a concern that others would view them differently to their familial relationship to the *sensei*:

When I'm grading, I always feel that I have to prove myself, because I'm your daughter, so you know I have to prove myself. I have to be SO good that they can't say anything like “she's just getting her grading because she's their child blah blah blah!” So I have always been training hard, but also when I'm going to grading, nobody is EVER going to say that. That's my goal, to reach and be the best as I can, so that it doesn't matter who I am, I deserve my diploma. (Freja, Interview, 8th August 2020)

This highlights that Freja perceives a tension between family and club loyalty, which she can only overcome by pushing herself to be unimpeachable in terms of her talent and ability.

This again demonstrates the importance of being seen and evaluated by the wider community and supports the notion that *sensei* approval is not the only factor which influences this acceptance. Inter-hierarchical relationships can both overcome the hierarchy (being granted status due to a relationship or reputation ‘vouched for’ by a senior member) or can undermine the stability of the hierarchy (if bias or lack of consistency is perceived based on relationships) therefore requiring individuals to prove themselves to the group.

Experiences such as gradings and competitions are part of individual’s ‘human museum’ but they are also viewed and discussed by others in the community who comment on whether they perceived the grading as fair, or recount amazing stories of legendary fights. This is how the status of an individual is verified by the community. This means that in the

dojo there is a constant evaluation of yourself and others taking place. The *sensei* is always evaluating each student, but also students are competing with and comparing themselves to each other, even if this is in a light-hearted manner. As one informant, Leif, explained;

Leif: You can't forget a step in the kata, because then [names *karateka*] is laughing at you, and he's making a fool of you, he's so happy and he calls you a hammerhead shark, so when I come home after training, I feel very embarrassed...

Rebecca: (laughs) Yeah I noticed that you compete!

Leif: Yeah we do it in a fun way! Because I have no prestige, but of course we all want to win! But it's from time to time, one day I have a better day and he has a better day and so on. But in some way you get yourself to always do your best, and that's the meaning, to push yourself, because the real opponent is yourself. It's not him beside you, he's only the help to get you to do more. (Interview, 3rd October 2020)

These words reveal a complex dynamic of support, encouragement and pressure. This is surely an example of what Ahmed describes when she talks about the 'pressure' of the family and the demand to find a 'shared orientation' towards a particular object or social structure (2010, pp45-49), or risk losing your place in the world.

6.6 Concluding Thoughts

This chapter has demonstrated the importance of material objects in social systems, in a sporting context and beyond. It demonstrates how uniform clothing such as the *gi* can act as a symbol of belonging, and remove established social categories, and how the *obi* can categorise people based on their perceived experience and skill, establishing somebody's place in the hierarchy, and essentialising and spatialising individuals. This system is accepted because of a perception that it is based on merit, because it is part of the performative realm of the *dojo*, because of a process of enculturation which hides or obscures the underlying mechanisms of power involved, and because of a desire to belong. We see how the *gi* and *obi* form an essential part of a new *karateka*'s induction into this social habitus of the *dojo*, and how they stabilise and support both the wider social system and the identity and status of the individual within it. The covid-19 pandemic gives us opportunity to see this process happening anew, at a distinctive moment in time. However, the chapter also highlights how these objects do not work alone, stressing the importance of group assent in affirming or legitimising status; the theme of being seen and validated by the group, is strong throughout this chapter, whether stepping into place in the line-up, or signalling respect to others through the cleanliness of your *gi*.

Chapter 7: Symbolic Capital

7.1 Wearing Out and Wearing In



Figure 8 Close up 'wear and tear'

Having explored the 'big picture' of national and group identity, I now want to delve into the closest and most intimate level of the relationship between individual and material object, exploring the mechanisms behind this symbolic power; how this meaning is acquired, and how it can be challenged or threatened. I will do this by utilising the concept of 'affect', discussing the power of these items to transform abstract symbolic concepts (such as respect, time, self-control, and effort) into an affective 'field', holding "forces, visceral intensities and reactive capacities of the body, which are then filtered, mediated and labelled as 'emotion'" (Frykman, 2016, p13) and also Mauss' concept of *mana* or the magical potency of objects (Mauss, 2001, pp133-134).

As already noted, many informants kept their *obi* even after they no longer had a practical use for them, due to the role of the object in the biography or legacy of the individual. However some informants also expressed another reason; the time and effort they felt they had invested into the belt:

Rebecca: So you keep them, why?

Liselotte: Because you have done a lot, it's many hours for every new belt

Agata: Yeah, there's a lot of effort behind every belt. (Interview, 3rd March 2021)

The use of the phrase 'behind the belt' is key here. It implies that the belt is the surface level, and that beyond the surface, hidden or obscured by the belt, or woven into the fabric itself, are more intangible meanings and qualities, such as time, effort, knowledge and self-control. This is the symbolic capital of the object. It is possible to examine the mechanics behind this,

to understand how an object becomes invested with these values and associations. Using Ahmed's theories of 'affect', I will argue that the first way in which this happens is through use.

Over time, like any fabric item, the belt gets worn, particularly in patches at the side of the body, where the hand and arm of the *karateka* often rub past the material. It softens and bends and becomes more attuned to the shape of the wearer. Fibres get worn away and fray, and gaps start to appear in the colour. The white material becomes yellowed with sweat. Some fabrics wear out quicker than others (See Fig. 8 and 9).



Figure 9 A very worn black belt

Many *karateka* express pride in the way in which the belt wears out, holding onto it to the point where it is so degraded it is falling apart, and it is no longer possible for an outsider to tell the difference, at a glance, between a severely worn black belt and a white belt. In this case, the 'wear and tear' of the belt has a direct relationship to the time spent aiming for that belt, and then practising with the belt. One informant said, "Well, the longer you train, the more you learn – well that is at least the goal – and the more you train the more your belt becomes worn, as you say, which = badass" (Freja, facebook communication 22nd March).

