

COMBAT PRACTICES, MARTIAL ARTS, AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



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Combat practices, martial arts, and social sciences

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Combat practices and martial arts in contemporary societies

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1. Introduction

Martial arts, wrestling, fighting and combat sports constitute some of the most variable, diverse and cross-cultural sporting practices in the contemporary world (see, among many others, Bromber, Krawietz & Petrov, 2014; Sánchez García & Spencer, 2013). The recent global popularity of Mixed Martial Arts has given visibility to a phenomenon that is more complex than such a mediatic, spectacular (and scientifically interesting) representation would suggest (Green, 2015; Spencer, 2014). In each socio-cultural context in which they are practiced, combat sports are characterized by divergent rules, forms, roles, meaning and significance. Indeed, through the establishment of specific sets of rules, codified gestures and the more or less developed degree of ritualization of the fight, these kinds of activities symbolically enact a confrontation between participants that is interpreted differently in each practice. At the same time, it should be noted that these activities also endorse, transmit and display a sense of belonging to collective groups or identities (Nardini & Scandurra, 2021). Consequently, they provide conducive environments for the analysis of the constituent values of the social groups in which they are employed, ranging from physical confrontation, violence, risk, strength and aggression to processes of trust, identity and gender construction.

The social sciences literature in this area has grown exponentially, especially in the last three decades. Nevertheless, the resulting body of work is not consistently characterized by theoretical, epistemological and methodological coherence, and a systematic research agenda is still emerging. While this undoubtedly enhances the possible innovative approaches that scholars can develop, it concomitantly renders the process of knowledge construction more intricate and fragmented. Furthermore, the fragmentation of disciplinary boundaries within the complex and multifaceted field of fighting and combat sports studies renders the process of establishing connections even more complicated. However, given the trans-cultural – and increasingly trans-social and trans-gender – distribution of these activities, they could represent a relevant subfield of “sport studies”. In order to produce relevant knowledge on all topics related to the analysis of martial arts, wrestling, fighting and combat sports, different disciplines need to relate to each other. The aim of the present issue of *Eracle. Journal of Sport and Social Sciences*, titled “Combat practices and martial arts in contemporary societies”, is exactly to make a small, non-exhaustive contribution to the existing body of knowledge on this subject.

The issue comprises six peer-reviewed articles and a final commentary. The authors of these articles have a range of affiliations and disciplinary backgrounds, including sociology, social anthropology, communication and media studies, education, kinesiology, pedagogies and psychology. It is evident that the analysis of the data and the approaches presented reveals the emergence of transdisciplinary topics that are pertinent to the subject under discussion. Firstly, it is evident that martial arts and combat practices are fields in which the social dimension of subjectivities is intrinsically evident. In her paper, “La gestione delle emozioni e la crescita socio-emotiva nei fighters: una ricerca empirica sugli atleti di kickboxing della Federkombat”, Flavia Verona demonstrates that sports, and combat sports in particular, such as kickboxing, play a significant role in the development of socio-emotional proficiency within young athletes. The study is grounded in an exploratory research investigation conducted among the athletes of Federkombat, the Italian federation encompassing kickboxing, Muay Thai, Savate and Shoot Boxe. In an era where emotional and frustration management is a salient and frequently discussed issue in public discourse, the research indicates that kickboxing provides a collective – and consequently individual – opportunity to reinterpret failures in a positive and productive manner. Physical confrontation necessitates the development of a range of skills, including athletic, emotional and social aptitudes. Consequently, it can be argued that such confrontations encourage the concurrent development of both competition and cooperation among fighters, thus facilitating the enhancement of their overall skill set. Consequently, martial arts and combat sports have the capacity to facilitate social integration within multicultural contexts. This assertion is supported by the findings of Jungjoo Yun and David Brown in their paper, entitled “Taekwondo-In as a platform for the social integration of migrants”. Through immersive observations and interviews in three multicultural Taekwondo clubs in the US and UK, the authors illustrate how such a practice helps to build trust-based relationships, both within and outside of the clubs. “These acted as bridging and bonding forms of capital social networks that facilitated not only the *social* integration of migrant practitioners but also their *structural* integration”.

The inherently social dimension of self-construction in combat sports athletes is further evidenced in Francesco Fanoli’s paper on *lamb* (wrestling with punches), a highly popular activity in contemporary Senegal. Fanoli’s ethnographic research is characterised by a deep engagement with the subject matter, thereby highlighting the mutuality and relationality of the self-making processes in contemporary *lamb* fighters. This is particularly pertinent in the context of the neoliberalisation of this particular style of wrestling. Fanoli’s work demonstrates the articulation and tensions between individualised and “dividual” modes of self-making. These modes give rise to multiple, indeterminate and often conflicting socio-cultural outcomes in Senegalese *lamb*.

In an era marked by neoliberal advancement, technological acceleration, and a certain degree of dehumanization, it is still possible to build academic processes founded on the co-production of knowledge with communities that engage in embodied practices, particularly martial arts. This approach implies a continuous commitment between the university and the community, as exemplified by the MIMA (Movement Inspired by Martial Arts) project in Wales. The program seeks to explore and create martial movements for use in daily life, especially for aging populations. This initiative is systematically explored in the article “Towards Co-Production: The Case of Movement Inspired by Martial Arts (MIMA)” by George Jennings and Zsofia Szekeres. The authors’ work underscores a shift from traditional, top-down research to a more

collaborative and ethically-grounded methodology, where embodied knowledge is not merely an object of study but a resource for collective well-being. This model represents a vital rehumanization of academic inquiry, positioning communities as active agents in the creation of knowledge.

This process of rehumanization should also impact the growth of women's participation in combat sports, which highlights the need for a deeper analysis of how female biology, sports culture, and performance demands are intertwined. This is deeply explored in the study by Turelli, Kirk, and Vaz "A boy is always going to be superior to a girl," the study examines gender dynamics within high-performance karate, focusing on the Spanish women's national team. It reveals that the sport operates as a "male preserve," where coaches enforce a male-centric performance ideal as the universal standard, often using flawed biological and historical arguments to justify men's inherent superiority. This creates a no-win situation for female athletes: they are pressured to emulate men's fighting styles but are then stigmatized with labels like "masculinized" if they succeed. The article highlights how this patriarchal system, which includes unequal training and a lack of female representation in leadership roles, is not just a legacy of the past but a current reality. Ultimately, the study concludes that the athletes' presence and their growing critical awareness of these issues represent powerful acts of resistance that are essential for challenging and disrupting these deeply ingrained gender inequalities in combat sports.

In the same vein, the article "Fight like a girl. The impact of menstruation on female athletes in combat sports" by Elisa Virgili, examines how menstruation, far from being a simple biological phenomenon, becomes a cultural and disciplinary battleground for female athletes, revealing the tensions inherent in a sports system historically shaped by male physiology. Modern sports have operated under the paradigm of a "neutral" athletic body, an ideal of stability and consistency based on the male model. This approach, which permeates sports science and training manuals, systematically ignores the cyclical variations of the female body. By making menstruation invisible, the sports institution imposes an immutable performance standard, forcing athletes to adapt their bodies to a model that is not their own, rather than having the system adapt to their realities. This phenomenon is framed within the medicalization of the body, a process analyzed by Michel Foucault, where biological differences are pathologized and controlled to align with standards of efficiency.

The paper that concludes this issue of *Eracle* is a "commentary" by Matteo Maiorano, a young scholar from La Sapienza Università di Roma, on "Media e Pugilato, tra rilevanza storica e futuro incerto. Il caso italiano di 'The Art of Fighting' Promotion". Maiorano presents the findings of an ongoing project that has the merit to inaugurating a new topic in the field of Media and Communication Studies. Maiorano's analysis of an Italian organization that promotes boxing events reveals "a growing dependency of contemporary boxing on media dynamics".

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La gestione delle emozioni e la crescita socio-emotiva nei fighters: una ricerca empirica sugli atleti di kickboxing della Federkombat

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Abstract

Sport is a widespread educational practice involving over 200 million children and young people worldwide, fostering personal development and emotional management within a context of enjoyment and social relationships. An exploratory study conducted on Federkombat's kickboxing athletes during the sporting year 2022-23 examined how they perceive challenges and failure—either as motivational stimuli or discouraging factor. Results show that these athletes, despite experiencing stress and anxiety in competitions, view challenges as opportunities for growth and personal improvement. Additionally, they demonstrate well-developed socio-emotional skills and participate in a sporting environment that balances sacrifice with satisfaction. Combat sports thus prove to be educational, promoting fun and positive relationships while debunking the stereotype of violent activities devoid of formative values.

Keywords: Failure, Challenge, Kickboxing athletes, Performance, Emotional intelligence.

1. Introduzione

Le emozioni sono al centro dell'esperienza umana ed influenzano profondamente la nostra capacità di ricordare, agire ed interagire con il mondo circostante. Gli individui non possono fare a meno di provare emozioni, rielaborarle e trasformarle. All'aumentare dell'attivazione emotiva, si osserva un miglioramento delle prestazioni cognitive, ma è cruciale notare che oltre una certa soglia, l'eccesso di coinvolgimento emotivo può compromettere tali prestazioni, talvolta danneggiandole. Maggiore è l'intensità delle emozioni, maggiore diventa difficile la loro gestione. Infatti, ancora oggi, l'essere umano dimostra difficoltà e disagio a vivere e governare alcune esperienze ed emozioni, soprattutto se negative (Di Maglie, 2019).

In questo contesto, al fine di una migliore vita sociale e personale, l'intelligenza emotiva emerge come una abilità fondamentale, definita da Goleman (1996) come

La capacità di motivare sé stessi e di persistere nel proseguire un obiettivo nonostante le frustrazioni; di controllare gli impulsi e rimandare la gratificazione; di modulare i propri stati d'animo evitando che la sofferenza ci impedisca di pensare; e, ancora, la capacità di essere empatici e di sperare (Goleman, 1996, p. 54).

Nella società contemporanea, in cui i sentimenti tendono a essere mercificati come beni di consumo (Lacroix, 2002) e molti giovani faticano a gestire emozioni come la noia ed il dolore (Coco, 2016), lo sport può offrire un ambiente regolato e sicuro in cui esplorare il proprio mondo emotivo e sviluppare una maggiore consapevolezza di sé. L'educazione alle emozioni emerge, quindi, come un intervento fondamentale per il benessere sociale, e la pratica sportiva, in particolare, si configura come uno strumento educativo privilegiato. Essa consente non solo la scoperta di sé e degli altri, ma anche la capacità di intessere relazioni, di autoregolarsi e di sviluppare maggiore consapevolezza di sé; il tutto all'interno di una cornice protetta e formata da regole condivise. Ben oltre l'insieme di esercizi biomeccanici, lo sport rappresenta un'esperienza concreta che permette agli individui, a qualsiasi livello, di confrontarsi con la realtà, mettersi alla prova e imparare a convivere con gli altri. In questo processo, gli atleti sviluppano competenze relazionali, decisionali e personali, aprendo la strada a percorsi di crescita, autoconsapevolezza e autoconoscenza (Di Maglie, 2019).

Tuttavia, cosa accade quando lo sport introduce l'esperienza del fallimento, inevitabilmente connessa alla dimensione della competizione?¹ Quale significato assumono la sfida e la sconfitta per chi pratica sport a livello agonistico? Per cercare di rispondere a questi interrogativi, è stata condotta una ricerca esplorativa basata su un questionario appositamente costruito e somministrato agli atleti di kickboxing affiliati alla Federkombat² durante l'anno sportivo 2022-2023. L'indagine si propone di esplorare come questi atleti vivano la dimensione della sfida e del fallimento, cercando di comprendere se tali esperienze siano percepite come occasioni di crescita e motivazione oppure come momenti di sconforto e demotivazione.

2. Il fallimento nello sport

Nel contesto sportivo, il concetto di fallimento assume un ruolo centrale, rappresentando una delle principali fonti di stress per gli atleti e costituendo spesso il motore del perfezionismo (Frost & Henderson, 1991). Quest'ultimo, se da un lato può stimolare il miglioramento della performance, dall'altro può trasformarsi in un ostacolo debilitante. Il fallimento viene comunemente definito come l'incapacità di raggiungere un obiettivo, generando una distanza psicologica tra l'individuo e l'idea di successo (Donald, 1976), e può nascere a causa di fattori personali, sociali e/o organizzativi (Goode, 1960; 1967).

Una delle risposte più frequenti al fallimento è la paura, che può fungere sia da leva motivazionale sia da freno psicologico. In particolare negli atleti, la paura di fallire è frequentemente connessa a forme eccessive di perfezionismo, fonte e origine di pensieri negativi e preoccupazioni durante le performance (Correia, Rosado & Serpa, 2015). Tale paura può dar vita a valutazioni critiche della propria prestazione (Frost & Henderson, 1991), con conseguenze che spaziano dall'aumento dello stress e dell'ansia (Conroy et al., 2002), all'abbandono precoce della pratica

¹ Intesa sia come competizione con se stessi per abbattere e superare i propri limiti sia come competizione in chiave strettamente agonistica.

² La Federkombat è l'unica federazione italiana di kickboxing, Muay Thai, Savate e Shoot Boxe riconosciuta dal CONI.

sportiva (Orlick, 1974), fino all'adozione di comportamenti disfunzionali, come il perfezionismo tossico (Sagar & Stoeber, 2009).

Nei bambini, il fallimento viene spesso interiorizzato come l'incapacità di soddisfare le aspettative genitoriali, compromettendo il piacere dell'attività sportiva e aumentando il loro livello di stress (Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1988; Woolger & Power, 1993).

A tal proposito, Hamachek (1978) distingue tra perfezionismo "normale", legato alla crescita personale e alla realizzazione di obiettivi, e perfezionismo "nevrotico", alimentato da pressioni esterne e aspettative sociali, spesso causa di ansia, *burnout* e disagio psicologico (Gould et al., 1996; Stoeber et al., 2007). Mentre il primo può favorire fiducia in sé, efficacia nella pianificazione e un allenamento più proficuo (Stoeber & Becker, 2008), il secondo è associato a una minore soddisfazione, umore negativo e stress elevato (Burns, 1980; Correia et al., 2015).

Nonostante ciò, il fallimento può anche rappresentare una preziosa opportunità di crescita: stimola la resilienza, favorisce la riflessione critica e promuove la pianificazione di obiettivi futuri (Stoeber, 2011). La percezione del fallimento, quindi, non è univoca. Atkinson (1957) ha dimostrato che la motivazione al successo nasce dall'equilibrio tra la spinta a evitare il fallimento ed il desiderio di ottenere risultati. Quando questo equilibrio si spezza, la paura di fallire può produrre effetti negativi sulla produttività e sulla salute mentale, aumentando ansia e stress (Atkinson & Litwin, 1960).

Nel contesto italiano, lo sport assume un ruolo educativo e culturale di rilievo. Secondo l'Annuario Statistico 2024³, oltre il 50% dei giovani tra i 6 e i 17 anni pratica attività sportiva, con picchi del 64% nella fascia tra i 6 ed i 10 anni. Lo sport rappresenta oggi una delle pratiche educative extrascolastiche più diffuse, coinvolgendo individui di tutte le età e offrendo un potente strumento di sviluppo personale. Così come l'ambiente scolastico, anche quello sportivo si configura come un contesto formativo in cui gli individui possono esplorare sé stessi, sviluppare la propria personalità e maturare in modo integrato (Navarini, 2002). Nel tempo, lo sport ha conquistato uno spazio importante tra i principali canali di trasmissione culturale e mediatica, accanto a strumenti consolidati come la televisione, la stampa e la radio (Roberts, 1978; 1984).

3. Le competenze socio-emotive

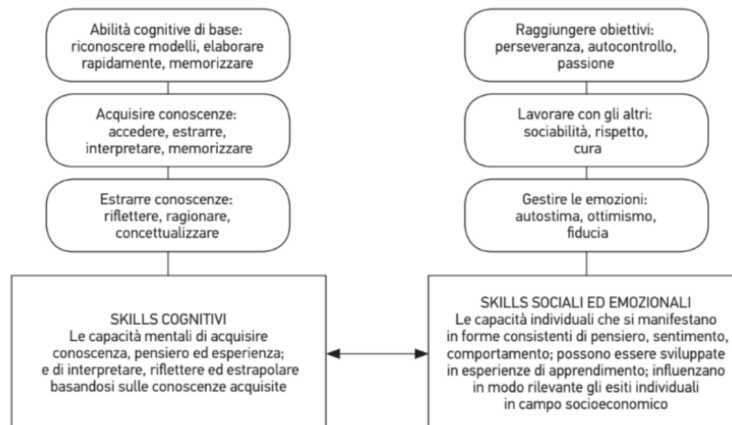
Il dibattito sviluppatosi intorno alle competenze non cognitive (Bowles, Gintis, & Osborne, 2001) è ampio e ricco di contributi teorici, ma al contempo presenta ancora incertezze concettuali e metodologiche. Nonostante la nebulosità definitoria e le difficoltà legate alla misurazione, numerosi studi, tra cui quello di Heckman e Kautz (2012), hanno evidenziato l'importanza di queste abilità in ambiti cruciali della vita individuale e collettiva. In questo contesto, il tentativo di classificare e misurare tali competenze rappresenta un passaggio fondamentale per comprenderne l'impatto e promuoverne lo sviluppo.

L'OCSE (OECD, 2015) ha proposto un *framework* che raggruppa le competenze non cognitive sotto l'etichetta di competenze socio-emotive, allineandosi alla nozione di "competenza in senso

³ Per una panoramica più completa, si invita a consultare il sito <https://www.sportesalute.eu/studiedatidellosport/blog-studie-dati-dello-sport/annuario-statistico-italiano-2024-dati-sulla-pratica-sportiva.html#:~:text=La%20pratica%20sportiva%20%C3%A8%20pi%C3%B9,di%20sopra%20della%20media%20nazionale>.

largo”. Si tratta di abilità plastiche e modificabili, particolarmente sensibili all’influenza dell’ambiente durante le fasi precoci dello sviluppo (Benadusi & Molina, 2018), ma suscettibili di cambiamento anche in età adulta [Fig. 1].

Fig.1: *Skills* cognitive, sociali ed emozionali



Fonte: OECD (2015)

In una prospettiva maggiormente sociologica, tali competenze sono definite sociali ed emozionali (ses), come sottolineato da Maccarini (2021), ed il loro sviluppo si radica nell’interazione sociale, in particolare all’interno di contesti educativi sia scolastici che extrascolastici. Secondo Perret-Clermont (1979), infatti, apprendimento e sviluppo sono processi profondamente intrecciati con le dinamiche interattive tra individui, in particolare nei primi anni di vita. Questa prospettiva risulta ancora più rilevante in una società caratterizzata da rapide trasformazioni, dove le capacità di adattamento e di autoregolazione risultano fondamentali.

Le ses (*socio-emotional skills*), pur influenzate dalle caratteristiche innate e dall’educazione, si sviluppano lungo tutto l’arco della vita e possono essere suddivise in cinque macro-aree: coinvolgimento sociale, cooperazione, autocontrollo, resilienza emotiva e competenze innovative. Ciascuna categoria contribuisce alla costruzione del capitale umano e relazionale dell’individuo, influenzando positivamente i risultati scolastici, lavorativi e personali. Tali abilità, come evidenziato da numerosi studi (Casillas, Way & Burrus, 2015; Duckworth et al., 2007; Durlak et al., 2011; Kautz et al., 2014; OECD, 2015), facilitano la gestione delle emozioni, la regolazione dei comportamenti e il raggiungimento di obiettivi individuali e collettivi [Fig. 2].