This equation is indicative of the relationship at work for some *karateka* between material qualities and affect, implying an "affective atmosphere" around the item, a dangerous or exciting mood (Frykman, 2016, p10) which is directly linked to its level of wear. As already discussed in the previous chapter, part of the enculturation of individuals into the social habitus of the *dojo* involves repetition, handling the object again and again. All these movements and habits also create a personal connection between the individual and the object, invest something of that individual into the object and create a certain 'affect'. This is what Ahmed calls 'stickiness', an "effect of the histories of contact between bodies, objects, and signs" (2004, p90). This repetition and history of contact, written into the very fabric of the belt with visible signs of use, establishes its affective and symbolic power.

The relationship between the individual and the belt thus becomes so connected that it almost blurs. The common conflation of the person and the belt (referring to the individual as a 'black belt') now holds even deeper meaning; not only can the person be seen as the belt,

the belt can be treated as the person, with a certain amount of bodily integrity which creates a social taboo on touching other's belts;

Liselotte: You don't touch other people's belt. And you don't try them on either, you don't touch them

Agata: No you don't

Rebecca: Whereas the gi, that's not so much of a thing, because you can have somebody's gi from before?

Liselotte: Yes

Agata: And yeah if you are at a training camp, you can borrow someone's

Liselotte: Maybe if you have an older belt. (A: yeah) Like I have my brown, and if I had the blue one in my bag, I could say "yes you can borrow my blue one" but not the one that's mine. (Interview, 3rd March 2021)

This example illustrates the symbolic sanctity of the bond between person and object in the karate community, particularly reinforcing that it is use which creates this bond, as once the object is no longer currently in use, it is no longer forbidden to touch it.

In Shotokan Sweden, there is an age limit for taking a black belt (you must be 16 years old). There also limits on how often a *karateka* can grade, so it can take between five to ten years of continuous practise to reach 1st *dan*. Shotokan Sweden suggests that *karateka* wait two years between 1st and 2nd *dan*, three years between 2nd and 3rd *dan*, and so on. Somebody who is on 5th *dan* will usually have been practising for at least 20 years. This system ensures (or attempts to ensure) that you cannot 'rush' through the system. We can repeat the words of Skeggs; "the right sort of capital depends on the processes by which it is acquired and displayed" (2004, p20). The belt must be earned through time and effort. As Skeggs states, legitimation is key to value. The visible 'wear and tear' of the belt visibly legitimatises its symbolic power for others who are in this particular 'affective community' and understand what they are witnessing, hence why many *karateka* continue to display their old, worn belts, during practise sessions. I will now discuss further another way in which this symbolic power is legitimated, through passing gradings.

7.2 Conditions of Arrival

Ahmed analyses how the way in which one receives an object can impact on the 'affectiveness' of an object; "to experience an object as being affective or sensational is to be directed not only toward an object but to what is around that object, which includes what is behind the object, the conditions of its arrival" (2010, p25) which creates positive

associations towards particular places or people which are invested with happiness. In this case, belts are inherently linked to gradings, as this is how they ‘arrive’.

As discussed in the introduction, *karateka* must do a grading every time they want to move up a rank and earn a new belt. Gradings involve demonstrating all three elements of karate; *kihon*, *kata* and *kumite*. Each belt requires better technique in *kihon*, more complex *kata* (which must be memorised) an understanding and demonstration of how techniques could be applied in a fighting scenario (known as *bunkai*) and demonstration of skill and power in *kumite*. Gradings get more rigorous and challenging, following guidelines set by the head of Shotokan Sweden. Gradings have ‘gate-keepers’; the leaders of the club will decide if participants are ready to progress depending on their assessment during practise sessions. Gradings are scary. One informant described being more terrified of their red belt grading than of their PhD defense. Still, they are widely considered to have a high value in terms of pushing forward one’s skill and ability, as seen in the following two quotations from informants:

Because some sports, if you want to have a challenge, if you want to compete, you must be young. But in karate, you can start, and with the belts, you can have a challenge. Especially with gradings, if you have a challenge, you can see something happening, they get better and better. (Liselotte, Interview, 3rd March 2021)

...

It’s special, because that is actually a sign that you are actually getting better. You achieved something, and you feel proud, you do. (Agata, Interview, 3rd March 2021)

Both informants suggest that gradings are visible signs of progress, and involve feelings of pride. Online memes about receiving belts also link gradings to emotions of achievement and joy. (See Fig. 10)



Figure 10 Memes concerning receiving a karate belt. The ‘fireworks’ of entering the dojo with a new belt. and the joy of receiving your belt from sensei. Source: reddit.com

This suggests that there is an associative link between the belt and feelings of happiness, pride and achievement. It is evident that this association goes beyond specific individuals, to something which can be made into a meme and understood by the wider community. This implies that the symbolic association is repeated enough to become anticipated. The belts are ‘read’ as material manifestations of success, pride and achievement.

Some informants remembered that from the start of their karate experience as children, there was a focus on the belt and gradings, even though this wasn’t consciously noted at the time:

I don’t think I was thinking about that when I was young. I was just, you know, going with the flow. We have our friends and we say “oh now we’re going to grading for a new belt!” “Oh, which belt are you going to get now? What colour??” It was like a thing. More of a fun thing (Freya, Interview, 8th August 2020).

Ahmed suggests that “the proximity between an affect and object is preserved through habit” in other words we learn the association between an object and a particular feeling through repetition and experience, and that objects then become a ‘feeling-cause’ – when we think of them we feel something, and then “when we feel the feeling we expect to feel, we are affirmed” (2010, p28). So, in a similar way to the enculturation discussed in Chapter 6, *karateka* are surrounded by others discussing what belt they are on, see others going through grading, and observe memes about belts, and will thus quickly pick up on the association between going through a grading, receiving a new belt, and positive affect. Ahmed describes this as “anticipatory causality”, meaning that an object can enter “our near sphere with a positive affective value already in place” (p28) In this way we can see how experience deposits power and affect into the object.