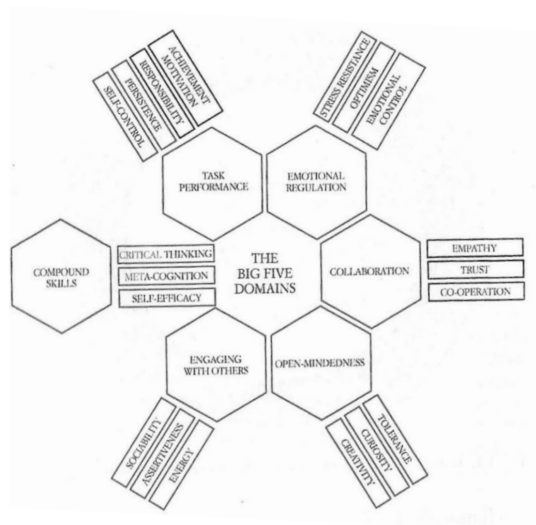
Fig.2 Incrocio tra dimensioni socio-emotive e rispettive caratteristiche

Dimension	Facet (and correlated trait adjective)
Extraversion vs introversion	Gregariousness (sociable) Assertiveness (forceful) Activity (energetic) Excitement-seeking (adventurous) Positive emotions (enthusiastic) Warmth (outgoing)
Agreeableness vs antagonism	Trust (forgiving) Straightforwardness (not demanding) Altruism (warm) Compliance (not stubborn) Modesty (not-show-off) Tender-mindedness (sympathetic)
Conscientiousness vs lack of direction	Competence (efficient) Order (organized) Dutifulness (not careless) Achievement striving (thorough) Self-discipline (not lazy) Deliberation (not impulsive)
Neuroticism vs emotional stability	Anxiety (tense) Angry hostility (irritable) Depression (not contented) Self-consciousness (shy) Impulsiveness (moody) Vulnerability (not self-confident)
Openness vs closedness to experience	Ideas (curious) Fantasy (imaginative) Aesthetics (artistic) Actions (wide interest) Feelings (excitable) Values (unconventional)

Fonte: Adattamento da John e Srivastava (1999) delle teorizzazioni di Costa e McCrae's (1992) NEO-PI-R.

Uno dei modelli teorici più utilizzati per la classificazione delle competenze socio-emotive è quello dei *Big Five*, adottato anche dall'OCSE, che incorpora al suo interno le cosiddette *compound skills* [Fig. 3].

Fig. 3 Il modello *Big Five* e le *compound skills*



Fonte OECD (2015)

Il modello non si fonda su una teoria univoca, ma sulla sistematizzazione del linguaggio quotidiano usato per descrivere le persone e le loro caratteristiche di personalità (John & De Fruyt, 2015; Chernyshenko, Kankaras & Drasgow, 2018). Le cinque dimensioni fondamentali, coscienziosità, estroversione, amicalità, stabilità emotiva e apertura mentale, rappresentano costrutti psicologici complessi, composti da pensieri, emozioni e comportamenti interrelati.

Nello specifico, questi domini possono essere schematizzati come:

- Coscienziosità: capacità di autodisciplina, organizzazione, perseveranza e orientamento al risultato.
- Estroversione: inclinazione verso il contatto sociale, la comunicazione e la vitalità.
- Amicalità: propensione alla cooperazione, alla fiducia reciproca e alla riduzione dei conflitti interpersonali.
- Stabilità emotiva: gestione efficace delle emozioni e resistenza allo stress.
- Apertura mentale: curiosità intellettuale, creatività, immaginazione e disponibilità al cambiamento.

Questo modello ha ricevuto ampia validazione empirica in contesti culturali e linguistici diversi (McCrae & Costa, 1987; Borkenau & Ostendorf, 1990; Goldberg, 1990; Christal & Tupes, 1992; Digman, 1990), pur non esaurendo tutte le sfaccettature della personalità umana. Altre dimensioni, come la motivazione, l'onestà o l'avversione al rischio, risultano infatti altrettanto rilevanti in specifici contesti, come quello professionale o etico (Kankaras, 2017).

4. Sport e competenze socio-emotive

Le emozioni rappresentano un motore fondamentale nell'esperienza motoria e sportiva, potendo fungere sia da risorsa che da ostacolo. Quando adeguatamente riconosciute e gestite, esse contribuiscono in modo significativo alla formazione della persona ed alla sua crescita

complessiva. Nonostante siano parte integrante della condizione umana, nell'epoca contemporanea si osserva una crescente difficoltà nel confrontarsi con le emozioni, in particolare quelle negative, che si tende spesso a reprimere o controllare (Di Maglie, 2019).

L'emotività, influenzata da media e pubblicità, può avere effetti distorsivi, specialmente nei più giovani, inducendo un disequilibrio tra stati di tristezza e la costante ricerca di esperienze emozionalmente intense. La difficoltà nel tollerare frustrazioni e sofferenze rende oggi più che mai centrale un'educazione all'emotività, che trova nello sport un contesto privilegiato. L'attività fisica, infatti, non si limita alla formazione della disciplina, ma contribuisce a sviluppare consapevolezza emotiva, autocontrollo e capacità di relazione, elementi indispensabili per la costruzione di una personalità equilibrata (Minello & Banzato, 2002; Coco, 2016).

Il gioco e lo sport mettono in atto complesse dinamiche cognitive, decisionali, relazionali ed emotive, sollecitando lo sviluppo dell'intelligenza emotiva (Cagigal, 1975; D'Alfonso et al., 2005). Quest'ultima, secondo la definizione di Goleman precedentemente illustrata, implica la capacità di riconoscere, comprendere e gestire le proprie emozioni e quelle altrui. Tale competenza può essere trasmessa, in particolare ai bambini, per aiutarli a elaborare sentimenti complessi quali la rabbia e la paura, prevenendo l'insorgenza di comportamenti disfunzionali. L'educazione socio-emotiva si fonda, quindi, su pilastri quali l'autoconsapevolezza, l'empatia e la gestione delle situazioni complesse, elementi indispensabili per affrontare in modo sano le sfide della quotidianità.

Nel contesto sportivo, la capacità di regolare le emozioni risulta cruciale per il raggiungimento della performance ottimale. Emozioni intense e non adeguatamente controllate possono compromettere concentrazione ed efficacia esecutiva. L'educazione fisica, in tal senso, offre un'opportunità di formazione integrale dell'individuo, unendo sviluppo fisico, sociale ed emotivo attraverso esperienze che promuovono interazione, espressione e consapevolezza (Parlebas, 1997). Tali dinamiche sono particolarmente rilevanti in una società nella quale i giovani, spesso isolati e iperconnessi, necessitano di spazi relazionali concreti per la costruzione identitaria.

L'emotività è fortemente influenzata dal contesto sociale, e la pratica sportiva, sia essa di squadra o individuale ma in ambito collettivo, rappresenta un potente veicolo relazionale. Le attività motorie collettive implicano forme di comunicazione corporea che si modificano in presenza degli altri, trasformando l'azione tecnica in interazione. L'individuo è così stimolato ad assumere differenti ruoli sociomotori, favorendo lo sviluppo dell'intelligenza sociomotoria (Parlebas, 1997).

Elemento fondativo di tale processo è il corpo, che rappresenta il punto di incontro tra pensiero e azione, nonché il principale strumento attraverso cui percepiamo, apprendiamo e ci relazioniamo. Un progetto motorio ben strutturato può dunque fungere da leva per la crescita personale e sociale (Naccari, 2003). Il corpo gioca inoltre un ruolo essenziale nei processi di apprendimento, supportando memoria e motivazione (Paloma, 2004) e consentendo lo sviluppo di competenze motorie e mentali (Casolo & Melica, 2005).

L'immagine corporea evolve in relazione all'autonomia personale e all'integrazione tra corpo, emozione e cultura. Attraverso il movimento, l'individuo si colloca socialmente e costruisce il proprio senso di identità. Le emozioni sono parte integrante dell'esperienza motoria: ogni attività fisica coinvolge l'individuo nella sua globalità, e l'apprendimento significativo si fonda proprio su stimoli emozionali (Coco, 2016). L'ambiente di pratica è condiviso, ma l'elaborazione emotiva è

sogettiva, influenzando motivazione, relazioni e processi cognitivi (Debois et al., 2007). Il corpo, quindi, non è solo uno strumento operativo, ma diviene linguaggio dell'identità (Cunti, 2016).

L'identità personale si costruisce nel dialogo tra corpo e ambiente. L'attività sportiva consente di esplorare e superare i propri limiti, promuovendo una sana autostima. In adolescenza, lo sport costituisce un mezzo privilegiato per confrontarsi con l'esperienza del limite, favorendo l'apprendimento derivante da errori e fallimenti (Ferrante & Sartori, 2011).

L'educazione sportiva può essere interpretata come un dispositivo, ovvero un insieme articolato di pratiche, regole e saperi che agisce sulla soggettività in maniera strutturata (Mariani, 2008; Massa, 1987). Massa (1987) individua nel "dispositivo strutturale" quattro dimensioni costitutive dell'esperienza educativa: spaziale, temporale, corporale e simbolica, a cui si aggiunge la "dimensione finzionale", che distingue l'educazione dalla vita quotidiana, offrendo uno spazio protetto per l'errore e la sperimentazione.

Nella società contemporanea, la pratica sportiva rappresenta una delle attività extrascolastiche più diffuse, in grado di coinvolgere famiglie e comunità. Al di là delle dimensioni agonistiche, lo sport quotidiano costituisce un potente strumento di socializzazione e formazione, a condizione che le organizzazioni sportive adottino una prospettiva pedagogica fondata su competenze specifiche (Navarini, 2002; Naccari, 2003). Lo sport non è solo veicolo di performance tecnica, ma anche occasione di espressione soggettiva e trasformazione personale. Esso consente di convertire vincoli fisici e regolamentari in opportunità di crescita, promuovendo un equilibrio tra individualità e cooperazione, soprattutto nei contesti di gruppo. In tal senso, lo sport può assumere una funzione emancipativa, rendendo il limite una componente generativa del processo educativo.

Tuttavia, ridurre il valore dello sport alla sola prevenzione del disagio o al mero controllo comportamentale rischia di svilirne le potenzialità. L'attività fisica regolare è fondamentale per il benessere psico-fisico, ma va accompagnata da una visione educativa consapevole. L'indagine condotta nel 2016 ha evidenziato livelli preoccupanti di sedentarietà tra bambini e adolescenti, acuiti dall'eccessivo uso di dispositivi digitali (Spinelli et al., 2017).

In questo scenario, diventa essenziale promuovere l'associazionismo sportivo e garantire agli operatori una formazione pedagogica mirata. La pratica sportiva offre infatti esperienze in cui i giovani possono assumere ruoli, confrontarsi con l'errore, condividere emozioni, sviluppando così capacità di ascolto, empatia e riflessione. Lo sport produce salute, disciplina e forza, ma al contempo favorisce relazioni significative con pari e adulti di riferimento, facilita l'apprendimento di regole e comportamenti socialmente condivisi, e legittima l'espressione di emozioni spesso inibite nella vita quotidiana. Consente esperienze ludiche, gratuite e non produttive, favorendo una più profonda consapevolezza del sé corporeo.

In sintesi, lo sport rappresenta una "palestra di vita" (Navarini, 2002), capace di offrire esperienze educative significative. Tuttavia, il rischio di una deriva disciplinare o di omologazione è reale, poiché ogni pratica sociale incorpora un progetto antropologico implicito. È quindi necessario che chi si occupa dell'educazione sportiva attivi competenze pedagogiche capaci di trasformare l'esperienza sportiva in uno spazio formativo autentico. Solo così lo sport potrà diventare un dispositivo complesso, corporeo e simbolico, in grado di accompagnare i giovani nell'elaborazione delle proprie emozioni, paure, speranze e bisogni, offrendo un contesto protetto per la costruzione della propria identità (Barone & Mantegazza, 2004).

5. I fighters

Secondo Pierre Bourdieu (2003), l'habitus conferisce all'individuo una capacità di costruzione e classificazione del mondo sociale, non come soggetto trascendentale, ma in quanto corpo socializzato. Esso rappresenta l'incorporazione duratura di principi sociali, acquisiti attraverso l'esperienza concreta e quotidiana, che plasmano il modo in cui gli individui percepiscono, agiscono e interagiscono. Lungi dall'essere una struttura rigida, l'habitus è un sistema dinamico e flessibile di disposizioni, in costante trasformazione a seguito di nuove esperienze, pur mantenendo una certa coerenza interna.

Nel contesto degli sport da combattimento, l'opera *Fighting Scholars* (Sanchez & Spencer, 2013) indaga l'esperienza di ricercatori che praticano direttamente le discipline oggetto di studio, pugilato, lotta, arti marziali, adottando una prospettiva di sociologia del corpo. In questo approccio, il corpo è considerato non solo oggetto d'indagine, ma anche strumento epistemologico. Il ricercatore, attraverso la pratica incorporata delle tecniche, sviluppa una comprensione situata e incarnata delle modalità con cui i soggetti costruiscono il proprio mondo attraverso corpi intelligenti, sensibili e vulnerabili. In tale prospettiva, l'habitus diviene al contempo oggetto e mezzo dell'indagine etnografica. Tuttavia, l'habitus non genera pratiche in modo automatico: è sempre il risultato dell'interazione tra le disposizioni soggettive incorporate e le condizioni oggettive offerte dal campo sociale in cui si agisce. Queste disposizioni, più o meno integrate tra loro, possono talvolta entrare in tensione, generando comportamenti inattesi o devianti. L'habitus è dunque storico e relazionale, e non può essere compreso in termini astratti o decontestualizzati: esso invita a considerare l'individuo nella sua traiettoria temporale, nelle sue appartenenze sociali e nelle esperienze che ne hanno modellato l'agire.

La distinzione tra habitus primario e secondario (o terziario) consente di cogliere la stratificazione delle disposizioni: le prime, generalmente acquisite in ambito familiare durante l'infanzia, interagiscono con quelle successivamente interiorizzate in contesti scolastici, professionali o culturali. Tale interazione può produrre continuità, ma anche discontinuità e attriti, soprattutto quando si attraversano contesti significativamente differenti dal punto di vista simbolico e normativo. Nel caso degli *scholar-fighters*, l'habitus marziale si costruisce a partire da disposizioni primarie legate a categorie come genere, classe sociale o nazionalità, e si sviluppa mediante un processo formativo intenzionale, una pedagogia corporea orientata. Questo processo può incontrare resistenze quando il nuovo habitus richiesto si discosta in modo marcato da quello originario, rendendo necessaria una negoziazione continua tra ciò che si è e ciò che si deve diventare.

Gli studi sui diversi stili di combattimento mettono in luce tre componenti fondamentali dell'habitus: quella cognitiva, relativa alla percezione e all'interpretazione del mondo; quella conativa, concernente le capacità senso-motorie e cinestetiche acquisite tramite la pratica; e quella affettiva, che comprende l'investimento emotivo e motivazionale nelle attività e nei fini perseguiti. La padronanza di un campo di pratica richiede dunque non solo competenze tecniche e corporee, ma anche una partecipazione emotiva profonda, che orienta l'azione e ne sostiene la durata nel tempo. Spazi come il ring o il tatami si configurano come luoghi privilegiati per osservare i

processi attraverso cui si costruisce la competenza sociale e si accede allo status di membro riconosciuto di un campo specifico. In questi ambienti altamente regolati ma al contempo permeati di incertezza, la condizione umana, fragile, esposta, finita, si confronta con le dimensioni fondamentali del vivere sociale. Attraverso il corpo che lotta, soffre e resiste, si apprendono strategie per affrontare il dolore fisico e le ferite simboliche, acquisendo quelle competenze relazionali e affettive che risultano cruciali anche al di fuori dell'arena sportiva.

6. La ricerca esplorativa

Ogni indagine prende avvio da un impulso di curiosità e, come in ogni percorso di ricerca, anche in questo caso il processo è stato innescato dal desiderio di esplorare una situazione specifica che si è progressivamente delineata come un ambito meritevole di approfondimento (Corrao, 2005). Fin dalle fasi iniziali, la ricerca ha presentato alcune criticità, a partire dalla definizione dell'universo empirico di riferimento e dall'individuazione delle abilità oggetto di studio, ovvero le competenze socio-emotive. Queste ultime, per loro natura complesse e multidimensionali, si sono rivelate difficili da indicizzare e categorizzare, rendendo necessaria un'attenta operazione di traduzione in variabili osservabili e misurabili.

Considerata l'ampiezza della popolazione nazionale praticante sport da combattimento, tanto in ambito agonistico quanto amatoriale, e la conseguente difficoltà nel raggiungere un campione statisticamente rappresentativo, si è optato per una delimitazione del campo d'indagine agli atleti di kickboxing affiliati alla Federkombat. Tale scelta si è basata sia sulla maggiore accessibilità di questo sottogruppo, facilitata dalla prossimità della ricercatrice al contesto in questione, sia sulla dimensione più contenuta dell'universo di riferimento, che ha reso più agevole la somministrazione e la gestione dello strumento di rilevazione.

Per l'analisi delle competenze socio-emotive si è fatto ricorso al software SPSS, che ha consentito una prima elaborazione delle frequenze monovariate delle risposte e l'eventuale ricodifica delle variabili. In un secondo momento, si è proceduto all'indicizzazione di specifici insiemi di item per costruire indicatori sintetici riferiti ai tratti del modello dei *Big Five* e alle *compound skills* individuate dall'OCSE (2015).

La raccolta dei dati è avvenuta tramite un questionario rivolto esclusivamente agli atleti tesserati presso la Federkombat, unica federazione ufficialmente riconosciuta in Italia per la disciplina della kickboxing. Il questionario è stato somministrato in modalità CAWI (*Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing*) attraverso i canali istituzionali e *social* della federazione. La struttura dello strumento prevedeva differenti modalità di risposta, aperta, a scelta multipla, con scale auto-ancoranti e variabili di diversa natura (stringhe, nominali semplici, categoriali ordinali, quasi-cardinali e cardinali).

Il questionario era articolato in tre sezioni principali: (1) *background* sociodemografico, (2) competenze socio-emotive, (3) relazione degli atleti con le esperienze di competizione e fallimento. Le domande sono state selezionate e adattate dal questionario OCSE per il Database SSES 2019, tenendo conto delle specificità del contesto sportivo e dell'ambiente della palestra.

Nella prima sezione (domande 1-8), sono stati raccolti dati relativi a genere (inteso come costruito sociale distinto dal sesso biologico), età anagrafica, condizione occupazionale, livello di istruzione,

regione o provincia autonoma di residenza, classe di età sportiva e livello di competizione raggiunto dagli atleti.

La seconda sezione (domande 9-13) ha approfondito le competenze socio-emotive, intese come la capacità di riconoscere, comprendere e regolare le proprie emozioni, nonché di interpretare e gestire quelle altrui.