7.3 ‘Baby Black Belts’ and Other Ambiguities

However, there are still challenges to the reliability of this symbolic association. As Douglas describes, there are always elements of ‘dirt’ or ‘disorder’ in any system;

In perceiving we are building, taking some cues and rejecting others. The most acceptable cues are those which fit most easily into the pattern that is being built up. Ambiguous ones tend to be treated as if they are harmonised with the rest of the pattern. Discordant ones tend to be rejected. If they are accepted the structure of assumptions has to be modified.” (1996, p37)

I heard stories about *karateka* who had recently achieved a black belt attempting to wear out their belt quicker by rubbing it on door frames and other ‘sneaky’ methods of achieving this

effect. I even saw an advert online for a ‘pre-worn’ black belt, where you could select the level of ‘patina’ you desired. (See Fig. 11)



Figure 11 A 'vintage' black belt available in "25% aged" to "100% aged" Source: Facebook.com Retrieved 7th May 2021.

This again highlights the overlap between symbolic, social and cultural capital; amongst the karate community this particular association is so well known that it can even be converted into a commodity for sale. However, these kinds of tactics to wear out the belt are largely greeted with derision and distaste by *karateka*; as indicated by the poster's comment below the belt. Even the fact that the poster places the word 'belt' in inverted commas here is a powerful sign that this is not a true black belt. Informants stated that this kind of acceleration of wear wasn't common. If a belt is not correctly 'legitimated' through authentic use, it is not considered capital by most members of the community.

Another example of ambiguity which I observed was the issue of children or young people earning high ranks of belt. As already mentioned, Shotokan Sweden has rules in place to prevent under 16s from taking a black belt. The belt system encourages slow progress. However in some karate organisations, it is possible for younger people to progress up to black belt and therefore to reach a high rank at a very young age. This was looked down upon by my informants. Based on memes found online, this seemed to be a widely-felt issue beyond Shotokan Sweden (See Fig. 12).

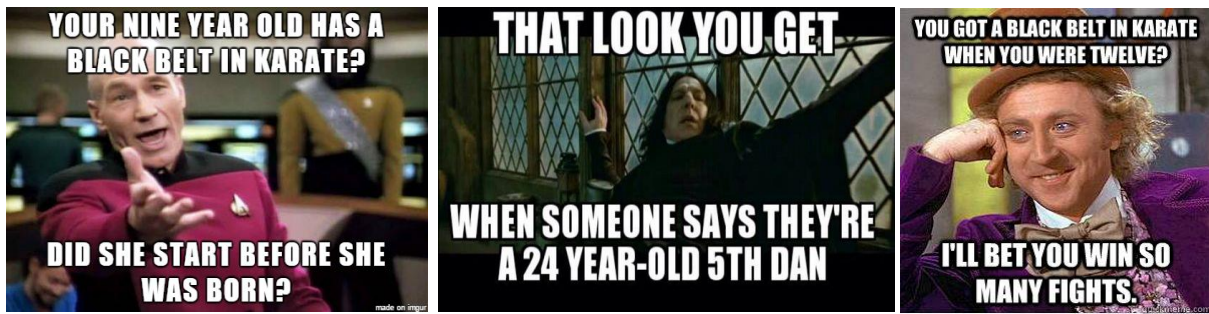


Figure 12 Memes Regarding Young Karateka with black belts. Source: Reddit.com Retrieved 7th May 2021.

These memes are a form of humorous processing and rejection of this particular threat, making it clear through light mockery that this is not acceptable. They suggest that a black belt is not authentic, or not truly a black belt, if worn by a 9-year old or a 12 year old. This once again highlights the importance of social ‘assent’ and wider agreement as part of legitimization of capital and explains why age limits and time limits on gradings exist in Shotokan Sweden, to try to preserve the stability of the symbolic system.

7.4 The Promise of the Belt

The affective potency of the belt also gives it a particular power; the ability to direct people’s steps. One informant described the moment that she became committed to karate:

And then it was time for my grading, and I got my red belt, and that was very nice. And I was like “Okay, I want the black belt” (Eva, Interview, 29th August 2020)

Another participant had a similar story:

I got my first belt, and I looked in the mirror and promised myself that I would not stop until I got the black belt (Björn, Interview, 12th September 2020)

In both cases, even though one informant started karate in the 70s, and one only a few years ago, the physical objects acted as a focal point to aim towards. As Ahmed states, “it is