Infine, la terza sezione (domande 14-27) si è focalizzata sul vissuto soggettivo degli atleti all'interno dell'ambiente sportivo: le sensazioni associate a determinate situazioni, il significato attribuito ai concetti di "competizione" e "fallimento", le emozioni provate in fase di allenamento e durante le gare, nonché il livello di accordo con alcune affermazioni rappresentative della cultura sportiva di riferimento.

7. I risultati

Come accennato in precedenza, lo strumento di raccolta dati ha suscitato grande interesse tra gli atleti, portando alla compilazione di 215 questionari. La fase di rilevazione si è svolta nell'arco di tre settimane, dal 27 febbraio al 19 marzo 2023.

7.1 Sezione socio-anagrafica

Il campione risulta eterogeneo, con una prevalenza di partecipazione maschile (57,2%) ed una netta maggioranza di atleti agonisti (96,3%). Più della metà (52,1%) ha riportato esperienze di competizione a livello nazionale. La fascia d'età maggiormente rappresentata è quella dei seniores (19-40 anni), che costituisce il 65,1% del totale. Gli atleti praticano diverse discipline della kickboxing, comprendenti sia specialità da ring che da tatami⁴.

7.2 Competenze socio-emotive

Nel percepire il contesto sportivo, la maggioranza degli atleti lo considera un ambiente positivo, inclusivo e gratificante dal punto di vista relazionale. L'82% circa afferma di sentirsi a proprio agio in palestra, senza provare disagio o solitudine, riuscendo facilmente a stringere nuove amicizie e a sentirsi apprezzato. Per quanto riguarda le emozioni legate all'allenamento, emerge una certa fiducia nell'affrontare esercizi nuovi e difficili, anche se, nella scelta degli esercizi, si tende a rimanere nella propria zona di comfort. Le tecniche preferite sono, infatti, quelle in cui si ottengono risultati migliori.

Durante le competizioni, tensione e ansia risultano ampiamente diffuse: l'86,8% degli intervistati dichiara di provare tensione, mentre il 68,3% riferisce di manifestare comportamenti ansiosi. Allo stesso tempo, vi è una consapevolezza matura del significato del successo: si riconosce che non sempre l'atleta più preparato raggiunge il podio, ma si attribuisce comunque grande valore all'impegno ed alla determinazione (83,3%).

Riguardo alla concezione della vittoria, il 76,3% non concorda con l'affermazione "vincere è una questione di fortuna", sottolineando la centralità della preparazione. La ricerca della perfezione è

⁴ Si elencano di seguito le discipline sportive di questo sport che si differenziano tra loro per alcune caratteristiche del combattimento quali tecniche e bersagli regolamentari, tipologia di combattimento se al punto o continuato, presenza ammessa del k.o., tipologia di divisa da combattimento e di protezioni. Per il tatami si hanno: point fighting, light contact, kick light e musical forms (quest'ultima è molto diversa dalle tre precedenti perché assomiglia maggiormente ai kata del karate); per il ring: full contact, low kick e k-1.

un elemento ricorrente: l'86,5% si allena fino a raggiungere una performance considerata ottimale ed il 98,1% si impegna per migliorare costantemente. Il giudizio degli altri è rilevante, specialmente quello degli allenatori, che assumono un ruolo centrale nel percorso sportivo e relazionale degli atleti, soprattutto giovani. Il coach, oltre a supportare tecnicamente, svolge una funzione educativa, mediatore tra atleti e famiglie, e promotore di dinamiche relazionali positive (Navarini, 2002). Tra le competenze richieste per essere un buon allenatore figurano: la capacità di comunicare efficacemente, ascoltare, sostenere gli atleti, gestire il gruppo, curare i dettagli e proporre allenamenti creativi (Ferrante & Sartori, 2011).

Per proseguire l'analisi si è deciso di utilizzare l'analisi fattoriale e sintetizzare alcune variabili in indici ricollegabili ad alcune *ses* del modello *Big Five* e *compound skills*.

A partire dalla batteria della variabile 10, si sono estratte tre componenti: "Immagine positiva personale", "Difficoltà gestionali e "Assertività" [Fig.4-5]; dalla variabile 14 altre due componenti "Riconoscimento in palestra" e "Socialità in palestra" [Fig.6-7]; ed infine dalla 15, spaccettata in due gruppi poiché facente riferimento a due occasioni simili ma non equiparabili (la gara e l'allenamento/palestra) altre 5: "Gestione emozioni gara", "Impegno", "Aspettative" [Fig.8-9]; "Spirito critico" e "Comfort zone" [Fig.10-11].

Fig. 4: Comunalità item 10

COMUNALITA'	
Variabile	Estrazione
10a. Ho grande fiducia nel futuro	0,623
10b. Sono costantemente alla ricerca di nuovi modi per migliorare la mia vita	0,446
10c. Sono generalmente molto sicuro* di me stesso*	0,517
10d. Penso di avere molto di cui essere orgoglioso*	0,578
10e. Se vedo qualcosa che non mi piace, cerco di rimediare	0,507
10f. Ho sempre risolto velocemente i problemi che ho affrontato	0,298
10g. Sono pieno di idee	0,354
10h. Rimango con le mie idee anche quando gli altri non le condividono	0,710
10i. Posso gestire molte informazioni	0,500
10j. Sono sempre pronto a prendermi le mie responsabilità	0,555
10k. Ho difficoltà a pianificare i miei impegni	0,616
10l. Evito i miei doveri	0,708
10m. Spreco il mio tempo	0,672

Fig. 5: Matrice delle componenti estratte variabile 10

MATRICE DELLE COMPONENTI ESTRATTE			
	Immagine positiva personale	Difficoltà gestionali	Assertività
10a. Ho grande fiducia nel futuro	0,778	0,061	-0,118
10b. Sono costantemente alla ricerca di nuovi modi per migliorare la mia vita	0,641	-0,101	0,158
10c. Sono generalmente molto sicuro* di me stesso*	0,711	-0,066	0,083
10d. Penso di avere molto di cui essere orgoglioso*	0,740	-0,133	0,114
10e. Se vedo qualcosa che non mi piace, cerco di rimediare	0,611	-0,207	0,301
10f. Ho sempre risolto velocemente i problemi che ho affrontato	0,513	-0,054	0,177
10g. Sono pieno di idee	0,464	-0,060	0,368
10h. Rimango con le mie idee anche quando gli altri non le condividono	-0,055	0,110	0,834
10i. Posso gestire molte informazioni	0,320	-0,270	0,570
10j. Sono sempre pronto a prendermi le mie responsabilità	0,431	-0,141	0,592
10k. Ho difficoltà a pianificare i miei impegni	0,000	0,777	-0,108
10l. Evito i miei doveri	-0,095	0,830	-0,094
10m. Spreco il mio tempo	-0,163	0,801	0,057

Fig. 6: Comunalità variabile 14

COMUNALITA'	
Variabile	Estrazione
14a. Mi sento fuori posto	0,804
14b. Riesco a farmi facilmente nuovi amici	0,685
14c. Mi sento a disagio	0,766
14d. Altri atleti sembrano apprezzarmi	0,615
14e. Mi sento solo in palestra	0,597

Fig. 7: Matrice delle componenti estratte variabile 14

	Riconoscimento in palestra	Socialità in palestra
14a. Mi sento fuori posto	-0,829	-0,342
14b. Riesco a farmi facilmente nuovi amici	-0,504	0,656
14c. Mi sento a mio disagio	0,865	0,136
14d. Altri atleti sembrano apprezzarmi	0,536	0,572
14e. Mi sento solo in palestra	-0,693	-0,342

Fig. 8: Comunalità variabile 15a-15h

COMUNALITA'	
Variabile	Estrazione
15a. Spesso mi preoccupo che un esercizio possa essere difficile per me	0,367
15b. Anche se mi preparo bene per una gara, mi sento ansioso	0,871
15c. Divento molto teso quando devo gareggiare	0,856
15d. Per ottenere risultati soddisfacenti servono impegno e forza di volontà	0,534
15e. Un atleta ben preparato arriva sempre sul podio	0,558
15f. Vincere è una questione di fortuna	0,629
15g. Continuo ad allenarmi finché non mi sembra tutto perfetto	0,604
15h. Cerco di migliorare le mie prestazioni passate	0,540

Fig. 9: Matrice delle componenti estratte variabile 15a-15h

MATRICE DELLE COMPONENTI ESTRATTE			
	Gestione emozioni gara	Impegno	Aspettative
15a. Spesso mi preoccupo che un esercizio possa essere difficile per me	0,486	-0,315	-0,179
15b. Anche se mi preparo bene per una gara, mi sento ansioso	0,906	-0,216	0,060
15c. Divento molto teso quando devo gareggiare	0,903	-0,188	0,072
15d. Per ottenere risultati soddisfacenti servono impegno e forza di volontà	0,384	0,440	-0,439
15e. Un atleta ben preparato arriva sempre sul podio	0,142	0,265	0,684
15f. Vincere è una questione di fortuna	-0,099	-0,515	0,595
15g. Continuo ad allenarmi finché non mi sembra tutto perfetto	0,297	0,659	0,287
15h. Cerco di migliorare le mie prestazioni passate	0,091	0,716	0,139

Fig. 10: Comunalità variabile 15i-15m

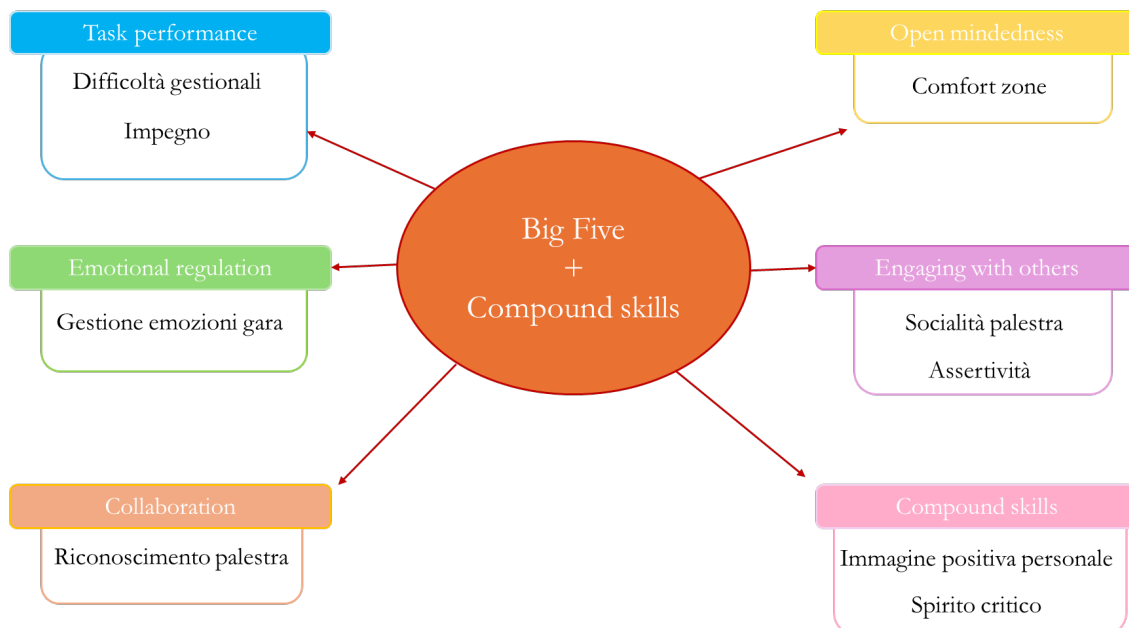
COMUNALITA'	
Variabile	Estrazione
15i. In allenamento, preferisco fare cose che posso fare bene piuttosto che cose che faccio male	0,648
15j. In palestra le opinioni degli altri su quanto bene io faccia certe cose sono importanti per me	0,711
15k. In palestra le opinioni dei miei allenatori su quanto bene io faccia certe cose, sono importanti per me	0,811
15l. In palestra mi piace essere abbastanza sicuro di poter svolgere con successo un esercizio/ una tecnica prima di tentare	0,476
15m. In palestra gli esercizi che mi piacciono di più sono gli esercizi che faccio meglio	0,348

Fig. 11: Matrice delle componenti estratte variabile 15i-15m

	Spirito critico	Comfort zone
15i. In allenamento, preferisco fare cose che posso fare bene piuttosto che cose che faccio male	0,530	0,606
15j. In palestra le opinioni degli altri su quanto bene io faccia certe cose sono importanti per me	0,766	-0,352
15k. In palestra le opinioni dei miei allenatori su quanto bene io faccia certe cose, sono importanti per me	0,526	-0,731
15l. In palestra mi piace essere abbastanza sicuro di poter svolgere con successo un esercizio/ una tecnica prima di tentare	0,568	0,392
15m. In palestra gli esercizi che mi piacciono di più sono gli esercizi che faccio meglio	0,555	0,199

In sintesi, lo schema Big Five ricavato da questa indagine è il seguente [Fig.12]:

Fig. 12: Schema *Big Five + compound skills* indagine atleti Federkombat



Per dare dei primi risultati in materia di sport da combattimento e *ses*, si è deciso, inoltre, di utilizzare il comando “confronta medie” del programma SPSS e riportare alcuni esiti

rilevanti ottenuti con gli indici estratti ed alcune variabili della sezione sportiva e socio-anagrafica del questionario.

Tab. 5: Confronta medie indici * genere

	Femmina			Maschio			Altro			Totale		
	Media	N	Deviazione std.	Media	N	Deviazione e std.	Media	N	Deviazione std.	Media	N	Deviazione std.
Difficoltà gestionali	-,2901977	90	1,00735114	,2105726	123	,95223871	,1086826	2	,07265678	,0000000	215	1,00000000
Impegno	-,2150918	90	,92844399	,1600435	123	1,03161379	-,1635410	2	,27886267	,0000000	215	1,00000000
Comfort zone	,0160844	90	,98801564	-,0234503	123	1,01541895	,7183916	2	,45399344	,0000000	215	1,00000000
Gestione emozioni gara	,1676853	90	1,09845863	-,1244877	123	,89872774	,1101519	2	1,89992298	,0000000	215	1,00000000
Aspettative	-,1858580	90	,98128043	,1475073	123	,99293873	-,7080911	2	1,10896638	,0000000	215	1,00000000
Socialità palestra	-,1425169	90	1,08583857	,1048944	123	,93090155	-,0377486	2	,39784801	,0000000	215	1,00000000
Assertività	,2523839	90	1,06132818	-,2024920	123	,90793357	1,0959794	2	,02130663	,0000000	215	1,00000000
Riconoscimento palestra	,1266038	90	1,04750982	-,1029633	123	,94355823	,6350716	2	2,04262714	,0000000	215	1,00000000
Immagine positiva personale	-,0629640	90	1,01874354	,0791273	123	,92225127	-2,0329526	2	2,91082217	,0000000	215	1,00000000
Spirito critico	,1185206	90	1,00559231	-,0856512	123	,99270430	-,0658761	2	1,26498145	,0000000	215	1,00000000

Quando si osservano le differenze tra generi nell'ambito della performance sportiva, i dati iniziano a raccontare una storia più profonda, fatta di pressioni sociali, aspettative interiorizzate e ruoli ancora oggi diseguali.

Task performance

Nel cuore delle sfide gestionali, le donne sembrano portare un peso maggiore: il loro punteggio medio negativo (-0,290) parla di difficoltà nella gestione delle attività legate alla performance. Gli uomini, al contrario, mostrano una media positiva (0,210), suggerendo una maggiore serenità in questo ambito. Non è difficile ipotizzare che questo divario affondi le radici nelle responsabilità sociali che gravano ancora in gran parte sul genere femminile: la cura della casa, dei figli, il carico mentale. A ciò si aggiunge il *gender gap* lavorativo e salariale, ancora presente, che contribuisce a rendere il cammino femminile più accidentato. È forse per questo che, parlando di impegno sportivo, gli uomini segnano una media positiva (0,160), mentre le donne si attestano leggermente sotto la soglia (-0,215): per molte, lo sport può diventare una voce da bilanciare in una vita già carica di priorità.

Open mindedness

Sul fronte dell'apertura mentale, ovvero la propensione ad accogliere il nuovo e a mettersi in gioco, emerge un'altra sfumatura interessante: le donne tendono a restare nella propria zona di comfort (0,016), mentre gli uomini si dimostrano leggermente più aperti alla sperimentazione.

Una scelta forse legata al desiderio di sicurezza in un contesto dove mettersi in discussione significa anche esporsi.

Emotional regulation

Quando sopraggiunge la gara, sono le donne a sperimentare livelli più alti di stress e ansia. Il peso delle emozioni sembra gravare con maggiore intensità sul lato femminile. Eppure, anche gli uomini non ne sono esenti: l'ansia da prestazione colpisce anche loro, ma si manifesta diversamente: come un'urgenza di validazione esterna, dove il podio non è solo un traguardo personale, ma la conferma del proprio valore agli occhi degli altri.

Engaging with others e collaboration

Nel dialogo con gli altri, le donne appaiono più assertive: vedono nella palestra uno spazio per emergere, per affermarsi. Tuttavia, è proprio in questo luogo che si avverte anche una certa difficoltà nell'intessere relazioni. Gli uomini, al contrario, mostrano una maggiore propensione a "fare gruppo", a vivere la palestra come un contesto di socialità. Eppure, quando si parla di riconoscimento, sono le donne a sentire maggiormente il valore sociale che l'ambiente restituisce loro (media positiva di 0,127), mentre gli uomini sembrano percepirsi meno riconosciuti (media negativa di -0,103). Forse perché, per le donne, la palestra rappresenta più un mezzo che un fine: un luogo dove affermarsi come individui, pur restando distanti dalla dimensione collettiva.

Compound skills

Infine, nelle cosiddette competenze trasversali, emerge un'ulteriore dicotomia: gli uomini mostrano una media negativa nel pensiero critico, ma positiva nell'immagine di sé. Le donne, invece, riportano l'opposto. Questo quadro racconta di un mondo femminile spesso segnato dall'insoddisfazione verso sé stesse, alimentata da standard sociali difficili da raggiungere. Eppure, proprio questa tensione spinge le donne a mettersi continuamente in discussione, ad affinare il pensiero critico, a cercare di migliorarsi giorno dopo giorno.