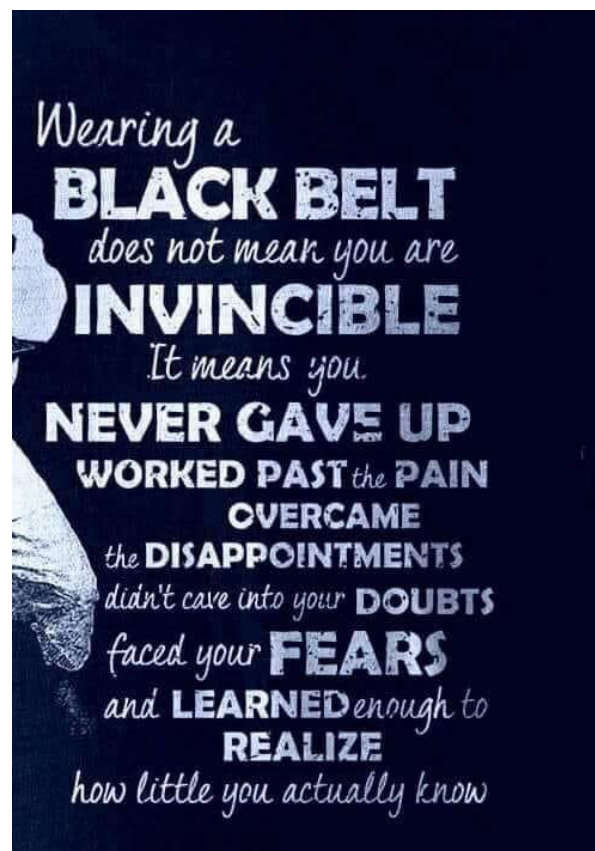


Figure 13 The Black Belt Journey. Source: Facebook. Retrieved 8th April 2021

not just that we can be happy about something, as a feeling in the present, but some things become happy for us, if we imagine they will bring happiness to us” (2010, p26). Through anticipatory causality, people’s steps are directed towards the object, and the actions that they should take to receive that object. Not only that, but this kind of conditioning also suggests that the quest for the next belt is natural, right, and tied up with moral or spiritual aspects. Figure 13 shows an example of this kind of ‘moral’ narrative in an image shared on the Shotokan Sweden Facebook page. The journey towards the belt is seen as directly reflecting the *karateka*’s resilience, mental strength and humility, and is therefore morally good; this is reinforced at every grading; the text on the diplomas received for passing gradings reads “We expect him/her to endeavour further for progress in both skill and character building in the future.”

As Ahmed states, “happiness directs you towards good, while creating the impression that the good is what gives you direction” (2010, p38). This can explain why some informants found it quite difficult to explain *why* they felt it was good to continue to the next belt. The way that the *obi* is framed as an integral and naturally good goal on the karate journey helps us to understand how we assign moral value and meaning to objects, as they come to symbolise a deeper moral path.

Evidently for many *karateka*, the black belt in particular was an important goal on this path. However, many informants expressed the idea that they saw the black belt as a goal until they achieved it. This idea was also widely represented in online memes about karate. As Figure 14 states, a black belt means you “learned enough to realise how little you actually know”. Figure 15 compares getting a black belt to a driver’s license – the journey is still ahead of you. Some examples of this narrative from informants included:

When you have the coloured belts, you also think the black belt, that’s it, I don’t need anything else, black belt is fine. Then when you have the black belt and you trained for a while, you see that “I know nothing”, now I’m starting to learn stuff (Caroline, Interview, 16th September 2020)

....

I remember my grading, but the same time, I felt like “Yeah I finally got my black belt” but then you need your second black belt! It’s like, you reached a goal, but karate means more for you. You feel great, you feel like “wow!” but then after that you are moving on to new projects. (Freja, Interview, 8th August 2020)



Figure 14 Meme about a Black Belt. Source: Facebook. Retrieved: 5th April 2021

This reflects a particularly distinctive aspect of karate, which is that there will always be another belt ahead of you. There are theoretically 10 levels of black belt (referred to as *dan*) however, 10th dan is usually only awarded posthumously. You can only be ‘graded’ by somebody who is a higher rank than you, and the leader of Shotokan Japan is 9th dan, so it is not possible to exceed his rank. 10th dan is usually granted by a committee of high-ranking Shotokan Japan *karateka* after somebody dies, to those who are considered to have contributed greatly in some way to the practise of karate. This is seen as an ultimate sign of respect. However, it means that *karate* truly becomes a lifetime practise for many. This system, with its extremely restricted ‘elite’ group, and its focus on striving for the future, could be seen through Ahmed’s interpretation of the “fantasy-preserving character of obstacles”. She states that “happiness becomes a question of following rather than finding... the happy object, in other words, is a gap-filler” (2010, p32). Karate is often presented as a journey, a spiritual path, or a ‘way of life’, and the belts can be characterised as ‘gap-fillers’ in this journey; pointers towards the way forward, and a deferred promise of happiness.

Of course, there will always be those who resist the directional potency of the *obi*. Some found that gradings were too stressful or downright terrifying, others focused on the present experience of karate in the mind and body rather than the future. For example, one informant, Måns, particularly resisted the social expectations relating to the *obi*:

The trainer wanted me to do grading and I did it once, and I did it twice, and then I said no, I don’t care, because it’s not my point to get a new colour on the belt, and he was so pissed off every time. And I kept on training and I kept on training, so when I stopped training I was training together with the brown belts, and he was so pissed off that I was still coming with the white belt on. (Interview, 1st October 2020)

Måns rejects the idea that he must progress (“It’s not my point to get a new colour on the belt”) but this is not without cost, as he was subject to anger from his *sensei*, who has invested in the belt hierarchy and the idea that you should keep moving forward, driven by the promise of the *obi*. In fact, Måns had stopped practising karate some time ago for health reasons and now only occasionally visited the *dojo*, where his partner still practised. In many

ways then, he was on the border of the *dojo*, not quite included, and his views on the *obi* similarly stood out as being borderline or irregular.

Just as Ahmed discusses ‘family’ as both a binding social object and a potentially alienating one, she is similarly critical about all objects which promise happiness, seeing them as potentially exclusionary, and co-existing closely with feelings such as pressure, disappointment, anxiety and self-doubt. Indeed, she identifies more with those who feel ‘alienated’ from the promise of happiness (2010) It was not possible for me to tell whether Måns was, in fact, stopped from passing his gradings, and his way of dealing with this was disappointment was therefore to reject the importance of passing the grading. But his words highlight once more the cross-over between symbolic and social capital, and the potential for social alienation for those who do not ‘buy in’.

7.5 Transformative Capital



Figure 15 A sketch (pencil and black ink) of karateka listening to their sensei during a session at a black belt camp

The last part of this chapter will discuss a final reason for the symbolic potency of the *obi* and *gi*; their power to transform. I am inspired by Marcel Mauss’ idea of magic as an art of transformation (2001) and his concept of *mana* to describe an object’s capacity to transform. This is not a kind of capital which is directly named by theorists such as Skeggs, but I will argue that the transformative ability of these objects does give them an additional layer of symbolic, social and cultural value. I choose to call this ‘transformative capital’.