Ponendo, invece, l'attenzione sulla divisione per classi di età agonistica, si hanno i seguenti risultati [Tab. 6]:

Tab. 6: Confronta medie indici * Classe di età sportiva

	Young Cadet			Old Cadet			Junior			Senior			Veteran			Totale		
	Media	N	Deviazione std.	Media	N	Deviazione e std.	Media	N	Deviazione std.	Media	N	Deviazione std.	Media	N	Deviazione e std.	Media	N	Deviazione e std.
Difficoltà gestionali	1,7741571	3	1,32910970	,0919723	18	,93540195	,1526792	48	,98787078	-,1095637	140	0,97097436	,1720581	6	1,10501436	,0000000	215	1,0000000
Impegno	-,0937759	3	,69343808	,3054522	18	0,82072623	,0120880	48	1,06572514	-,0656951	140	1,00872200	,5667129	6	0,71087730	,0000000	215	1,0000000
Comfort zone	,5655249	3	-,56109486	-,1116375	18	1,10936852	-,2406678	48	,86186223	,0737212	140	1,03907124	-,2106632	6	,69707673	,0000000	215	1,0000000
Gestione emozioni gara	,4301469	3	0,84245410	,3048392	18	1,07452757	,0951190	48	1,09375910	-,0726537	140	0,95442469	-,1952908	6	1,13815633	,0000000	215	1,0000000
Aspettative	,6315004	3	-,52071405	-,3153078	18	,79870132	,1707581	48	1,12578380	-,0465252	140	,98313790	,3496967	6	,80889680	,0000000	215	1,0000000
Socialità palestra	,6787798	3	0,81159684	,0601610	18	0,95189348	-,1741843	48	1,04335502	,0401695	140	1,00147394	-,0636869	6	0,84275584	,0000000	215	1,0000000
Assertività	,0590487	3	0,46511926	,1586152	18	0,91000561	,1306635	48	1,07148314	-,0322214	140	0,95509353	-,7988448	6	1,64173365	,0000000	215	1,0000000
Riconoscimento palestra	,6804227	3	0,43443645	-,1562241	18	0,88159714	,2633746	48	1,16583421	-,0599760	140	0,95985707	-,5790964	6	0,39778367	,0000000	215	1,0000000
Immagine positiva personale	-,4933490	3	0,24498819	-,1635042	18	1,30749818	-,0873635	48	0,99816850	,0381964	140	0,97076816	,5448455	6	0,82874987	,0000000	215	1,0000000
Spirito critico	,6397695	3	0,77627894	-,0249260	18	1,20778024	,1271955	48	0,85755293	-,0495125	140	1,02594258	-,1073781	6	0,96943367	,0000000	215	1,0000000

Young Cadet (10-12 anni)

I più giovani si affacciano al mondo agonistico con un'energia intensa ma ancora disordinata. I dati mostrano un'altissima media nelle difficoltà gestionali (1,774): un segnale chiaro che questi atleti sono ancora in cerca di un equilibrio nella gestione del tempo, delle responsabilità e delle aspettative. Al tempo stesso, la socialità in palestra è vivace (0,679), quasi a suggerire che il gruppo rappresenti per loro un rifugio e un punto di riferimento. Eppure, nonostante questa apertura verso l'esterno, l'immagine positiva di sé risulta negativa (-0,493): i più giovani sembrano convivere con un senso di insicurezza interiore, come se il confronto con gli altri evidenziasse ancora troppe fragilità non del tutto risolte.

Old Cadet (13-15 anni)

Nella fase successiva, quella degli *Old Cadet*, il panorama si fa più stabile. Le medie si avvicinano alla neutralità, indice di un certo equilibrio che si va costruendo. Emergono leggere tendenze positive sia nell'impegno (0,305) sia nella gestione delle emozioni in gara (0,305): segnali di una maggiore consapevolezza, forse ancora fragile, ma già orientata al miglioramento. È una fase di transizione, dove l'energia giovanile inizia a canalizzarsi verso obiettivi più concreti.

Junior (16-18 anni)

Gli *Junior* vivono una contraddizione interessante. Da un lato, percepiscono un buon livello di riconoscimento in palestra (0,263) e mostrano aspettative crescenti rispetto all'impegno (0,171); dall'altro, proprio la socialità in palestra risulta negativa (-0,174). È come se questi atleti iniziassero a vedere lo sport come un terreno su cui affermarsi, ma sentissero allo stesso tempo una distanza dagli altri. Il gruppo non è più solo uno spazio di gioco e condivisione: diventa competizione,

confronto, bisogno di emergere e ciò può comportare una percezione di isolamento o fatica relazionale.

Senior (19-40 anni)

Con l'età, con i *senior*, si entra in una fase di maggiore maturità. Le medie si avvicinano tutte allo zero, segno di un equilibrio ormai raggiunto. Tuttavia, compaiono leggere tendenze negative nella gestione delle emozioni in gara (-0,073) e nelle difficoltà gestionali (-0,110). È come se i *senior* avessero sviluppato strategie di controllo che, pur senza eccellere, permettono loro di mantenere la rotta. Sono atleti forse meno impulsivi, più misurati, consapevoli dei propri limiti e delle proprie risorse.

Veterani (41-55 anni)

Infine, i veterani rappresentano un paradosso affascinante. Da un lato, mostrano un impegno altissimo (0,567) e una forte immagine positiva di sé (0,545): sono atleti motivati, determinati, spesso esempi per i più giovani. Tuttavia, questi stessi atleti riportano difficoltà nel campo della assertività (-0,799) e una bassa percezione di riconoscimento sociale e socialità in palestra (-0,579). È come se il loro percorso fosse diventato fortemente individuale: una strada solitaria, guidata da obiettivi personali e interiori, ma non sempre accompagnata dal senso di appartenenza al gruppo. L'impegno diventa allora una questione di identità, non necessariamente condivisa o riconosciuta dagli altri.

7.3 Significato del fallimento

Alla domanda sul significato attribuito al fallimento è emersa una lettura prevalentemente proattiva: esso viene interpretato come un'occasione di miglioramento, sia della performance che del percorso di allenamento. Gli atleti lo considerano un'opportunità educativa, distinguendo chiaramente tra fallire e perdere. La maggioranza degli intervistati ritiene infatti che fallire significhi non raggiungere gli obiettivi prefissati, ma non per questo si configura come una sconfitta definitiva.

Dati significativi emergono nelle risposte conclusive: il 70,2% degli atleti preferisce “perdere ma essere soddisfatto della prestazione” piuttosto che “vincere senza sentirsi soddisfatto di sé”. Inoltre, il 76,3% dichiara che non abbandonerebbe la kickboxing anche dopo un periodo prolungato di insuccessi, evidenziando un attaccamento forte verso lo sport ed il gruppo di appartenenza. Le motivazioni addotte spaziano dall'amore per la disciplina alla determinazione personale: “perché amo il mio sport”, “faccio ciò che mi piace, e se fallisco, ci riprovo”, “il fallimento è parte della crescita”, “con costanza si superano tutte le difficoltà”.

Il 90,2% ha dichiarato di aver vissuto esperienze di fallimento associate a emozioni intense come delusione, frustrazione e tristezza, spesso legate al non aver espresso appieno il proprio potenziale o al timore di aver deluso le persone significative.

Le emozioni provate in tre contesti distinti, allenamento, gara e fallimento, rivelano sfumature interessanti [Fig.13].

Fig. 13: Le emozioni provate in allenamento, in gara e dopo aver vissuto un fallimento

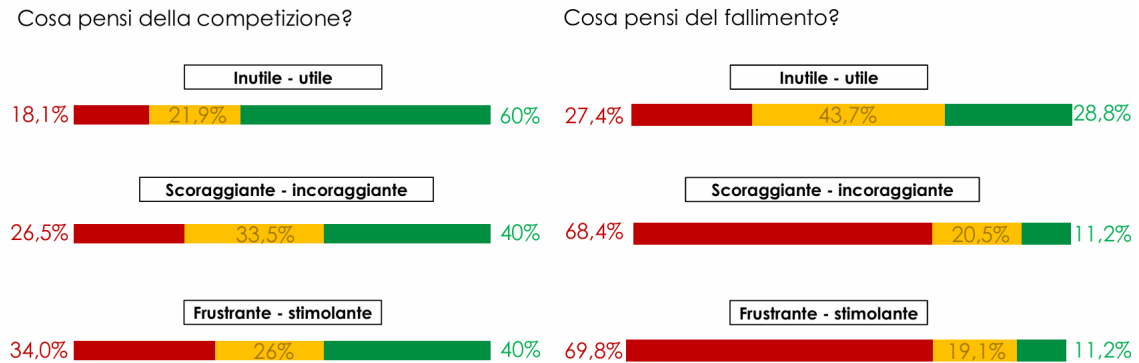
Che emozioni provi quando ti alleni?	Che emozioni provi quando gareggi?	Se hai mai fallito, descrivi il tuo stato d'animo in seguito al fallimento vissuto
● Felicità	● Adrenalina	● Tristezza
● Adrenalina	● Ansia	● Frustrazione
● Benessere	● Tensione	● Rabbia
● Spensieratezza	● Eccitazione	● Nervosismo
● Gioia	● Fierezza	● Delusione
● Libertà	● Timore	● Amarezza
● Serenità	● Pressione	● Dispiacere
● Divertimento	● Grinta	● Scoraggiamento
● Sfogo	● Orgoglio	
● Rabbia	● Concentrazione	

Durante l'allenamento prevalgono emozioni positive: libertà, felicità, soddisfazione, energia, senso di sfogo. Le gare mantengono una componente ludica, ma a questa si affiancano adrenalina, eccitazione e, in molti casi, ansia e tensione. Nonostante ciò, la competizione è vissuta come stimolante e formativa. Il fallimento, infine, è accompagnato da emozioni spiacevoli come frustrazione e amarezza. Questi segnali possono suggerire la presenza di un perfezionismo "nevrotico" (Hamachek, 1978), sebbene in forma lieve, che merita attenzione.

Nonostante tutto, sia la sfida che il fallimento sono riconosciuti come elementi fondamentali nel processo di crescita personale e sportiva. Risulta dunque prioritario promuovere una sana educazione emotiva all'interno del contesto sportivo, per prevenire gli effetti negativi di un perfezionismo disfunzionale. Lo sport, in quanto ambiente strutturato, rappresenta un laboratorio privilegiato per sperimentare dinamiche complesse e favorire uno sviluppo armonico dell'individuo.

Un'ulteriore riflessione nasce dal confronto tra percezioni legate a competizione e fallimento. Mentre la competizione è generalmente considerata utile, stimolante e incoraggiante, il fallimento appare vissuto come scoraggiante e frustrante, sebbene venga comunque riconosciuto come esperienza formativa [Fig. 14].

Fig. 14: Competizione e fallimento a confronto



8. Conclusioni

Dallo studio emerge che gli atleti di kickboxing nutrono una passione profonda per il proprio sport e mostrano un buon livello di sviluppo delle competenze socio-emotive. L'ambiente sportivo è generalmente vissuto come stimolante e positivo, ma la dimensione competitiva porta con sé emozioni intense come ansia, stress e tensione. In particolare, la competizione viene interpretata non tanto come un ostacolo, quanto come una sfida significativa: un'occasione per testare i propri limiti, valutare i progressi compiuti e conoscersi più a fondo. Tuttavia, il fatto che molte delle emozioni associate alle gare siano di natura ansiogena richiede un'attenta riflessione: è fondamentale indagarne le cause e promuovere strategie efficaci di gestione emotiva, al fine di prevenire derive disfunzionali come il perfezionismo nevrotico (Hamachek, 1978), con le relative implicazioni in termini di disagio psicologico.

Nonostante le difficoltà, i partecipanti riconoscono nella competizione e nel fallimento due elementi imprescindibili per il miglioramento personale e atletico: momenti di crisi, ma anche motori di crescita e consapevolezza. Un dato particolarmente rilevante è il ruolo persistente del divertimento, che contraddice gli stereotipi più comuni sugli sport da combattimento, spesso erroneamente associati a violenza e mancanza di valori educativi. Al contrario, i risultati indicano che la kickboxing favorisce la costruzione di relazioni sociali appaganti, stimolanti e basate sull'equilibrio emotivo.

Come sottolineato dall'Organizzazione Mondiale della Sanità nel documento Life Skills Education in Schools (1993), è cruciale promuovere il capitale umano lungo tutto l'arco della vita, aiutando le persone a crescere come cittadini, professionisti e individui completi. In questo quadro, l'educazione emotiva riveste un ruolo centrale, perché consente agli individui di affrontare con maggiore efficacia le continue sfide sociali che si presentano. Lo sport, grazie alla sua struttura rituale e codificata, si configura come un contesto privilegiato per sperimentare un

ampio spettro di emozioni – positive (piacere corporeo, gioco di squadra, soddisfazione) e negative (frustrazione, fatica, delusione) – in un ambiente regolato e sicuro.

L'attività sportiva si conferma dunque come uno strumento pedagogico trasversale ed efficace, in grado di favorire l'autoconsapevolezza, la costruzione di legami autentici e l'acquisizione di competenze trasversali utili nei diversi ambiti della vita. Ma affinché ciò avvenga in modo consapevole e profondo, è indispensabile una solida educazione emotiva, di cui lo sport può essere espressione indiretta ma potente, agendo come laboratorio informale per la crescita della personalità nella sua totalità. I risultati ottenuti sollecitano, in definitiva, una riflessione più ampia sul ruolo educativo dello sport, inteso come spazio privilegiato per trasformare il fallimento in un'opportunità di crescita, tanto individuale quanto collettiva.

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Taekwondo-In as a platform for the social integration of migrants

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Abstract

This article examines the phenomenon of social integration of migrants through the practice of sporting and physical cultural activities. More specifically, it illustrates how Taekwondo, as a martial art and combat sport, can contribute to social integration. A collective instrumental case study gathered observational and interview data on three multicultural Taekwondo clubs. Following a directed content analysis, our findings suggest that Taekwondo can function as an effective platform for social integration promoting bridging, bonding forms of social capital and pluralised integrated identity as part of the development of a Taekwondo practitioner identity known as Taekwondo-In. In conclusion, we consider the unique features these kinds of martial arts appear to have for functioning as platforms for social integration for both migrant and domestic populations, but that further research is needed including work to better understand the specific processes and practices through which arts like Taekwondo achieve this.

Keywords: Migration, Social Integration, Taekwondo, Identity, Bridging, Bonding, Social Capital, Globalisation.

1. Introduction

The topic of migration is increasingly capturing the attention of scholars, policy makers, politicians as well as becoming the locus of public debate and politicised moral panic. The most recent available data show that “international migration remains relatively uncommon, with a mere 3.6 per cent (or 281 million) of the world being international migrants” (International Organisation for Migration [IOM] 2024). Nevertheless, the anthropologist, Erlandson (2010) shows that “migrations have played a fundamental role in human history” (p. 191), while historians Lucasson, Lucassen and Manning (2010, p. 4) articulate how migration has been a structural aspect of human life since the beginning, causing adaptations in language, technology, social systems and culture. They also acknowledge that at the same time, “patterns of migration

have changed along with modifications in technology, social organization, and ideology” (ibid. p. 18). The IOM (2024) confirms this, stating,

Ongoing technological, geopolitical and environmental global transformations are particularly relevant to help better understand strategic issues shaping the context in which people migrate, and the growing increase in displacement globally.

More sociologically, we might refer to these as one of the consequences of accelerating globalisation processes within an era of reflexive modernisation and multiple modernities (Lee, 2008; Fourie, 2012). Unsurprisingly the issue of *immigration* has risen on the political and civic agenda given significantly increased ‘forced displacement’ which the IOM (ibid) highlights is “the highest on record in the modern era” due to the ‘seismic shifts’ of technological, geopolitical and environmental transformation highlighted. The corollary to migration and immigration is *social integration*. Park and Burgess’s (1969, p. 735) classic definition of social integration suggests it is,

a process of interpenetration and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitude of other persons and groups and, by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in a common cultural life.

Brissette, Cohen and Seeman (2000) focus on the importance of relationships suggesting social integration is “the extent to which an individual participates in a broad range of social relationships” (p. 54), Wessendorf and Phillimore’s (2019) more recent, definition reflects a growing understanding of the importance of,

the relations migrants establish after they arrive in a new country. Such relations can be with members of the receiving society, through clubs, associations and institutions, or with co-ethnics. Importantly, social integration is considered to be instrumental regarding access to more structural aspects of integration because information about jobs, housing and schools is often gained through social connectedness (pp. 125-6).

Many of the politicised ‘moral panics’ are less about migrants themselves and more about the fear of their (assumed) failure to socially integrate. ‘Refugee-phobia’ represents one negative example of this encounter where migrants are effectively denied opportunities to socially integrate. This was illustrated in German and South Korean¹ incidents involving anti-refugee protestors.

More positively, migration can produce opportunities for encounters which promote a rich intermingling of diverse cultures developing intercultural understanding, tolerance (Parekh, 2002) and multiculturalism (Taylor & Gutmann, 1994). For these more positive outcomes to be a possibility, cultural encounters need platforms through which positive forms of social integration can occur. Our research contributes to the relatively limited research on social integration that may occur through sport and physical culture.

The paper reports on a study that examined how Taekwondo, as a martial art and combat sport, can contribute to social integration. It builds on Madsen’s (2015) work that concludes

¹ In 2018, 550 Yemeni refugees arrived in Jeju, South Korea, but faced hostility from anti-refugee protestors shouting, “We are the first [people/nation], Go back (Bo, 2018).” Emcke (2019, p.18), in ‘Against Hate’, criticised the German Klaunitz incident, in 2016, when locals shouted, “We are the people, you are not”, at a refugee bus.

Taekwondo fosters social integration in terms of sociolinguistics suggesting “such encounters show that the processes of integration involve more than just the co-presence of diverse groups of individuals” (p. 182). A collective instrumental case study gathered observational and interview data on three multicultural Taekwondo clubs. Following a directed content analysis, our findings suggest that Taekwondo functions as an effective platform for social integration promoting Putnam’s *bridging* and *bonding* forms of social capital, and Sen’s (2007) multifaceted ideas of integrated identity as part of the development of a Taekwondo-In practitioner identity. The findings illustrate how Taekwondo practice helps to build trust-based relationships, both within and outside of the Taekwondo club context. These acted as bridging and bonding forms of capital via social networks that facilitated not only the *social* integration of migrant practitioners but also their *structural* integration, which supports Wessendorf and Phillimore’s (2019, pp. 125-6) earlier point that these kinds of social integration activities are very important offerings for migrant populations and recipient communities alike.

In what follows, we identify empirical research that has been conducted in the area of social integration through sport and physical culture before covering the concepts of identity construction and bridging and bonding forms of social capital. Next, we explain the methodological strategy for this study and then present, interpret and discuss our data. The conclusion considers the unique features these kinds of martial arts appear to have for functioning as platforms for social integration for both migrant and domestic populations. It also delineates areas of focus for further research.

2. Sport, physical culture, Taekwondo and Social integration

Social integration as theory, policy and practice has been studied extensively for decades (see Park & Burgess, 1969; Glazer & Moynihan, 1970; Alba & Nee, 1997; Bisin & Verdier, 2000; Parekh, 2002; Penninx, 2005; Gebhardt, 2014). More specifically, there is a growing body of research literature considering social integration through sports and physical culture (Andrei, 2016; Elling et. al, 2001; Seippel, 2005; Said & Amine, 2022; Höglund & Bruhn, 2022) and some studies that draw on developing social capital in this focus (Richardson, 2012; Schulenkorf, 2013). However, importantly, we acknowledge those studies related to our research on the contribution of sports and physical cultures to the social integration of immigrants (Coalter, 2007; Doherty & Taylor, 2007; Hofmann, 2008; Agergaard & Sørensenb, 2010; Spaaij, 2011; Makarova & Herzog, 2014; Blecking, 2015; Braun & Nobis, 2016; Buser, et al., 2016; Whitley et al., 2016; Allin et al., 2017; Piatkowska et al., 2017; Carmi & Kidron, 2018; Moyo, 2018; D’Angelo, 2019; Doidge, et al., 2020; Flensner, et al., 2020; Kölbel, 2024; Lee et al., 2021; Nagel et al., 2020; Michelini, 2020; Chatzopoulos, 2021). Notable amongst these is Spaaij (2011), who examined how engagement in sport enabled Somali migrants in Australia to cultivate social capital and negotiate the challenges associated with integration. Similarly, Whitley et al. (2016) assessed sport-based youth development initiatives for refugee populations, concluding that such programmes enhance psychosocial well-being and foster a sense of belonging within local communities. More recently, Michelini’s (2020) systematic review further substantiates the role of physical activity and sport as significant platforms for refugee integration across a range of domains identifying three key

mechanisms through which sport facilitates refugee integration: (1) social connection building, (2) health and wellbeing promotion, and (3) cultural orientation. While martial arts and combat sports research does not typically generically address social integration, recent research suggests that nevertheless, they can foster meaningful social connections by enhancing interpersonal engagement (Purnamasari, 2017). Furthermore, martial art disciplines have been associated with improved psychosocial well-being through the cultivation of inclusiveness, mutual respect, and a sense of communal belonging (Healey, 2025), as well as the reinforcement of self-confidence, which is essential for effective social interaction (Calinog et al., 2021).