One reason why these objects are particularly full of *mana* or transformative capital is the fact that they exist within the highly potent field of sport. The connection between magic and sport is easy to make; Mauss describes how magic heavily relies on symbols, and certain elements of performance, including symbolic elements of dress, specially appointed places,

rituals performed at particular times and particular body movements which induce a special state of mind (2001, pp54-62) all qualities which we can also associate with the ‘oceanic’ experience of sporting events. Barthes says, “In sport, man experiences life’s fatal combat, but this combat is distanced by the spectacle, reduced to its forms, cleared of its effects, of its dangers, and of its shames: it loses its noxiousness, not its brilliance or its meaning” (2007, p61) Sport is always highly symbolic and performative, and can be argued to be made up of a symbolic set of rituals, where we enact patterns, and hope for transformations. Ethnologist Katarzyna Herd has drawn attention to the magical aspects of football, particularly the importance of “context-dependent” behavior which makes sense only in the context or reality of the football stadium (2016). Similarly, there is a certain social and symbolic reality in the *dojo* which people step in and out of, which often involve the *gi* and the *obi*.

As I observed karate sessions, I was always struck by the sensory power of what I observed, to the point that I sometimes felt I was losing myself in the sensations of observation and that my own mental state was transformed and altered. Figure 16 shows my impressions of a karate camp which I observed on the coastline of Southern Sweden. *Karateka* were practicing outdoors, on the top of the cliff. The sea, the sun and the repetitive, synchronised movement of the white-clad *karateka* was mesmerizing, and I tried to capture some of this atmosphere in my quickly-scribbled drawing. When I reviewed the drawing later I noticed that my representation of the vague shapes of the *karateka* had made the figures appear almost monk-like, as if they were gathered to do a spiritual or magical ritual; this was clearly a strong mood of my observation that day. I also experienced a strong mental and sensory reaction in the *dojo* when individuals performed *kihon* (the drilling of basic techniques) or particularly group *kata*. In all cases, there was a powerful sensory impact caused by the synchronization of movement and sound, which I experienced as calming, mesmerizing and exciting simultaneously.

Sociologist Nigel Thrift has argued persuasively for “immersive body practise” as a route to connect to the present moment, stretch out time, and achieve a state of “non-cognitive transcendence” (2000, p35). He states that “Mystical experiences can be brought forth and animated through the power of body postures, repetitive movements, schedules of recall and spatial juxtapositions” (p45). Karate would seem to match this description almost uncannily, with its focus on movement and memory, and the sensory experience I had can be seen as reflecting this state of non-cognitive transcendence. Many participants spoke about the ‘oceanic’ experience of karate in terms of the balance of movement and stillness of mind:

I have a job which can be really stressful for my mind. When you come to the dojo you can feel totally exhausted, but you know the exhaustion is in the brain, not in the body, but you can't say which is which until you have activated your body. And then you realise this was a tiredness in your soul, not your body. And after you have trained, there's a lot of memory component, focusing, remembering lots of techniques and sequences in kata. So your mind must stay in the dojo, you can't let the mind flow away, you can't think of anything else. And that's a sort of, very good relaxation. (Leif, Interview, 3rd October 2020)

The *obi* and *gi* can therefore be characterised as part of this magical or mystical experience, not only as symbols of entry into a unique social habitus, as discussed in the previous chapter, but also as part of the sensory landscape of the practise; they interact with the body's senses visually, audibly (for example, the sound the *gi* makes as somebody pulls their arm back), and in a tactile way, through the sensation of contact with the body. The strong interplay of symbolic and affective power discussed earlier in this chapter, the taboos over touching other's *obi*, and the wider context of the immersive, ritual-filled aspects of the sport, all suggest that the *obi* and *gi* are items with high *mana* or magical potency, which gives them transformative capital.

Some informants would probably reject the suggestion that they believe that the *obi* or *gi* are magical. However, informants repeatedly spoke about the transformative impact of these objects on their abilities or attitude;

It does something to people, I know the difference, when [names *karateka*] came up to that grade, he was quite shy before, and he has a lot of confidence that he doesn't have before, and that's fun to see. (Liselotte, Interview, 3rd March 2021)

This increased confidence could be related to the many other types of capital of the *obi* discussed in Chapter 6, such as the social status conferred in the hierarchy, but it was also notable that Liselotte uses the phrase "it does something to people" to refer to the belt's impact, raising the idea of the *mana* of the object. A key characteristic of items with magical power is the idea of "ambivalence as to whether it is the objects themselves which effect material changes in some mysterious way, or whether it is some spiritual force which is either represented by or located in (but separate from) these objects" (Ellen, 1988, p16). Liselotte expressed this ambiguous relationship of control, and we continued to discuss this with reference to the *gi*:

Rebecca: Yeah, I wonder why that is? Like, why it has that effect?

Liselotte: Yeah! Because... it's just like white pyjama!! (all laugh) But it's something! And when you buy them, you know, the kids [*gi*] are very soft. But the other ones, they are not, because they do sounds when you (gestures to show a punch) So even if you aren't very strong, it sounds strong, and that's another feeling.

Elin: It gives another feeling.

Liselotte: Yes, because when you (gestures to Elin and Ida) were old enough to buy the other parts, it's different.

Elin: It's more real, yep. (Interview, 3rd March 2021)

We can see connection between materiality, senses, and the impact on the practitioner as Liselotte first links the material of the *gi* to the noise it makes during practise (“it sounds strong”) and then Elin suggests that this makes the practise “more real”. In her work on the sensory experience of karate and gender, Maclean also noted this connection between the senses and materials, noting the “the sound on the pad confirms the feeling: the dull thud of a scrappy kick, or a nice sharp noise. You also get it from the sound of your suit sometimes when you throw a good technique” (2018, p127). In a sporting context, the sensory power of clothing is more evident than in less movement-focused fields.