Given the above literature, it is perhaps surprising, especially so because of the intrinsic geographic origins of many martial arts, with a few important exceptions we mention later, that there remains a lack of research on the social integrative function of martial arts. As well as responding to this obvious gap in the research literature, our study identified Taekwondo as containing features that can play a positive role in social integration. The principal reason is the sociality of “Taekwondo-In” which according to Tadesse, (2015; 2016) is as an essential feature of the art’s social interaction and a holistic and collective element of the Taekwondo personality. We consider these features make it well suited to developing social integration.

Madsen’s (2015) study of Taekwondo argues that recent research in the sociology of sports assumes that participation in sports clubs fosters the integration of socially marginalised youth minority into mainstream society. She highlights how, in Danish popular discourse, the lack of participation in organised leisure activities is a symptom of problems in social integration and, there has been a focus on increasing the number of members in sports clubs for the integration of ethnic minorities in Denmark. In her book “Fighters, Girls and Other Identities” (2015), Madsen studied Nørrebro Taekwondo Club in Denmark, examining how Taekwondo fosters social integration. Through interviews with ethnic youth in the multi-ethnic Nørrebro environment, she used identity categorisation to analyse how they navigate their social position. Madsen found that minority youth, by showcasing their skilled techniques, reinforce social distinctions, positively impacting the social integration of immigrant youth. Notably, Taekwondo was seen to transcend ethnocentricity, acting as a platform for forming a new community identity and enhancing social integration. Finally, ‘Taekwondo-In’ is ‘태권도인’ in Korean and ‘跆拳道人’ in Chinese. The word ‘인; 人; In’ means a person. Taekwondo means the way of using the feet and hands correctly. It is a person who practices and embodies the meaning of Taekwondo not only practising skills and techniques but also cultivating the inner self (Song & Na, 2011).

As the above section delineates, there has been a steady development of research on social integration, social integration in sport and social integration of immigrant populations through sport specifically. However, there remains a gap in research literature on social integration of immigrant populations through traditional martial arts, generally and specifically here, Taekwondo. The study seeks to contribute to the social integration literature by building a more nuanced understanding of how arts like Taekwondo may foster both bonding and bridging social capital, facilitate pluralised integrative identities, and support structural integration pathways for migrants. Employing a comparative, multi-sited case study approach across diverse cultural contexts, the study provides empirical insights into the unique cultural, pedagogical, practical and philosophical dynamics of Taekwondo that may contribute to social cohesion. It also lays the

groundwork for imagining future longitudinal and comparative research, positioning martial arts not merely as recreational activities, but as potent policy instruments for migrant integration.

3. Identity and social integration

The recognition of ‘Others’ is an important identification process humans often use to form individual and group identities (including, ethnic group, occupational, identity regional, national, broad culture and even civilisational (Giddens, 1991; Giddens & Philip, 2017; Huntington, 2002; MacClancy, 1996). The root of the term ‘identity’ is the Latin *idem*, which means ‘same’ (Lawler, 2014). ‘Same’ can only be defined by ‘different’. In explaining the construction of identity through difference, Young (1990) points out that, “...by seeking to reduce the differently similar to the same, it turns the merely different into the absolutely other” (p. 99). Therefore, according to the principle of alterity it is not possible to recognise ‘same’ without awareness of ‘difference and otherness’, and in so doing recognize those who are ‘different’ from ‘us’ as ‘Others’. The Other category is problematic because it “lies outside the unified as the chaotic, unformed, transforming, that always threatens to cross the border and break up the unity of the good” (ibid, p. 99). This is what typically happens with migrants who become Othered as ‘outsiders’ and threaten to break up the presumed unity of a given collective group identity.

Set against this theoretical backdrop, we use Amartya Sen’s (2007) work which challenges Othering processes through a different form of identification in the hope it may produce a more organic form of multiculturalism. For Sen, identity is *multi-faceted, pluralized and de-centred*. We see ourselves and others situated in various identity groups in the different contexts of our daily lives. Sen (2007) contends that the assumption people have only one unique or ‘primordial centred’, ascribed identity generates an ‘illusion of destiny’ which is found in the dogma of fundamentalist beliefs and breeds mistrust of and violence towards the Other. Sen (2007, pp. 27-28) argues for the plurality of identity passionately:

The insistence, if only implicitly, on a choiceless singularity of human identity not only diminishes us all, it also makes the world much more flammable. The alternative to the divisiveness of one preeminent categorization is not any unreal claim that we are all much the same. That we are not. Rather, the main hope of harmony in our troubled world lies in the plurality of our identities, which cut across each other and work against sharp divisions around one single hardened line of vehement division that allegedly cannot be resisted.

The totality of each group to which a person belongs provides the person a specific identity. However, none of the groups a person belongs to can be considered that person’s only unique identity or a single membership category. Therefore, individual identity forms as an accumulation of the various group identities suggesting better integrated individuals have greater likelihood of developing a pluralized identity where Othering is less of a defining feature of identity construction. Therefore, when we recognise ourselves in others and others in ourselves Othering is displaced and replaced by what we refer to as *pluralized integrative identification*.

4. Social capital and integration

Since Bourdieu (1986) added notions of cultural, social and symbolic capital to Marx's (1976) notion of economic and incorporated capital, the concept of social capital has been widely developed (see for example, Briggs, 2004; Putnam, 1995, 2000; Vidal, 2004; Woolcock, 1998). In this paper, we use elements of Putnam's social capital.

Putnam (1995) defines social capital as "social organisation such as networks, norms, and 'social trust' that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (p. 67). His interpretation of social capital is uniquely developed to explore social integration occurring through the sub-concepts of *bonding* social capital and *bridging* social capital (Putnam, 2000). Bonding social capital articulates relationships between members in the 'within-group' and community. It strengthens the relationships and ethnic-cultural identity of homogeneous groups. In contrast, bridging social capital articulates relationships with more distant colleagues and associates: 'inter-individuals' and 'inter-groups'. It connects people or groups who previously did not interact with one another.

Putnam (2007) theorises that when the community becomes ethnically more diverse, there are more 'others' who are 'unlike us'. It causes people to tend to 'shrink down' and withdraw, reducing social connections and lowering levels of mutual trust. In short, increased ethnic diversity reduces the ability to establish social capital in the community compared to homogeneous ethnic community relatively speaking. Put differently, increasingly diversified multi-cultural societies do not automatically connect majority and minority groups. In the sociological sense, in general the *minority group* is used to refer to groups which have less power and benefits such as minority ethnic groups (particularly non-white people), women, and so on in relation to the dominant group considered as a *majority group* in society (Ghosh, 2000, p. 281) despite some minority groups being relatively influential in certain contexts, e.g. Jewish, Irish or Italian minority ethnic groups in the US. Within each insular community, the bond by the cultural similarity of the homogeneous group is relatively easily formed as bonding social capital but, bridging ties through group interchanges are less easily formed, but critical for social integration. Putnam (2000) argues that capital theory suggests active participation in sports fosters social bonding and bridging capital. While bonding social capital reinforces cultural identity within ethnic groups, bridging social capital exposes individuals to diverse experiences and the opportunity to interact with people from different ethnic backgrounds. Putnam (2000) emphasises that sports can contribute to ethnic integration by bridging the gap between majority and minority groups, highlighting the need to "transcend our social, political, and professional identities" (p. 411) for the building of bridging social capital.

Theeboom et al. (2012) explored Putnam's bonding and bridging social capital empirically from the viewpoint of social integration of ethnic minorities with an ethnically separated sports group and an ethnically mixed sports group with a diverse culture. The study findings did not support the common-sense idea that a 'mixed sports group context' provides more social integration potential to the members than a 'separated sports group context'. Rather, their data analysis suggests that bridging and bonding social capital can be acquired as key elements of social integration in *both* types of clubs. It is a very significant finding that the increased bridging capital of mixed ethnic group is based on the survey findings that many of the ethnic minority participants in the mixed group have a positive image of the ethnic majority and learn socially

from them. These conceptual elements serve as a foundation for our analysis of the data and are applied to ascertain better the integrative function of Taekwondo emerging from its practices and from Taekwondo-In identity development.

5. Methodology

5.1. Collective instrumental case study design, sampling and data collection and ethics

Bourdieu (1990) emphasises the importance of engaging with concrete empirical cases to avoid passive empiricism and grand theorizing. He advocates for a reflexive sociology that interrogates systematically particular instances of a more general phenomenon. Drawing on extensive experience of the first author in teaching Taekwondo generally and to minority ethnic and immigrant groups specifically, the research was able to identify three specific instances where Taekwondo practice appeared to promote social integration. These instances are organized into three cases, forming an *instrumental collective case study* approach.

Dillon and Reid (2004, p. 26) define this approach as: “not the study of a collective but an instrumental study extended to several cases, e.g. an issue is studied in several situations.” The authors also highlight that such a methodology serves several functions, including exemplification and valorisation. Thus, our purposive sample sought to exemplify and valorise if Taekwondo does indeed, for some individuals at least, promote social integration. We also sought to use the case study method to ascertain if *bridging, bonding* and *pluralized integrative identification* prominent in the social construction literature were suitable to understand this phenomenon.

The three cases were each multi-ethnic Taekwondo clubs, which we have named the Sanctuary, Harbour and Bridge respectively for disambiguation purposes. Sanctuary Taekwondo club is run by a Korean-American instructor in an affluent Californian region in the US known for high levels of migrants. Harbour Taekwondo club is run by an Iranian-British instructor in an ethnically diverse setting in Wales, UK. Bridge Taekwondo club was run by the first author, a migrant instructor (now UK resident) from South Korea, located in a less privileged post-industrial setting also in Wales. Within these clubs purposive sampling extended to observing and interviewing Taekwondo instructors and practitioners of various ethnicities from January 2018 to January 2019. Principal sources of data included participant observations semi-structured interviews, and documentary data. The author observed the participants in his own class almost every week for the duration of running this class as an observer/instructor for approximately one year. Table 1 below presents the interviewees (names are pseudonyms ages are approximate) although many more students across the three schools were observed anonymously.

Characteristics	Interviewees				
	1	2	3	4	5
Interviewee	MinJun	JiHun	Malcolm	Ahmad	JeongHun
Sex	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male
Age	12	10	45	52	47
Ethnicity	Half Korean/ Half Welsh	Half Korean/ Half Scottish	Scottish	Iranian	Korean
Nationality	British	British	British	British	American
Belt Level	Blue Belt	Red Belt	Red Belt	6th Dan	5th Dan

Table1. Characteristics of Interviewees

5.2. Researcher Reflexivity and Ethics

We also recognized the critical role of the researcher-as-instrument in producing knowledge (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). This necessitated reflexivity to acknowledge their influence on the study's design, procedures, and findings. Berger (2015) defines reflexivity, as involving continual self-evaluation of the researcher's positionality and its potential impact on the research process and outcomes. The first author's unique position as a Taekwondo teacher involved collecting data both as an objective non-participant and a subjective participant in Taekwondo sessions. This is posed both benefits and challenges. While his close relationship with participants facilitated access to interviews and the research field, it also required maintaining a proper distance to avoid biasing actions and responses. Balancing the roles of insider and outsider was crucial to leveraging the benefits of this dual perspective. To mitigate potential biases, the research was guided by Finlay's (2002) advice that "it is the task of each researcher, based on their research aims, values and the logic of the methodology involved, to decide how best to exploit the reflexive potential of their research." Accordingly, the first author drew on range of reflexivity types identified by Finlay including *introspection, intersubjectivity and mutual collaboration*. used his teaching experience to engage in what Finlay calls introspection to excavate the wide range of experiences of teaching the art to migrants, he used a form of intersubjective introspection to corroborate his emerging interpretations with the other two teachers who were also participants and finally, he used a version of mutual collaboration to work with the second author as a critical friend who could raise questions and issues surrounding the research design, data collection, theory selection, analysis and interpretation processes.

Before fieldwork began (January 2018), the researchers considered ethical issues following Creswell (2014) and Neuman (2013) and obtained approval from the authors' university research ethics committee. To protect participants' anonymity and confidentiality, they provided an information sheet and a consent form and altered interviewees' names and specific details. Additionally, it was clearly stated that participants had the right to withdraw at any time without providing a reason.

5.3 Data analysis and representation

The collective instrumental case study focus was deliberately employed to exemplify and valorise the phenomena of social integration through Taekwondo practice using a conceptual framework of integrative pluralised identity construction and the development of bridging and bonding forms of social capital. As a result, it was decided that the best analytical technique for this purpose was that of what Hsieh and Shannon (2005) refer to as *directed content analysis* which is typically used when the purpose is to “validate or extend conceptually a theoretical framework or theory” (p. 1281). In this case, the a priori theory on social integrations processes informed the observational lenses, interview questions and the types of codes that were used in the analysis, which involved evidence of collective and individual identity development, formation of relationships and the categorisation of these into bonding and bridging types of networks.

Data excerpts were coded separated, and categorised by case and conceptual theme, illustrating the interpretational process. According to Harrison et al. (2017, 3.4.3), this approach, typical of an interpretive case study, positions the researcher as a partner in knowledge discovery, utilising direct interpretations and thematic grouping of findings. The first and second author discussed the emerging findings as a form of intersubjective mutually collaborative reflexivity. The representation can be seen as a modified realist tale (Sparkes, 2002)². However, the modification occurs by the addition of a confessional dialogue provided by the first author about his role in the data production, collection and analysis process as well as his participation as one of the study instructors investigated. Data are presented, interpreted and discussed below in three sections corresponding to each case study with each discussing social integration via the themes of *integrative pluralised identification*, and *bridging*, and *bonding* social capital.

6. Data presentation, interpretation and discussion

6.1. Case 1: Bridge Taekwondo Club

This club is run by the first author as described in the methodology. He is a 6th grade WT (World Taekwondo, the so-called Olympic Taekwondo) black belt. He has been teaching his martial art to various ethnic background students (Gulf Arabian, European, Levant Arabian, African, North American, Korean, and other Asian) since 2006 abroad in Yemen, Jordan, and Wales. He aims to enhance the mental health and physical well-being of practitioners.

Bonding, bridging and pluralised integrative identification are each observable in the author’s story of teaching Taekwondo at Bridge Taekwondo. Indeed, bonding occurred before the first author arrived in Wales, because he had junior Syrian students (who also became his first students in Wales) waiting to learn Taekwondo from him. He was informed this from an acquaintance, who volunteered at a charity for asylum seekers and refugees in Wales when the first author met the acquaintance when he visited Jordan. The father of these children, a Syrian refugee, wanted his children to learn Taekwondo from the first author, because he had had a positive experience learning Taekwondo from a Korean instructor when he was a child in Syria. This reveals the

² Conventions of a realist tale include author-excavated construction through use of the third person neutral, and the use of the passive voice. In addition, “extensive, closely edited quotations...used to convey to the reader that the views expressed are not those of the researcher but are rather the authentic and representative remarks ... of the participants” (Sparkes, 2002, p. 44)

integrative pluralised identity and also bonding capital of the Syrian father (through his connection with Taekwondo), acquired through Taekwondo practice created trust in the Taekwondo network and became an important motivation for the first author's decision to move to Wales. He thought it could be very meaningful to teach this martial art to other migrants including Syrian refugees in Wales as he was already teaching Taekwondo to Syrian refugees in Jordan and found it rewarding. Just as the first author's identity as a Korean from Taekwondo's dominant country of origin facilitated his transition to teaching Taekwondo in Wales, this integrative pluralized identity facilitated bridging capital form himself and his students in their new location.

The Bridge Taekwondo Club was originally intended to be set up to teach Korean immigrants in the city and Welsh students from their network of contacts and was in operation from 2017 to 2019. The first author, as a Taekwondo instructor taught this martial art, emphasising mutual respect as an essential part of Taekwondo-In spirit. However, through the aforementioned Syrian bridging relationship, the first author eventually established Taekwondo clubs in three urban areas in Wales. These produced opportunities for bridging relationships for immigrants across Wales in the form of a wider social network, for the author, also promoting social capital that enabled his own structural integration into UK society via gaining a permanent residency and settlement in Wales.

Pluralised integrative identification was in evidence in the building of Taekwondo-In identity, through repeated Taekwondo practice. The first author taught three Korean children, two half-Korean and half-Welsh children (the mother's side is Korean and the father's side is Welsh), and four white Welsh children in addition to the Welsh and Korean adult students. Through observations and a small group interview of two Children Taekwondo practitioners from Bridge Taekwondo club (both of them are from multicultural families with a British father and Korean mother). MinJun and JiHun are proud of the fact that Taekwondo is Korean and proud that they are Koreans,

JiHun: (When) I grew up in Korea. My Taekwondo teacher told me that Taekwondo is Korean.

MinJun: Taekwondo is Korean. Now everyone does Taekwondo. A lot of people know Taekwondo is Korean. It's like... (Taekwondo) People speak in Korean. Hana, Dul, Set, Net... (Korean counting numbers)

JiHun: ... I did a presentation about Taekwondo. I took a PE lesson from my Taekwondo and I taught Taekwondo. ... I was literally just teaching the whole afternoon.

Discussing JiHun's Korean identity, his father Malcolm (another Taekwondo practitioner) commented,

I think we want him to stick with it (Taekwondo) because he is Korean and because something distinct that he can say 'I can do this because I am Korean and this is Korean (martial) art.' So we want him to value that. In terms of cultural influences, Taekwondo is a very important part of that. At his school, he can learn British culture for his British identity.

Malcolm is a British man from Scotland who spent his childhood in Canada and from his experience, Malcolm wants his children to establish the right identity as Korean and British³. Ghosh (2000, p. 294) affirms the importance of pluralised identification in aiding bonding relationship and social integration commenting,

Strong ethnic identification with one's own ethnic culture as well as with the dominant culture is the ideal way to integrate because one needs to know where one is coming from in order to know where one is going.

Indeed, from over eighteen years of teaching experiences with Koreans living in Yemen, Jordan and the UK the first author observed that Korean identity can be strengthened by learning Korean culture through Taekwondo, such as Korean greeting manners, Korean Taekwondo terms, and Korean number counting, etc.. Thus, as JiHun's example illustrates building and forming the identity of Taekwondo-In through the process of repeated Taekwondo practice helps reinforce Korean identity. Taekwondo practice helped these migrant and multi-ethnic Koreans develop self-esteem and self-confidence, establish and reinforce their Korean ethnic and national identities, build mutual trust in relationships with others and integrate into the social environment in which these people are involved – all elements of bonding relationships. On the other hand, through Malcolm's comments below, we can see that the confidence (based on constructed identity) that his son, JiHun, gained from practising Taekwondo promoted bridging relations and social capital as his value extended beyond the Taekwondo club in his classmates and PE teacher.

Malcolm: In his class, he (JiHun) led a Taekwondo class in his school one day, actually, he was asked to do it twice because he did very well. It's teaching him some skills for leadership and (self) confidence. ... It is helping him in a lot of ways as well.

JiHun's confident Taekwondo performance has built trust in his PE teacher (an important component of bridging social capital), and this trust allowed the PE teacher to offer him the opportunity to teach Taekwondo again. In conclusion, it can be said that JiHun's identity as a Korean and as a practitioner of the Korean martial art Taekwondo, which was strengthened through the Bridge Taekwondo Club, helped him to develop bridging social capital, which contributed to his social integration that strengthened his position in the community (school).

6.2. Case 2: Harbour Taekwondo Club

Ahmad: As a work(er)... I left the UK, then I came in 2004 again. ... In 2004 I applied to the Home Office I wanted to stay here and they gave me (a visa).

The first author: You applied to be an asylum seeker or refugee?

³ At some point in his young age, he moved to South Korea and lived there for more than fifteen years before coming to Wales. His life in Canada and South Korea was longer than his life in the UK (It is the reason why his English accent is much closer to the Canadian English accent, as he explained to the first author). Even though he is British, after he returned to his homeland the UK, he had the experience of confusion about his identity, such as having difficulties with cultural differences.

Ahmad: No, just as a worker.

The first author: So, at the time, what visa did you get?

Ahmad: Work visa. I worked at a port. You know, in south Iran, we worked in the port when I was (a) little boy. Here, I got experience in the port in the crane, in the (tanker) ship, ye, jetty... to be honest, Taekwondo helped me. As a Taekwondo instructor, I applied. I got about five second ... or primary school. They gave me (work visa) as a Taekwondo man. ... That is part of my life. Why bad? Because I've got five primary schools in my name. (That's) I registered in my name. ... 20 years I passed my age here. They gave me ... It was not easy but...

The first author: When did you start Taekwondo?

Ahmad: 1983 in Iran ... (I started TKD) I was, that time, teenager. ... I played (with) my friends. ... because people like TKD. ... There are Karate, there are Kungfu, there are freestyle wrestling but most public they like TKD. They grew up... you know, (like) tree... small tree... they grew up with them... I don't know why they love this sport. They love inside... because inside. ... and they had now league... exactly the same as football. Same as Manchester...

The first author has known Master Ahmad for around eight years at the time of the study. Master Ahmad is an Iranian British Taekwondo instructor. He was born in the Arab area of Iran and speaks Arabic, Persian, and English. He visited the UK first in 1998 and returned to Iran. In 2004, 6 years after his first visit, he migrated to the UK to settle in this country. He runs Harbour Taekwondo Centre, which has diverse ethnic background students, in a Welsh conurbation. Ahmad had been working in the port since his childhood in Iran, so he was able to get a job at the port in the UK. At the same time, he taught Taekwondo at five primary and secondary schools. According to him, the fact that his name was registered at those schools in Wales as a Taekwondo instructor was considered an important component when his application was in the process of getting the work visa. Ahmad's story is illuminated by Stuart Hall (1990, p. 225) description of the dynamic relations between (cultural) identity and time:

Cultural identity ... is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. ... Identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.

Ahmad's pluralized identity is integrative and pluralized, and the Iranian and Welsh dimensions are integrated through the formation of his Taekwondo-In identity and his experiences as an instructor. His Taekwondo practice, which began as a child, continues to this day in the mid-50s. Also, he remains committed to teaching ethnically diverse students. Moreover, Ahmad's cultural identity as a Taekwondo-In instructor and practitioner provided valuable bridging social capital that played a decisive role in his structural integration in terms of his settlement in the UK. Light (2004) emphasizes mutual metamorphosis as one of the important properties of capital. According to him, "human, cultural, and social capital metamorphose into one another as such as physical and financial capital's mutual metamorphosis (ibid., p. 147)." Ahmad's case illustrates the fluidity of capital transformation by showing how his incorporation of Taekwondo-In became a form of capital that was converted into bridging social capital during the migration

process where having a skill to offer and provide him with employment and settling in the country he migrated to was critical not only to his social integration but also structural integration into UK economy.

However, Taekwondo-In is not just about physical skills but also about moral and social dispositions. The transcript below demonstrates how this *inner* identity of a Taekwondo-In that not only helped to integrate himself into society but also helped students from different ethnic backgrounds to form the ‘trust’ in others necessary to achieve bridging and bonding social relations here.

The first author: What are the ethnic backgrounds of the students?

Ahmad: I got many nationalities. Chinese, Somali, Syrian, Libyan, English from Bristol, Wales, Indian, Iraq, Iranian... it’s mixed.

The first author: What are the students’ religious backgrounds?

Ahmad: Muslims, Christians, Buddhist, Hindu ... Mixed.

The first author: Do you think that the students learn Korean culture through learning Taekwondo?

Ahmad: Definitely, Taekwondo is part of life. They learn how to bow, how to respect their parents, how to respect (people) outside, how to respect each other... you know, how to stand against bully, Taekwondo help them stand against bully... Ye ... I teach them, I told them as well how to give the stuff to each other, saying ‘thank you’, bow ... They help each other. I taught them how to help each other everything. This is part of Taekwondo. One team supports each other. ... One united... This is I teach them how... This is part of Taekwondo. One as one, together as one. That is part of Taekwondo. ... We have no problem with this... All of them know each other... I haven’t heard, haven’t seen (the problem). I had white, I had black, I had Arab ... All of them (be) friend each other.

Ahmad regards ‘respect’ as an important spiritual, cultural and social value that Taekwondo emphasises and he teaches this to students. In terms of his emphasis, ‘respect’ (as a basis of ‘trust’) can be seen as an essential integrative value contributing to social integration as well as teaching the importance of unity to students of various ethnic backgrounds. Ahmad, who is well integrated into British society as a person from an ethnic minority background, shows a typical Taekwondo-In model. In particular, he encourages his students, who come from diverse ethnic backgrounds, to internalise and practice not only the techniques of Taekwondo, but also the spiritual value of ‘respect’, emphasising that it is a core part of the art/sport. This is an important integrative element of identity that helps practitioners from different ethnic backgrounds build mutual trust in their communities and contributes to their integration into the community. The first author observed how many of Master Ahmad’s students have become socially integrated members of their communities and society, at least in part due to Master Ahmad’s teaching and example.

6.3 Case 3: Sanctuary Taekwondo Club

The third case is that of Taekwondo Master 'JeongHun', who runs the Sanctuary Taekwondo Club and examined how Taekwondo training affects practitioners' social integration. Master JeongHun emigrated to the US in 1986 at the age of 13 and became a US citizen 13 years later in 1999 at the age of 26. JeongHun began practising Taekwondo in the first year of elementary school and became a black belt in this martial art in 1996, three years before becoming a citizen, and a Taekwondo instructor in 1998.

Although Taekwondo did not lead him to settle in the US and become a citizen like Ahmad or the first author, his coaching career seems to have made a positive impact in his community such as taking students outside the club to serve the community across ethnic and religious boundaries and has been an underlying factor in his successful social integration into the US.

JeongHun: As assistant instructors, they learn how to treat people well while teaching junior students and grow into confident leaders in front of people. Moreover, I see that students have a very healthy spiritual worldview by experiencing volunteer activities while teaching Taekwondo in the local community and abroad outside of club...the students practice and interact with other people regardless of ethnicity, language, culture, or religion.

In 2010, after 12 years as a Taekwondo instructor, he founded Sanctuary Taekwondo Club, as his business and has been running it successfully ever since. Sanctuary club is located in an affluent Californian region in the US known for high levels of migrants and the resident population is ethnically very diverse which is reflected in the club practitioners' ethnicities.⁴

First author: ... I found the specific term 'trust' through the website. What does that mean?

JeongHun: It shows the parents that 'We do not lie, and we truly treat you. We are always telling the truth.' It means building up 'trust'.

First author: Do you emphasise 'trust' in the training for the practitioners?

JeongHun: I emphasise the term 'Integrity' to my students. The foundation of 'trust' is integrity. For example, when I let the students do push-ups, I emphasise 'Integrity' saying 'Cheating is cheating yourself. Do not deceive.' 'Integrity' is about honesty, no matter who sees or not. Only a person of 'Integrity' can be trusted by others. [...]

First author: Do practitioners think most people are trustworthy?

JeongHun: They (practitioners) say that the people who do Taekwondo are generally trustworthy but it is not about outsiders. They think that the person who does Taekwondo is honest and trustworthy. By doing Taekwondo, a very high sense of trust is formed among practitioners.

As illustrated above, Master JeongHun encourages the practitioners to build up integrity as their inner character and the practitioners have actually been building up 'integrity', which is a key foundation for building up 'trust' among members of the community and society. Furthermore, 'trust', is a key element in measuring the growth of social capital, building up among the members

⁴ About 40 percent is Asian (including Koreans, Chinese and Indians), about 30 percent is white Slavs (Including Russians and Poles), about 20 percent is mixed ethnicity, about 8 per cent is Hispanic (including Mexicans) and about 2 percent is African-American.

of this club can be articulated as a form of bonding social capital appears to be an essential homogenising facet of social integration.

JeongHun: I teach 'discover', 'master' and 'share'. Discover is the stage where you realise who you are. When you know who you are, then you move to the next stage 'master'. On this stage, you try to be an expert by working hard on yourself. The next stage is to share with others. I encourage my students to develop themselves and become influential leaders and return their abilities to society. [...] When the practitioners become Black Belts, I give them the opportunities to teach other practitioners. ...As assistant instructors, they learn how to deal with people well while teaching junior students and grow into confident leaders in front of people.... Moreover, I see that students have a very healthy spiritual worldview by experiencing volunteer activities while teaching Taekwondo in the local community and abroad outside of club.

Through the holistic teaching of Master JeongHun, Taekwondo practitioners have been getting somatic (holistic) Taekwondo-In identity. Like the first two instructors, Master JeongHun also considers the Taekwondo-In identity is not only technical, but also spiritual, physical, moral, ethical, and social and as such, further highlights the pluralised integrative identification process we suggest is occurring in these settings. In addition to integrity and trust, in this process of growth, self-confidence plays a key role in establishing the appropriate self-identity to become a functional member of society. Therefore, Master JeongHun's emphasis on the social and moral dimensions of Taekwondo-In's identity encourages his students to develop bridging capital, which is focused on social cohesion and organic solidity in their communities.

JeongHun: Training time for the students is very diverse. Usually, the practitioners train for 2-3 hours a week. Students who spend the most time in club are the members of players who go to competitions. They spend 6-7 hours a week for training, and for about an hour chatting with each other. I am careful to give enough time for the students to get along with each other. ... In general, parents seem to be getting closer. The players, who go to competitions, are more intimate because they go out together. They spend a lot of times when they go to competitions and come back around 2-3 hours. Especially, when they go abroad for volunteer activities, they have a lot of time to mingle.

These 'social interactions', are considered an essential practice developing of social capital, between Taekwondo practitioners before and after Taekwondo sessions, and also between the parents on account of pleasant environments formed by comfortable resting place and beverages from the vending machine. Moreover, the values obtained through Taekwondo practice in this club are summarized as the following three values that can be found on the website of this club: 'Self-development', 'building trust', and 'serving society'. Therefore, like the other cases presented, social integration appears fostered through valorising and encouraging bridging social capital (between various ethnic groups) and bonding social capital in the respect of a collective yet integrative and pluralised identification process as Taekwondo-In.

7. Conclusions

This article has examined the question of social integration through the practice of sporting and physical cultural forms of Taekwondo. We utilised a collective instrumental case study which

gathered observational, interview and documentary data on three multicultural Taekwondo clubs. Following a directed content analysis which drew on Putnam's (1995) constructs of bridging and bonding forms of social capital and Sen's (2007) notions of de-centred, pluralised, integrative identification, our findings suggest that in these settings, Taekwondo functions as an effective platform for social integration. The Taekwondo-Jang functions as a place for the identity formation of Taekwondo-In. Here, a Taekwondo practitioner interacts with the other Taekwondo practitioners and forms a unique collective identity through the process in which 'my' individual narratives and the narratives of 'others' are making 'our' shared stories in dynamic interaction. When this individual and collective identity as Taekwondo-In is recognised as an aspect of plural identity, which the other Taekwondo-In also have, the recognition causes a positive effect in terms of social integration promoting 'mutual trust', which is an essential aspect of bonding social capital. In the Taekwondo-In identity that 'You' and 'I' are formed in the Taekwondo-Jang. The core features of that identity are universal and so it doesn't (or shouldn't) matter that, for example, 'I' am a Christian from China, and 'You' are a Muslim from Syria. Moreover, when Taekwondo-Ins show each other empathy and tolerance promoted by self-confidence and respect through practices like wearing the same Taekwondo uniform, using the same specific language and practising the same techniques, patterns and etiquette regardless of ethnicity, skin colour, nationality, sex/gender, ability or social class, etc.. In and beyond the context of multi-ethnic the Taekwondo-Jang we begin to see how the integrative pluralised identities formed construct forms of bridging relationships which operate as social capital. In this we discover a brighter side of social integration and multiculturalism.

In summary, we conclude that the formation of a Taekwondo-In's identity (holistic: physical, spiritual, ethical and social) promotes social integration by opening the individual to shared integrative, pluralised Taekwondo-centred identities which fosters bonding and bridging forms of social capital.

While our findings contribute significant elements to the empirical literature on social integration through sport and physical cultures, further research is needed to develop a deeper understanding of this phenomenon. Follow up studies are needed to identify which specific practices and pedagogies are most impactful for bringing this social integration about. It also needs to corroborate if Taekwondo practice induces social integration in a broader range of Taekwondo-Dojangs, particularly those with non-migrant instructors and lower numbers of migrant students. Finally, given social integration is a relatively slow process, this research might add a longitudinal dimension to ascertain how long these integrative impacts take to occur, the degree of latency in the process and, also, if there is some longer-term stability to the type of social integration experienced by practitioners should they leave Taekwondo or move locations. Lastly, and crucially it is important that future research can establish a more direct connection between social integration and broader facets of structural integration. For example, how these sport-based social capitals translate into improved access to other social spheres such as housing, employment, and education. Within this, how researchers might in future consider how "linking capital" (Coalter, 2007; Agger & Jensen, 2015) as another form of exchangeable capital is developed in this physical cultural activity sphere.

In light of these insights, and the prevailing context highlighted in our introduction – of projected increases in population migration in the near future – the following recommendations are

cautiously offered: 1) Governments and NGOs might consider prioritising funding the implementation and research evaluation of martial arts programmes within migrant and multicultural communities as part of broader integration policies. 2) Sports clubs and instructors might be encouraged and incentivised (by the funding suggested above) to receive training in intercultural communication and inclusive pedagogical approaches to maximise both bonding and bridging social capital. Of course, beyond Taekwondo specifically, but as our findings highlight emphatically, many of these immigrants may be expert martial artists themselves, with particular skills to offer to the local community and in so doing provide bridging and bonding connections to cultures, practices and values of diverse immigrant and indigenous populations. In many ways, this has been one of the stories of the martial arts diaspora.

Finally, the potential limitations of sport as an integration platform warrant comment. As Spaaij (2011) cautions, sport participation alone cannot overcome structural barriers to integration like discrimination or xenophobic policy restrictions. The transformative potential of arts like Taekwondo may be constrained without complementary support in other social and cultural spheres. By operationalising these recommendations, stakeholders can more effectively leverage the integrative potential of martial arts as physical cultural activities and sports, thereby contributing to more inclusive and socially cohesive societies.

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The “dividual” person and the self-made wrestling star in Senegalese *lamb* (wrestling with punches)

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Abstract

In Senegal, *lamb* (wrestling with punches) is both a national sport and a popular passion. Since the 1990s, a neoliberal ethos has emerged within *lamb*, with an increasing number of wrestlers conceiving the sport as an individual business venture and embodying self-entrepreneurial attitudes. Yet, a fighter’s self is a composite relational formation: each wrestler embodies not only the collective formed around his persona but also the “invisible” forces and resources mobilized by this coalition. Through ethnographic episodes that highlight the articulation and tensions between individualized and “dividual” modes of self-making, I examine how the neoliberalization of *lamb* has produced multiple, indeterminate and often conflicting socio-cultural outcomes. From this perspective, competing evaluations of relationships, agency and the production of economic value come to the fore. This approach complicates existing scholarly accounts of the neoliberalization of sport by revealing how neoliberal logics are both reproduced and deflected through their interaction with different socio-historical forces and values.

Keywords: Senegalese wrestling, Individual, Dividual, Neoliberal subjectivity, Value.

1. Introduction

When we trained together in the Ño Far *écurie*, Sunsong was an experienced light heavyweight wrestler and a practicing Muslim of the Tijaniyya Sufi order¹. He was far from being one of the very few wrestling national celebrities, nor was he able to make a living from wrestling.

¹ This article is based on long-term “observant-participation” in one *écurie* located in Pikine, a suburb of Dakar (Senegal). Between 2008 to 2023, I spent a total of thirteen months conducting fieldwork in Dakar, including ten months training within the *écurie*. *Écurie*, French for stable, refers to the sporting associations where wrestling training takes place, and to which a wrestler must be affiliated in order to compete in official matches. By participating in wrestling training, I followed in the footsteps of scholars who have directly engaged in combat sports (Wacquant, 2000; Spencer & Sánchez García, 2013). This methodological approach accelerated the process of building relationships of trust with research participants and enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of the embodied dimensions of wrestling. Nonetheless, I never assumed that my experience mirrored those of my teammates. I remain sceptical that the sensuous, emotional and conative engagement of a middle-class Italian scholar aiming to write an ethnography of *lamb* could be isomorphic with that of a working-class Senegalese wrestler striving to make a name for himself in the arena. Throughout the article, I use pseudonyms. The views expressed here are my own and do not reflect those of the institution for which I work. I thank the two anonymous reviewers of Eracle for their insightful and useful comments, as well as the editors of this special issue, Bruno Mora and Dario Nardini, for their work.

Nevertheless, he was well known in his neighbourhood, where acquaintances hailed him with the appreciatory title of *mbër* (a Wolof word meaning champion and, by extension, wrestler). In response to my question about why he became a wrestler, he said:

To be a wrestler is my destiny. It is God's decision. It was God's challenge [...]. I used to spend time at the seashore with the wrestlers. I was in the *cummu kay* [the corner] of Issa Pouye and Boy Mandione [popular wrestlers from his native neighborhood]. I was with them. I followed them when they went to the *mbappat* [wrestling without punches tournaments]; I was with them [...]. What do I want most from wrestling? For God's truth and the Prophet's grace... to help my parents, my brothers and sisters. I want a house, cars [...]. A VIP's car, Prado, do you know it? I want money, I want to help. But God is good. If you are in business, sometimes it goes bad, sometimes it goes well, but if you are in trouble you keep on believing in God" (Dakar, 11/03/2017).