A further clue regarding the transformative capital of the *gi* lies in informants' beliefs about what happens if you don't wear it. As already mentioned in Chapter 6, Liselotte stated that when the club changed to online karate (due to the covid-19 pandemic) some did not wear the *gi* but over time, more had started to wear the *gi* and now she was the only one left. She said that this was because she found the *gi* restrictive, but also that she took the practise more seriously if she was wearing the *gi* and, as she had been away from the practise for some time, this felt like a big step for her:

You do it more seriously when you have the clothes. I'm not serious at all up here [points to upstairs where she practises at home] I can tell you!... I think it's because I have to come over the step to be back there for real. I'm almost there, I have gone to [club] a few Saturdays now. (Liselotte, Interview, 3rd March 2021)

For Liselotte, the *gi* is part of getting back to karate ‘for real’ and this means it induces a transformation in terms of mental attitude and focus. Others also stated that the *gi* transformed their mental attitude. I spoke again to Måns, who had worked in the military, and his partner Paula. He compared the transformative power of the *gi* to the transformative power of a military uniform:

Måns: It's a little bit like how I'm working – you don't stop when you're tired, you stop when you're dead. [laughter] Put the uniform on me, it's a completely different thing. Your mind starts working in a different way, your body starts working in a different way. Like when I was in Bosnia, working on the ambulance – when something happens, I'm in charge, giving the orders, and then when it's over [sighs] If you put the *gi* on, you get started. Sometimes when I do the training, it's impossible for me to hold back.

Paula: Once you are there you can't stop. You realise you can do a whole lot more.

Måns: Someone said... again, comparing with the military – what your mother thinks you can do, what you think you can do, but in reality you can do (gestures further)... getting over the barrier

Paula: When you're doing karate you don't think about barriers, you just keep going.

This also implies that the *gi* not only transforms the mind, but also the physical capacities of the body. Benny also highlighted the perceived impact of the *gi* on his ability during fights:

It's individual. I prefer the thick *gi* for practise, because even if you sweat a lot it doesn't stick to your skin. But this one [indicates a *gi*] is made by Hirota, and its more expensive, many people wear this. But it sticks to your skin. But I wear this one in competition, because it's lighter, so I feel like I can move more. I can kind of imagine myself being quicker because its lighter" (Interview, 2nd March 2021)

While of course the material of an item can affect mobility and speed, it is interesting to consider that part of the impact on Benny here comes from *imagining* a benefit to the item. There have been studies which show that this psychological aspect of material choice does have a measurable effect on participants, for example Cárdenes et al 2018 study of judo found that those wearing a blue *gi* consistently moved faster than those wearing white in competition, and that this was because competitors believed that the blue *gi* makes you faster. This supports the idea that symbolic, material qualities of objects including their colour can be transformative, even if participants do not specifically refer to magic. Ultimately the transformative capital of these objects may remain largely un-named by participants, but it is still another form of symbolic power.

7.7 Concluding Thoughts

This Chapter has unveiled how material objects in a sporting context become invested with symbolic and affective potency; through use and investment of time and effort, and through their conditions of arrival. It also demonstrates that a key part of the symbolic and affective potency of the *obi* in particular is its potentiality, the idea of what it points towards. The *obi* promises happiness to the *karateka* and their steps are directed towards it. Both the *obi* and *gi* are a key part of the wider transformative practise of karate, and both objects have a type of *mana* which effects various transformations on the wearer; the *obi* imparts confidence, the *gi* imparts mental focus, and bodily power. This *mana* acts as another type of symbolic capital. Finally, a great deal of the symbolic, affective and magical power of these objects lies in their materiality; the physical wear and tear, their interaction with the body, and the intensely intimate relationship between person and object.

Chapter 8: Conclusions and Applicability

This thesis asked what the material, cultural, symbolic and social significance of the *obi* and the *gi* was, and how they direct, frame and influence the cultural, sporting and social practise of karate, in order to understand these relationships in wider society. This conclusion will highlight the key findings of this thesis and suggest various points of applicability.

The first and primary conclusion of this thesis is that material objects work in many different ways in the field of sport, and hold many different types of capital; cultural, symbolic, social and affective. Throughout this thesis I have shown various ways in which *karateka* strategically (if not always consciously) make use of objects to process and interpret a different culture, signal status and identity of themselves and others, and frame and construct a social habitus. Similarly, material objects also act on people. They have the ability to inscribe certain characteristics onto the wearer, limit where people can go, control how they interact with others, direct them towards certain goals, and transform their mental state and physical body. This suggests that those who study sport should consider the benefits of studying material culture, and those who study material culture should consider the benefits of studying sport; the study of the material culture of sport can open up many new insights, and few scholars have yet taken this approach, suggesting that there is room for further research in the field of sport with this material focus.

A related conclusion is that none of these functions are seen only in the sporting world, although they can be clearly observed there. Karate is in many senses unique, however the strategies we see people use in karate are the same that we see in many other sports, and many other spheres; we can see how general interaction between cultures happens, how hierarchy works, and how culture is formed within the *dojo*, and this can teach us about how these processes occur outside the *dojo*. This suggests that sport is a fruitful field for studying social and cultural systems, and that there can be strong applicability for those who work with concepts of hierarchy, identity or intercultural interaction in a variety of other fields. There are a few key findings which could have implications outside of the *dojo*:

Firstly, we can see that *karateka* seem to be drawn to the visible hierarchy in the *dojo*, and to enjoy the idea of respect for self and others which is captured within its clearly delineated rituals of conduct, perhaps in contrast to their normal life. Miller argues that “among the things once accomplished by religion or by the state but now increasingly delegated downwards, to individuals and households, is the responsibility for creating order and cosmology... an order, moral or aesthetic, is still an authentic order even if one creates it

for oneself and makes it up as one goes along, rather than just inheriting it as tradition or custom.” (2008, p29). This thesis has shown examples of individuals constructing a certain aesthetic order; routines, patterns, and categories which become predictable and comforting, and which rely on and involve material components, such as the ‘belt hierarchy’. This supports the notion that the social elements of sport are equally as important as the physical practise. As Miller says, what usually matters most to people is “their ability to form relationships, and the nature of those relationships. Relationships which flow constantly between persons and things” (2008, p6). People search for a connection with each other, and with the material world, and these aspects are inherently intertwined. This gives us valuable insight into the importance of community and structure, and how material objects become tools in this quest, which could be of use for marketing professionals (particularly in the field of sport or lifestyle) seeking an ethnographic angle on promotion of products which tap into this desire for community and social structure. It also has strong applicability for sporting and community institutions who may choose to highlight these elements of their offer.

In addition, this thesis has shown various strategies which individuals use to enforce the social order. Material objects, particularly clothing, which is so visual and so attached to individual bodies, have a lot of power to transform or induct people into a certain social group, and to set their place within that group. One particularly crucial conclusion of this thesis is that material objects which act as visual symbols of rank can be particularly important ‘tools’ in systems of domination which can open up possibilities of abuse. Applicable parallels can easily be drawn to other spheres where this is the case; particularly military settings, but in fact, it could be argued that the applicability of this finding extends even to places where ‘uniform’ is less formal. Even subtle details of the objects we wear and carry with us, such as the length of a sleeve on an office worker, could be argued to reflect our place in an invisible hierarchy, or indeed to expose or question the hierarchy. We should therefore pay greater attention to the way in which spoken or unspoken uniforms and visual symbols at play on our own and others bodies, as these objects can give us a great deal of insight into ever-present power relations. Researchers in the field of fashion and clothing, or businesses, could perhaps benefit from examining the more hidden ‘uniforms’ at play in various fields, and what these reveal about the social hierarchies in their organisations; who is included and excluded, who is able to move freely and who is not. Those who are interested in challenging systemic power, such as social justice campaigners, may also be particularly interested in the power of clothing to reinforce or expose these systems.

I have also highlighted various strategies which individuals use to engage or negotiate with a different culture through the practise of karate, and through items holding cultural capital. Some individuals not only embrace the new culture, but indeed capitalise on it, investing in objects which confer cultural capital within like-minded members of their social group. Others reject the importance of the culture, creating a separation between the physical practise of the sport and its origins. Still others sit somewhere in between, neither investing nor rejecting the origin culture, often expressing a general admiration for it, and constructing a narrative which works for them, through which they interpret their own practise of the sport, and the material objects involved with the sport. My interpretation of this process is that it is a natural and human way of dealing with things which are bigger than our ability to grasp; we cannot fully absorb another's culture, only decide to what extent we invest in it, and consider the ethical implications of these actions. These findings are relevant for those who deal in cultural 'experience-scapes', and those who package and also consume cultural objects from other places (whether it is sport, music or art) They suggest that marketing and consumption professionals and researchers should consider their target audience's strategies for dealing with other cultures, and how their own products carry cultural capital.

Overall, as globalisation opens up new options for our free time and how we choose to spend it, we see the importance of negotiating our relationships to material culture from a macro to a micro level. Material objects do not stand alone. The wider assemblage of karate is made up of a complex local-global network; websites selling equipment, leaders of Shotokan Japan, local actors in the clubs, the *dojo* itself. All of these elements rely on and interact with each other, and this means that material objects impact us on different scales; they influence local-global relationships, relationships between *karateka* in the *dojo*, and individual transformations. The same can be said for many sports, or for any social system with both global and local reach, and the material objects within those systems. Additionally, in the richly symbolic and performative field of sport, material objects can take on huge affective significance. The *obi* and *gi* are examples of objects with *mana*, which both pulls *karateka* to them and pushes them forward. The deeper implication of this is complex; it implies that objects can form an intense bond with people, and that the influential relationship between object and person is not one-way. This finding has wide applicability for consumption studies and individual consumers, implying that each of our choices has cultural, social and symbolic power that must be carefully considered, and supporting the argument that we should think carefully about our relationships to objects and the ethical implications of our choices regarding how we shape our material sphere.

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Interviews

Participants (Pseudonyms)	Date	Location	Interview length
Kerstin & Freja	8 th August 2020	dojo	1:28:15
Pia, Jonas, Marcus, Eva	29 th August 2020	karate camp	37:17
Lily (Leif, parent, present)	5 th September 2020	dojo	12:08
Benny	9 th September 2020	home	12:34
Liselotte, Agata, Ida & Elin	9 th September 2020	home	1:27:26
Björn & Kerstin	12 th September 2020	Café	58:52
Gustav	16 th September 2020	dojo	08:40
Caroline	16 th September 2020	dojo	31:18
Anja	17 th September 2020	dojo	15:08
Pia	23 rd September 2020	dojo	15:30
Petra & Måns	1 st October 2020	dojo	31:23
Leif, Oscar & Benny	3 rd October 2020	home	1:09:40
Paulina, Isla & Cecilia	4 th October 2020	home	1:18:21
Benny	2 nd March 2021	home	1:05:05
Liselotte, Agata, Ida & Elin	3 rd March 2021	home	1:07:10

Chapter 10: Appendix A

Consent Form

Please note, names and logos identifying Shotokan Sweden's actual name have been anonymised:



MACA [redacted] Project 2020 Consent Form



Thank you for your support and interest in this project! The project aim is to support [redacted] in understanding and facilitating women's engagement, participation and leadership in karate. By signing this [form](#) you consent to the use of information gathered from our interview, both for this project and associated academic work. Any quotations used will be anonymised, and any recording will only be used as a memory aid, will not be shared, and will be deleted once the project concludes. You are welcome to withdraw your consent at any time. If you wish to withdraw consent, you have any questions about the project, or you would like to hear about the findings from the project, you can contact me at [redacted]. More information can also be found at [www.\[redacted\].wordpress.com](http://www.[redacted].wordpress.com)