Offering an Islamic reinterpretation of Weber's "spirit of capitalism", Sunsong framed his sporting career as a business venture ultimately dependent on divine will. He aspired to generate substantial income through wrestling, thereby accessing to a "material culture of success" (Rowlands, 1996), while also providing financial support to his family. Later in the interview, he compared each wrestling hold to a weapon – a skill that a wrestler must acquire and continually hone through training to succeed.

As with an increasing number of young men from economically marginalized areas globally, he aspired to achieve significant economic and social advancement through sport, despite the improbability of such outcomes (Besnier et al., 2018, p. 864). To this end, he adhered to a strict training and behavioural regimen, and actively engaged in self-promotional activities aimed at expanding his base of supporters. As other wrestlers in Senegal and sportsmen in the Global Souths do, he relied on both sporting techniques and magical-religious practices to enhance his chances of success (Ibid., p. 855 and 863). In a way, his narrative and practices align with the concept of the neoliberal subject (Gershon, 2011) – an entrepreneurial self, conceived as a bundle of skills in need of constant improvement (Urciuoli, 2008). This kind of subject works hard to constantly improve him/herself, s/he is held individually responsible for his/her failures and achievements, and uses every earthly and otherworldly mean at his/her disposal to uphold his/her confidence in a glorious future despite deep uncertainties (Besnier et al., 2018, p. 865). Yet Sunsong affirmed at the same time that his "destiny" took shape by constantly being with the wrestlers of the neighbourhood. In speaking about his wrestling career, he stressed how his teammates, coaches, *marabouts* (magical-religious experts who work through the invisible domain to help wrestlers win their matches), parents, close friend and supporters played a crucial and an active part in his matches – as they usually do in Senegalese *lâmb* (Chevé et al., 2014; Bonhomme, 2022). Before each fight he distributed *sarax* (alms and gifts) to augment the number of his supporters, to increase and elevate his persona, and enhance his chances of victory. He took *saafara* (magical concoctions that are poured on the body or drunk) to absorb their powers. He tied on his arms, legs, waist and torso amulets to "armour" and strengthen his body, and to attract "invisible" allies. His conducts and narratives were predicated also on a relational, porous and partible idea of the self. I index this understanding of the self as "dividual".

The viability to extend the concept of the dividual person beyond Melanesia has been at the center of a heightened debate (Mosko, 2010 and 2015; Robbins, 2010 and 2015). Joel Robbins,

especially, was critical of Mark Mosko's interpretation of the Christian person as *dividual*. Robbins argued that this position risks erasing the ethnographic specificity of the concept and overlooks the fact that some Melanesian people explicitly emphasize the novelty of Christianity. However, he was less critical of more recent attempts to interrogate the individual/*dividual* nexus in order to develop a comparative framework for examining processes of self-making (see Bialecki, & Daswani 2015; Robbins, 2015). While I sometimes use these terms synonymously, in this article I prefer to speak of the *dividual* instead of the relational self. The former, in fact, better captures the mutuality of beings, porosity and exchanges that are central in the self-making processes examined. In what follows, I will focus on the relationship between the neoliberalization of *lamb* and the reshaping of the in/*dividual* modes of self-making (Bialecki, & Daswani 2015).

As Ilana Gershon argues, neoliberal agency presupposes an autonomous "self that is a flexible bundle of skills that reflexively manage oneself as though the self was a business" (2011, p. 537). In a neoliberal perspective, albeit the self is socially constructed, its reflexivity exists prior to social relationships, which are framed as alliances that should be based on market rationality. Like the "individual" of post-Enlightenment political and economic discourse, this self is thought as an impermeable and indivisible being "whose relations with others consists of transactions over "things", "objects", or "entities" that are categorically distinct from they who exchange them" (Mosko, 2015, p. 362). But distinct from the "secular Modern individual" and aligned with more relational-processual modes of self-making, the neoliberal subject is engaged in a continual process of becoming –whether through "personal growth", "professional advancement", "networking" etc. (Comaroff, & Comaroff, 2012).

Instead, a *dividual* is a person "constructed as the plural and composite site of the relationships that produced it", which can be imagined as a social microcosm (Strathern, 1988, p. 13). It is a permeable and partible person (Marriot, 1976) continuously re-shaped through transactions (gift exchanges) and interactions with others (human and non-human). This concept develops Mauss's foundational claim that exchange is basic to social life (Mauss, 2016 [1925]; Mosko, 2010). In line with a gift economy, here there are no clear-cut distinctions between self and other, persons and things, subjects and objects. Persons are made as composite beings through interactions and exchanges of "things" and "substances" with others. They exist in a state of continuous intersubjective becoming –giving away parts of their extended self and absorbing elements received from others in return.

Neoliberal and *dividual* selves should be understood as theoretical constructs rather than ontological realities. My aim is not to revive an essentialist opposition between non-Western and Western, or traditional and modern, conceptions of the self². As Jean and John Comaroff (2012, p. 62) note, "[n]owhere in Africa were ideas of individuality ever absent". Conversely, individualisms and *dividualisms* can be seen as different crystallizations of an underlining generative problematic through which self and other, subject and object, are produced (Bialecki,

² In a related vein, I contend that the heightened tension between individual and *dividual* aspects of self-making is not caused by the passage from a "traditional" game to a sport. Rather, it is the increasing focus on spectacularization and commercialization –more than the sportization of the practice in the 1960s – that has intensified this tension. Moreover, I argue that the opposition between "modern" and "traditional" sports is not one between structural forms or configurations – it is instead an opposition between groups of people fighting for the power to define the right ways to practice, regulate and display a sportive discipline (Brownell 2001, p. 38).

& Daswani, 2015). I employ these concepts to trace a long-standing tension at the heart of the constitution of wrestlers' subjectivities –one that has been intensified by the recent neoliberalization of *lamb*.

2. The Neoliberalization of *lamb* in Senegal

In Senegal, *lamb* is a national sport followed by millions of peoples. In crowded stadiums, wrestling matches are staged along with dances, chants and magical-religious practices. *Lamb* can be traced back to *mbappat*, ritualized events organized during the harvest time by different Senegambian groups in which wrestling matches without punches took place. In the 1920s, wrestling with punches began to be organized as a paid spectacle, and from that point onward, *lamb* gradually adopted the characteristics of a fighting exhibition. Businessmen started investing money in wrestling and established arenas; audiences began purchasing tickets to attend matches; wrestlers received a *cachet* (a purse) for fighting; and championship titles were introduced (Faye, 2002). From Senegal's independence (1960) on, wrestling became the Senegalese national sport and the first federation was instituted.

Between the 1990s and the 2010s, an increase in the process of marketization and mediatization of *lamb* took place (Bonhomme, 2022; Chev e et al., 2014). The implementation of the IMF-mandated structural adjustment programs brought privatizations and cuts in public spending (Diop, 2002). The privatizations opened the Senegalese market to new multinational companies, which invested in *lamb* to promote their products. Meanwhile, budget cuts restrained public employment and put an end to key State interventions in economy and agriculture. Therefore, the paths leading toward self-affirmation and adulthood for young men narrowed and changed direction (Ban egas & Warnier, 20001; Diouf, 2002; Perry, 2005). The liberalization and subsequent digitalization of mass-medias enabled the emergence of newspapers, broadcasts, TV channels and websites exclusively dedicated to wrestling. The media landscape became saturated with images of individual wrestling stars stylishly dressed, driving expensive cars, dwelling in luxury villas and adored by fans. In the lead-up to major bouts, media outlets began to report impressive sums earned by fighters, with the purses for the most popular champions reaching the equivalent of 150.000 euros. In this context, as the fame and earning of wrestling stars soared, a growing number of young men from the impoverished classes began to pursue success through wrestling with punches.

In this context, a neoliberal form of subjectivity emerged in *lamb*. Entrepreneurial attitudes were not unknown among the previous generation of wrestling champions (Bonhomme, 2022). Yet it was during this time that, more and more, wrestlers started to take care of their image as a personal brand and began to think about their career as an individual business venture (Faye, 2002; Hann, 2025). Wrestlers engage in different modes of self-improvement. On the one hand, they try to enhance their reputation by presenting themselves as disciplined professionals through careful promotional work (Hann, 2025). They organize dancing and wrestling events to rally supporters, construct a public persona by crafting self-narratives, display distinctive aesthetic styles in the mass media, and proudly assert the wrestling excellence of their respective ethnicities (Hann, Chev e, & Wane, 2021). On the other hand, wrestlers engage in constant work on their

bodies. They go to magical-religious experts to increase their invisible forces. They train tirelessly to improve their fighting skills in grappling and boxing.

The emergence of a neoliberal subjectivity in *lamb* is vividly illustrated by the career of Mohammed Ndao, who took the wrestling name Tyson and became “king of the arenas” at the turn of the millennium. Erasing his apprenticeship in Pikine’s wrestling milieu, Tyson popularized a self-made man narrative, portraying his success as the result of personal strength and determination alone. Naming his *écurie* Bul Faale (don’t care) – like the homonymous youth movement – he crafted the image of a new kind of fighter, one who was skillful both in wrestling and sport-business. In doing so, Tyson became the individualized hero of a new urban generation (Havard, 2001; Diouf, 2003).

The change was not merely quantitative but also qualitative. While individual champions were praised and remembered well before colonial times (Faye 2002), no wrestling champion before Tyson ever denied his roots in a wrestling collective – a form of belonging that was (and still is) usually proudly asserted. Moreover, during this period, supporters began to organize themselves into fan clubs and some promoters started offering wrestlers the opportunity to fight in exchange for selling a certain number of tickets. As a result, wrestlers increasingly began evaluating the size of their supporter base using a commodity logic. Despite all this, in Senegalese wrestling, relationships, persons and things are not so easily (or at least completely) commoditized.

3. Relational, porous and partible subjectivities

Wrestlers’ subjectivities are composite formations constituted of the detached parts and relationships of others (both human and not human) through processes of exchange.

Lamb fights are collective endeavours involving wrestlers’ teammates, their allies, kin, magical-religious experts, and public figures acting as patrons. Each bout, therefore, is not merely a contest between two challengers, but rather an encounter between two collectives (Bonhomme, 2022). Each wrestler embodies the collective formed around his persona, along with the “invisible” forces and the material resources mobilized by this coalition.

Super Ziguinchor was already in his thirties by the time he finally secured a contract for a *lamb* fight. Experienced, agile, and tactically astute, he excelled in hand-to-hand combat. Generous and deeply committed to training, he constantly supported his teammates, whether by assisting in their matches preparation or by offering advice to refine their wrestling techniques.

His own match preparation involved many people. His parents sought the help of powerful experts of the “invisible” in his native village in the southern region of Casamance. Kin and neighbours prayed for his victory and offered advice on how to manage his time more effectively and protect himself against “mystical attacks”. His brothers brought him talismans and magical concoctions. His childhood friend Babou assisted him with the “mystical preparation” and, once at the stadium, he set up his *cummu kay* – the corner where the wrestler companions gather to protect his “mystical arsenal”. Some teammates and close friends visited marabouts on his behalf, contributing money to pay for their services. His boss at the woodwork workshop, where he worked between trainings, give him money and advice. Since his opponent was heavier than him, several heavyweights trained with him during hand-to-hand sessions in order to help him get

accustomed facing bigger opponents. Coach Tigo helped him to perfect his boxing skills. Two close friends, who were key figures of his fan club, approached local politicians, who provided money to print promotional t-shirts. The female members of the fan club organized dancing and drumming events in the neighbourhood to rally supporters and raise funds.

The expenses for organizing a wrestling match are considerable, especially for people dwelling in impoverished places such as Pikine *irregulaire* (an unplanned suburb of Dakar). He and his friends had to pay *marabouts* for their work. They had to buy the goods – such as fruits, candles, sugar, sour milk puddings, chickens and more – that *marabouts* asked them to distribute as gifts and alms. They had to provide financial support to the women of the household, who purchased the ingredients to prepare lunch for the hundreds of people gathered at his home on the day of the fight. They had to pay for renting vans to transport fans to the stadium and assist those who couldn't afford the full price of the ticket.

At the stadium, he was accompanied by teammates and coaches. Coach Tigo guided him through his warm-up. As he paraded around the stadium, teammates shielded him from stones that might have been thrown by the opponent's supporters. They also protected him from “evil eyes” (*caat yu bon*) during the moment when he had to remove the sweatshirt and acetate trousers worn over his *ngeemb* (the loincloth used for wrestling). This liminal phase –transitioning from athletic to fighting attire– is commonly regarded as a moment of heightened vulnerability. They danced the *écurie*'s choreography, stomping their feet and swinging their arms in unison as they followed the beat of the drums played by the *griots*³. Meanwhile, his fans in the stands set off fireworks and chanted joyfully to cheer them on.

After winning the match, he ran to embrace his coach and teammates. When we returned to Pikine, the beat of the drum and the scent of the freshly cooked rice with spicy meat sauce filled the air. The celebration was open to everyone in the neighbourhood and would last until late into the night. Babou, the teammates, the coaches, close friends, all of us, were congratulated for the victory. It was a collective achievement contingent on a distributed and relational agency.

In the following days, I accompanied Super Ziguinchor to thank and give something to those who had helped him: *marabouts*, friends, and family in a nearby neighbourhood. By the time we finished the rounds, his pockets were empty; the expenses for the match far exceeded the amount of his purse. If it hadn't been for the help of friends and allies, he would never have been able to cover all the costs. Nevertheless, he was proud of having been at the centre of a neighbourhood event and happy to have had the opportunity to demonstrate his courage, strength, generosity, and dedication to wrestling.

Wrestling matches involve many people, who take an active part in the fight to the point that the people involved the most can be praised for a wrestler's victory, almost as if they themselves had fought. No wrestler can hope to become a champion without acquiring “wealth in people” – that is, without building a large following.

³ *Griots* is a pidgin word used to refer to an endogamous “caste” of praise singers, genealogists, musicians and intermediaries found in the countries that once formed the Mande empire. Although the endogamy and professional specialization that historically distinguished the *niëño* (artisan castes, of which *griots* are a part) and *géer* (“nobles”) has become less rigid, these distinctions remain socially meaningful today. For broader discussions of *griots*, see Hale, 2007; for Senegal more specifically, see Irvine (1978), Panzacchi (1994), and Tang (2007).

There are at least two reasons for this. First, the promoters have to fill stadiums. Therefore, the more popular a wrestler is the more opportunities he has of being offered a fighting contract. Depending on the renown of a wrestler, he represents a smaller or bigger geographical area – in some cases arriving to comprise an entire district or town. Second, a wrestler's strength is a collective one (Bonhomme, & Gabail, 2018). In order to be allowed to participate in official competition, a wrestler must be part of a *écurie*. In *écuries* wrestlers hone their fighting abilities with the help of trainers and more experienced fighters. Consequently, through his performance during a bout, a wrestler gives evidence of the forces of his *écurie*. Moreover, each wrestling match is considered to take place both on a visible and “invisible” (Ellis, & ter Haar, 2004) or “mystical” level. Wrestlers’ “mystical” preparation directly involves their allies. Powerful *marabouts* are sought out, and sometimes even paid, through the help of parents, friends and teammates. *Marabouts* craft talismans and magical concoctions, to which different invigorating, protective and offensive powers are attributed.

Some of this “magical” materiality is commonly used to attract “invisible” forces. A prominent example is a widely used type of *senghor* – a class of “magical” cotton belts used by wrestlers. One kind of *senghor* is tied around the waist after being struck on the ground in the direction of the four cardinal points. According to my teammates, this ritual act is meant to summon “spirits of wrestling” (*rawanu lãmb*), who are believed to protect and empower the wrestler during the match. When speaking about their “mystical luggage”, wrestlers were not only able to explain the functions and use of each magical object, but also to recall the *marabout* who had given it to them and the people who took them, or went on their behalf, to the magical-religious expert. When wrestlers commented the pictures showing them before the fights, it became clear that wrestlers’ bodies were central nodes within an assemblage composed of social relations, material objects and “invisible” forces.

A few months after his second *lãmb* fight, I visited Abdul-Jabbar Jr. to interview him and his close friend Tapha (the leader of his fan club). Abdul-Jabbar Jr. was a promising young wrestler who had suffered his first defeat, after having brilliantly won his previous bout. As we belonged to the same *écurie*, I had attended both matches. Tapha and Abdul-Jabbar’s account of what happened on the day of the fight led me reinterpret two events. The first was a quarrel between Tapha and Malik –one of Abdul-Jabbar teammates and close friend. They had argued over the distribution of promotional t-shirts produced by the fan club. In hindsight, both Tapha and Abdul-Jabbar attributed the true cause of the dispute to the action of the *marabouts* working for the opponent. Unable to reach the wrestler directly, said Tapha, the *marabouts* had mobilized invisible forces to provoke discord among his companions. In doing so, they compromised some of the wrestler’s talismans, whose efficacy was contingent on harmony within the group. The second event was the fact that the car taking Abdul-Jabbar to the stadium blew a tire. This incident was interpreted as further evidence that the *marabouts* succeeded in piercing their defenses. In short, the wrestler, his entourage, the magical objects and the car were all seen as components of a collective and porous body.

A wrestler body is a partible body as well. When we met, Alioun Diouf was a wrestling coach and the son of an “*ancienne gloire*” – a former wrestling star. In his youth, he had been a very promising heavyweight, raised in a family of wrestlers. After winning and performing excellently in wrestling tournaments without punches, he lost his first two *lãmb* matches in the mid-1990s and felt ill. He

attributed both his defeats and his illness to *maraboutage* (a sorcerous attack). He accused a close relative of having collected the sand where his footprint had been imprinted and bringing it to a *marabout* out of envy for his success. Soon afterward his relative's betrayal, he began to feel unwell and was eventually unable to walk for a month.

Sorcerous attacks, in fact, can be carried out using a victim's footprints and fingerprints, nail clippings, clothing, hairs and other personal items – body excreta and intimate objects that maintain a connection to the self of which they are a part. Through these means, it is commonly believed, *marabouts* can undermine persons' wellbeing and capacity to act by affecting their *raawan* (a kind of spiritual double or invisible ally).

Moreover, wrestlers receive advice, money, food supplies, magical objects and prayers from a vast array of people, who are related to them. In return, a wrestler is expected to bring pride to the collectives that he embodies, to publicly thank the people involved through mass-media, and to share a portion of his wrestling earnings with them. In preparation for their matches, wrestlers perform *sarax* –that is, they distribute various goods as alms and gifts to others. By giving away material possessions –i.e. parts of their extended self– wrestlers receive in return *wërsëg* (good luck) and *bayre* (a force of attraction that draws people to them), thereby extending their selfhood and enhancing their chances of success. In those cases, clear-cut distinctions between subjects and objects, such as those premised on the commodity form, do not apply. *Marabouts* act upon wrestlers by manipulating objects related to them; and it is through the circulation of gifts and alms that a distributed, collective self is assembled.

In sum, one is dealing with relational, porous and partible subjectivities composed of people, objects and “invisible” forces. Wrestlers' selves expand and contract as they embody or lose allies, supporters, objects and invisible forces, depending on how their behavior and performances in the arena are evaluated according to values such as courage, generosity, commitment and strength. Through exchanges of gifts, money, knowledge, advices, prayers and prizes, wrestlers enhance their capacity to act as collective beings. At the same time, adversaries can introduce harmful “invisible” forces into these porous bodies by targeting detachable parts of these collective beings with sorcerous attacks, thereby undermining their capacity to act.