Name: Age:
 Gender: 'Home' karate club:
 Contact details (of parent/guardian if under 18):
 Signature (of parent/guardian if under 18):

Interview Script – August 2020

Questions

- How did you first become involved in karate?
- Why did you choose karate (not other sports)?
- What do you feel you have gained from doing karate?
- Do you prefer *kata* or *kumite*? Why?
- Have there been any times when you stopped practising? Why?
- Do you teach in the club? Do you enjoy teaching or not? Why?
- *For those in leadership positions eg. Club president* How do you feel about leading the club? Do you enjoy it or not? Why?
- *For those in leadership positions* What do you think makes a good leader? Do you see yourself as a leader?
- Has there ever been a time when you particularly noticed/felt conscious of your gender? Eg. You were treated in any way differently due to your gender?
- Do you compare yourself with others in the *dojo*?
- Do you have any role models? Who/why?
- What are your goals for the future with karate?

Interview Script – March 2021

Questions

- Please remind me how you became involved in karate?
- Was there anything you noticed/first impressions when you saw karate?
- Do you remember putting on the *gi/obi* for the first time? Any memories or stories of what it felt like?
- Did somebody show you how to put it on? How did you learn?
- Is the *gi/obi* an important part of karate for you? Why/why not?
- Would you practise without it?
- What would happen if somebody came to practise without it?
- Do you have any stories involving the *gi/obi* in practise? Any times you really noticed it?
- How did you choose your *gi/obi*?
- Does somebody's *gi/obi* tell you something about them? What?
- Do you remember your first grading? How did it feel?
- Do you still have your *gi/obi*? How do you store them? Can I see them?

Glossary

Budo: 'Martial Way' the practise of martial arts

Bunkai: 'Analysis', the demonstration of the application of moves in a kata

Karateka: A practitioner of Karate

Kata: A sequence of movements

Kiai: A shout of power or spirit

Kihon: 'Basics', repeated drilled movements such as punches or kicks

Kumite: 'Fighting', traditional combat between two participants

Kyu: 'Rank' for students

Dan: 'Rank' for masters

Dojo: 'Place of the way', the place where karate is practised.

Gi: 'Uniform', the white robe worn by karateka

Mokusu: 'Still mind' or meditation.

Obi: 'Belt'

Rei: 'Bow'

Seiza: 'Proper sitting' a kneeling position with knees slightly apart, hands in lap.

Sempai: 'Elders' or 'Seniors', high ranking members of the club.

Sensei: 'Teacher'

Shomen: 'Front wall' where traditionally photos of past sensei are kept

i Japanese terms are used throughout this thesis. Where a word appears for the first time it is translated. Please refer to Appendix A for a glossary of terms.

ii for a thorough description of the development and subsequent globalisation of Shotokan, see Lawton & Nauright (2019).

iii Informants and other karateka have been given pseudonyms throughout this thesis, and so has the Swedish and Japanese organisation I worked with.

iv For an example (in Swedish) see <https://halmstadkarateacademy.se/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Sensei-Roy-Andersson-Min-historia.pdf>

v Many karate clubs in Sweden proudly display photos of their teachers with prominent members of Japanese karate organisations, such as the example on this page: <http://www.karateschool.se/instructor>. Some others even name their organisations after revered figures who trained under Funakoshi, such as this organisation: <https://karateakademin.se/shihan-taiji-kase/>

vi This is sometimes referred to as 'gaiman' otherwise expressed by the maxim "accept pain, don't complain"; see Littler (2019) for more on this concept.

vii For an illustrative example, see <https://emea.mizuno.com/eu/en/explore-mizuno/mizuno-history/>

viii There are many examples of sports which include or encourage a cultural interaction or exchange of ideas which goes beyond the standard 'rules of the game'. One particularly relevant example of a physical practise which has become commercialised and arguably 'sportified' in the West and which debate rages over in terms of ideas of appropriation and intercultural dialogue is yoga. Much has been written on this topic with titles including criticism of 'The uberisation of yoga' (Fabian, 2019) questioning the 'legitimacy of cultural hybrid products' (Coskuner-Balli & Ertimur, 2016) examining the idea of the 'glocal' (global-local) and the idea of re-appropriation of yoga in the 'Indian consumptionscape' (Askegaard & Eckhardt, 2012) and considering ambiguities around the idea of 'xenophilia' in sport (Valdina, 2017) showing a range of academic 'takes' on this topic and illustrating that karate is not a unique example of this kind of intercultural interaction occurring within a physical practise. This conversation is extremely topical in popular culture online, for example popular comedian and speaker Russell Brand recently interviewed Adrienne Mishler (one of the most watched yoga teachers on youtube) on Instagram about the issues of 'Westernising' and commercialising the traditional practise of yoga: https://www.instagram.com/tv/CPBZtNplQY4/?utm_medium=copy_link

ix The comparison between karate and the military came up regularly with my informants, for example one karateka, Måns, who was ex-military, said about the gi "But it's the wrong colour, I'm used to green", directly comparing it to a military uniform. Karate has also historically been associated with military influence, particularly in its transference to the US after WWII (Tan, 2004) so the comparison to military hierarchy therefore seems particularly relevant. All the other examples of conflation of person and object I could think of where this happens were also military examples, such as 'green beret' 'black shirt' or 'red coat', terms used to 'essentialise' people within highly hierarchical settings where obedience and discipline are stressed as vital.

x Donohue here makes reference to a Japanese Buddhist philosophy *godai* which refers to five elements; earth, air, water, fire and 'void', representing the quintessential energy of the world.