4. The relationship between dividual and individual modes of self-making

When the wrestling machine functions well, a relationship of mutual constitution and reinforcement is established between the individual and dividual modes of self-making. A wrestler cannot become a champion without his entourage and supporters. And a collective-self forms around the wrestler, one that he builds by relying on, and continually renewing, pre-existing affiliations (Bonhomme, 2022).

The more matches a wrestler wins, the more allies and supporters he gathers. The more supporters he assembles, the richer his purses become. The more material resources he attracts and redistributes among his allies and followers, the greater his ability to build a reputation and raise as an “individualized figure of success” (Havard, 2001).

These dynamic echoes longstanding power and prestige mechanisms in the region. Since at least the foundation of the Ghana Empire in the 8th century, the status of chiefs and notables has been

rooted in the number of their clients and followers (Diouf, 2001). In areas of low population density, “wealth in people” was crucial. Leaders had to secure the loyalty of subordinates by offering them food, shelter and gifts in exchange for the agricultural labour on the land of their patrilineage, as well as for their services and allegiances. Chiefs and notables must be perceived as righteous and generous by their followers; otherwise they risked losing them to more prodigal patrons. This mode of governance characterized the Grand Jolof state and the Wolof monarchies that emerged following its dissolution in the 15th century (Boulègue, 2013). In a sense, wrestling champions today reconfigure an ancient male code of honour in which social standing –once rooted in “noble” birth– had to be continually reinforced through acts of bravery in war and generosity toward subordinates (Ly, 1966; Searing, 2002; Iliffe, 2005). A wrestler who is not judged courageous, strong and generous enough risks losing fans and allies, thereby undermining his chances of becoming a big champion (*mbër bu mag*).

At the same time, more egalitarian and mutualistic values are also vibrant within *lamb*. In *écuries*, a rich vocabulary is employed to express this egalitarian and mutualistic ethics. One cluster of meanings is organized around the Wolof verb *bokk* (to share, to have in common). Before each fight, wrestlers from the same *écurie* gather at the house of the prospective performer and usually eat together from the same bowl. On these occasions, if someone sees a teammate looking for a spot to eat, he will probably say: “*Kaay fii, ñu bokk*” (Come here, we share). *Écuries* are frequently described metaphorically as families. A common expression used to emphasize this sense of togetherness is: “*Ci écurie ben lañu, ñu bokk bay ak ñu bokk yaay*” (In the *écurie* we are one, we share father and mother). From the same root come the Wolof word for kin: *mbokk yi* (those who have in common). The word *mboolo* (togetherness, union) –used in the name of some *écuries* such as the popular Pikine Mboolo– conveys a related meaning. Specifically, *mboolo* emphasizes the act of bringing people together for a common purpose, as in the Wolof maxim: “*mboolo mooy dollé*” (unity is strength). Similarly, the expression *ño far* (we are together) is often used to express solidarity and companionship, such as when a teammate responds to a wrestler who has thanked him for his help.

According to these values, *écurie* members are expected to support one another, share resources and know-how, treat one person’s problem as everyone’s concern, and view individual success as a collective achievement. In line with this ethos, coaches sometimes stress that all wrestlers are equals. For example, during a post-workout talk addressing all those who attended the afternoon training session, the assistant coach Kaa declared: “Here, there are no big and little wrestlers: you are all equals”. Standing in front of the wrestlers seated on the ground, his face serious, he spoke firmly and loudly to make it clear that he would not show preferential treatment to well-established wrestlers, and that all were expected to train with full commitment. Even though I was still at the beginning of my fieldwork, this sentence struck me –precisely because the differences between big and little wrestlers were so evident, and not only in terms of their physical size. Established heavyweights were often treated preferentially by the coaches, and enjoyed more freedom in deciding how to train and behave. Moreover, the *chef de file* (leading wrestler) had the final say in all decisions. In fact, the *écurie* formed around him, and some even identified it with his very persona.

As my fieldwork progressed, frictions between individual and dividual modes of self-making became increasingly apparent. The neoliberalization of *lamb* has reinforced values such as self-

reliance, individual responsibility, and accumulation of personal resources –values that can conflict with those of generosity, sharing and mutuality promoted by more relational/dividual understandings of the self.

The criticisms directed at wrestling stars often bring this tension to the surface. Issa Gomis, one of the *écurie*'s coaches during my fieldwork, illustrated this dynamic clearly. A few days after a big bout, I found Issa furious with a heavyweight. He explained that during the training, the wrestler had called him father and asked him to occupy his corner in the arena. But the day after the fight, the wrestler disappeared without giving him anything. “You know, some wrestlers are greedy; they want to eat all the money”, Issa commented bitterly.

The criticism of wrestling superstars who change neighbourhood after attaining success or don't help their teammates is also frequent. Tyson was a case in point. Some *pikinois* didn't forgive him for leaving Pikine after all that they did for helping him become “king of the arenas”. *Écurie* are usually formed around a leading wrestler, the *chef de file*. It is his charisma and his capacity to attract material resources and redistribute them that permits to maintain the cohesion in the group and his leadership position. Yet members of the *écurie* often judge that the leading wrestler is not giving enough to them; they accuse him to be excessively individualist –overrating his personal agency and devaluating their contribution to his success.

Conversely, wrestlers can also feel burdened by constant request of financial help from family and friends. Boy Bagaya, a young light-heavyweight wrestler, was the eldest male son his family and struggled to support his aging father. Thanks to his good performances in the arena, he had begun to face higher-ranked opponents. Nevertheless, he was far from earning a living through wrestling alone. In addition to training and competing, he worked as a mason and as nightclub bouncer.

After telling me about the meager amount he had earned from his last fight, he expressed frustration over how relative reacted whenever they heard he had signed a contract. Knowing that top wrestlers could earn tens of millions of FCFA (1000 FCFA equals 1,50 euros), they didn't believe him when he said he had little or no money to give. In his words:

“BB: When you have a fight... ‘Boy Bagaya got a fight!’ The family hook up. They think you have millions, they think you have millions. They don't understand nothing.

FF: They don't?

BB: They don't. They think that because you have a fight, you've made millions. And If you try to explain to them [that your purse is small], they'll say you want to keep it all for yourself [he laughs]

FF: But everyone knows that for little wrestlers there is no money, isn't it?

BB: They don't know. In your country –I heard that, since I never being there– when you have a job, it's for you alone. But here, if you have a job, your father, your mother, your mother's aunt, your... [he laughs] Everyone's eyes are on you. If you don't share, they say: ‘he's not kind’. It's hard to succeed. If I were alone... I'd keep the money from my job and become a millionaire.” (Dakar, 27/03/2017).

As anthropologists have shown, in post-colonial African cities the renegotiation of the “communitarian debt” –the obligation to repay elders and share resources within kin and social networks– in the face of new opportunities for “individualization” can be fraught and complex (Marie, 1997). Yet, interestingly, when I met Boy Bagaya again in 2023, he expressed a different

concern: that people in Dakar were becoming too much individualistic. “Everyone thinks only of themselves”, he said. “They work too much outside the home and don’t have time for family and friends”. The cost of living kept raising, new expensive commodities popped up daily, and the job market was increasingly competitive. He and his wife were both working long hours, often returning home late at night, without even enough time to eat dinner together or chat. For him, as for many others, the challenge was finding a balance between relational obligations and degree of autonomy. Achieving this equilibrium, however, required walking a thin and shrinking line.

Something similar happened in *lâmb*. From the 1990s onwards, the purses for the major fights skyrocketed. *Écuries* multiplied, as becoming a wrestling star increasingly required to be a *chef de file*. The number of aspiring champions grew exponentially, but the number of big matches decreased, as they became increasingly expensive for promoters to organize (Bonhomme 2022). As a result, the competition for securing a fight contract intensified. This dynamic further strained the delicate balance between individual ambition and mutual support. While it would be nearly impossible to quantify the number of accusations of betrayal and disputes within *écurie* over long periods of time, the widespread perception was that such tensions were increasing. During my fieldwork, for example, one coach who had recently migrated to Europe was rumored to have sold sensitive information to an opposing champion in exchange for money. Some wrestlers were suspected of using sorcery against teammates, driven by envy over their success. Others clashed over access to fight contract.

Boy Bagaya, for example, was not on good terms with Mr. Perfect. Although they were of similar size, they rarely trained together in hand-to-hand combat. Boy Bagaya complained that whenever he asked Mr. Perfect to train, he would often refuse, citing an “imaginary ache” as an excuse. He also accused Mr. Perfect of having stolen a match from him by secretly offering a better deal to a promoter who had initially approached Boy Bagaya to negotiate a contract with him.

Nevertheless, within *écuries*, the values of sharing and mutuality remain vibrant. Far from simply, or exclusively, (re)producing atomized, calculating individual or reinforcing hierarchical orders, competition does not inherently erode solidarities. Its outcomes are not predetermined; rather, they are contingent on the diverse interpretations and evaluations of the social actors involved, as well as on the broader ecology of practices in which competition is embedded (Hopkinson, & Zidarou, 2022). In *écuries*, it is also through daily hand-to-hand training that the values of *boké* acquire embodied thickness. When these competitive encounters are complemented by dancing together at the stadium, supporting one another before a fight, and sharing meals from the same bowl, the production of relational and mutualistic subjectivities is actively reinforced.

5. The (un)making of neoliberal subjectivities in wrestling

As the implementation of neoliberal ideologies threatens to commodify “human relations and the production of identity and personhood” (Gledhill, 2004, p. 340), focusing on the articulation between individual and dividual modes of self-making can prove heuristically fruitful.

Combat sports offer a kind of testing ground for exploring these issues, insofar as they dramatize and intensify some of the processes under scrutiny. In late capitalist societies, mass-mediated

representations of martial arts and combat sports have been considered particularly well suited to metaphorize the *topos* of the exceptional individual –someone endowed with unwavering will, who asserts himself against all others (Nardini, 2024, p. 163). At the same time, ethnographic studies have shown that by requiring practitioners to share the experience of exposing their bodies to controlled risks, by magnifying mimetic apprenticeship (Wacquant, 2000), and by coupling violent confrontations and attrition with mutuality and affirmation (Hopkinson 2024), sporting practices such as boxing, wrestling and martial arts –albeit in different ways depending on the socio-cultural context– serve as breeding ground for the production of relational and mutualistic subjectivities, along with a strong sense of belonging to a collective (Renesson 2006; Beauchez, 2017; Nardini, & Scandurra 2021).

In the case at hand, the proposed analytic makes it possible to appreciate how the neoliberalization of *lâmb* has produced multiple, indeterminate and often conflicting socio-cultural outcomes. This approach helps to complicate existing scholarly accounts of the neoliberalization of sport by illuminating how neoliberal logics are both reproduced and deflected through their articulation with diverse socio-historical forces and values. Far from being merely a hotbed of individualistic, calculating and self-entrepreneurial subjectivities, Senegalese *lâmb* continues to provide fertile ground for mutuality, solidarity and sharing.

The spread of self-entrepreneurial attitudes threatens to undermine mutualistic values. Yet, *écurie* continue to serve as spaces for the cultivation of friendships and new forms of communal bonds. Of course, they are not utopias of reciprocity and equality. Gift-giving can reinforce hierarchies, and communitarian solidarity often comes with obligations – especially in African contexts. And yet dependency may still be preferable to abjection (Ferguson, 2006).

Although there is a strong drive to exploit relationships and concentrate resources in the hands of a few, the power of social relations remains equally strong – shaping the wrestler’s self, conjuring collective agency, sustaining redistributive mechanisms and fostering collectivist views on economic value.

While Strathern (1988) elaborated the concept of the *dividual* with a focus on gender, and recent studies have applied it in the context of the anthropology of religion (Mosko 2010 and 2015; Bialecki & Daswani 2015), its application to sport studies appears to offer further insights into two domains that were equally central to Mauss’s *Essai sur le don*: economics and politics. From this perspective, competing views on relationships, agency and the production of economic value are foregrounded. This, in turn, allows for a re-examination of both the constraints and the possibilities for change of the current neoliberal moment.

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Towards Co-Production: The Case of Movement Inspired by Martial Arts (MIMA)

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Abstract

One of the major streams of social scientific research on martial arts and combat sports has tended to examine these fighting practices and their distinct techniques of the body from an ethnographic perspective, studying typically young, male practitioners in their regular training environments. A newer trend in wider physical activity research is co-production, a collaborative design that involves community members helping to develop an intervention that suits their wants and needs. This article presents the design of the Movement Inspired by Martial Arts (MIMA) pilot project in Cardiff, Wales, which borrows exercises and movements taken from a range of martial arts that are adapted for older adults and women in multicultural, underserved communities. We evaluated and refined the initial version of the MIMA exercise programme through an iterative process by collecting findings of an evaluation questionnaire and two focus groups with older adults and professionals from a council and third-sector organisations. The findings led to the refinement of the programme that is demonstrated by describing key exercises, offering direct instructions and a video demonstration. We close with suggestions for future co-production projects, pointing the way to a new area for martial arts scholarship.

Keywords: Co-creation, Community-based research, Health and wellbeing, Adapted martial arts, Older adults.

1. Introduction: Field research, embodiment and ethnographies of martial arts

Field research is a means to study a social group, culture of organisation first-hand, studying their way of life and operation using “up-close and personal” methods of data collection such as participant observation, photography, tailor-made questionnaires and in-situ, relatively informal interviews. It can also be used within quantitative lens, especially in medical research, although is an equally well-established approach within qualitative methodology, particularly in sociocultural anthropology and sociology. Ethnography is one quintessential field research design tried, tested

and transformed over the decades, and it has been well utilised in martial arts scholarship since the 1980s (Jennings, 2019). Researchers began ethnographic inquiry as lone (and invariably white, male and Western) ethnographers undertaking field work in little-studied locations, such as Zarrilli's (1998) influential examination of Kalarippayattu in its native region of Kerala, Southern India, which added to Alter's (1992) pioneering study of North Indian wrestling. These studies illustrate a commitment to longitudinal data collection using multiple sources, with Zarrilli's (1998) study exemplifying the potential for multiple case studies across geographical and cultural settings. Empirical field research developed from more abstract descriptions of martial arts settings such as Goodger's (1982) pioneering sociological work indicating a Judo club operating as a gnostic sect, which did not contain any empirical data, despite the interesting theoretical insights it gleaned.

Ethnographies turned even more reflexive as the years went by, with Wacquant's (2004) famous study of boxing in Chicago being one notable example where the researcher's thoughts, feelings and concerns become more central to the writing process, which differed slightly to his more traditional focus on the boxers themselves in his journal publications from the 1990s exemplifying the boxers' commitment in diet and lifestyle (Wacquant, 1995). Wacquant's study inspired the *Fighting Scholars* edited collection (Sánchez García & Spencer, 2013) that included both ethnographic studies of particular martial arts and combat sports as well as autoethnographic writings of the scholar-practitioners (or "pracademics") themselves.

Martial arts ethnographies have become more gender balanced in recent years, with studies being produced by solo female researchers (e.g., Joseph, 2012; Madsen, 2015; Miller Griffith, 2016). The academic field is also becoming more diverse in terms of ethnicity, nationalities and religious backgrounds, with notable contributions from a new generation of researchers operating in increasingly multicultural societies (Joseph, 2012) adding to the earlier canon written by predominantly white, male scholars.

More recent ethnographic trends have made a mark on martial arts studies. Many scholars have moved away from acting as lone fieldworkers studying hard-to-reach communities, instead turning to more collaborative ventures involving what Delamont and Stephens (2023) call two-handed ethnography. Using the example of Capoeira, these authors worked as a team for over a decade, with the older and less athletic Delamont undertaking nearly pure observational work from the sidelines of the class while Stephens embedded himself as an apprentice student, benefiting from a background in Karate. In Delamont, Stephens and Campos (2017), these authors later worked with their *mestre* (teacher), who acted as a sounding board for their theoretical analysis. Other scholars utilising prolonged participant observation worked with academic supervisors and critical friends to produce more balanced and theoretically insightful accounts of a given culture (e.g., Jennings, Brown & Sparkes, 2010).

Like autoethnography, autoethnography has changed over time as it evolved from a narrative of the self to a more specific study of particular phenomena. Allen Collinson and Owton (2015) pointed the way to study the intense aspects of embodiment through a more phenomenological approach to autoethnography involving them charting their day-to-day physical experiences of undertaking distance running and boxing. This was extended by Allen Collinson, Vaittinen, Jennings and Owton (2016) in a four-way collaboration involving data from traditionalist Chinese martial arts and mixed martial arts (MMA) in terms of the sense of heat (thermoception). These

are examples of autophenomenography, which charts the direct lived experiences of the researcher who happens to be a committed practitioner of a given sport or martial art. Here, such sensuous scholarship adds to knowledge of how people live and learn the martial arts through specific senses such as touch and smell (Spencer, 2012), building a sensitivity to core ideas of body calling and conditioning (Spencer, 2009) and pain (Green, 2011).

So far, we have covered developments in field research in martial arts, focusing on the interconnected traditions of ethnography and autoethnography. All these studies have tended to focus on the performing body and the development of embodied skill and knowledge in complete martial arts systems within spaces devoted to their teaching, coaching and training. Yet there are many techniques and practices that can be extracted from full fighting systems for reasons other than combat. This article charts the development of a novel and emerging programme, Movement Inspired by Martial Arts (MIMA), which draws on embodied knowledge obtained through successive ethnographies and wider study of different ways of moving the body in martial arts cultures. We examine the notion of techniques of the body in the next section before turning to an overview of a novel research design fitting the theme of embodied knowledge and health: co-production. This is followed by an overview of the fledgling Movement Inspired by Martial Arts (MIMA) project and its potential as a co-produced programme for older adults and women from diverse communities. We conclude with implications for a more collaborative, practical and adaptive approach to field research in martial arts studies.

2. Theoretical Framework: Techniques of the Body

The seminal ethnographies of martial arts outlined above have tended to be concerned with the embodied movements and process of acquiring bodily skill and knowhow in distinct martial arts cultures, institutions and pedagogies. The way that boxers learn to bob and weave, the manner in which a Kung Fu practitioner can replicate the movements of an inspiring animal or the subtle way of controlling one's body parts as a whole unit in Taijiquan, have been key problems and questions for these scholars. Despite the concept not necessarily driving the aforementioned research projects, the classic concept of techniques of the body (also known as "body techniques") is an appropriate theoretical notion for practical ethnographic and qualitative research projects on martial arts, whether they be focused on fighting, bodily control, cultural expression or national pride. French anthropologist and sociologist Marcel Mauss (1973[1934]) first coined the concept in a series of lectures to his students published posthumously, defining it in the oft-cited statement:

I deliberately say techniques of the body in the plural because it is possible to produce a theory of the technique of the body in the singular on the basis of a study, an exposition, a description pure and simple of techniques of the body in the plural. By this expression I mean the ways in which from society to society men [sic] know how to use their bodies. (Mauss, 1973, p. 70).

Following Mauss's (1973) pioneering logic drawing on his first-person, retrospective reflections and cross-cultural observations of contrasting ethnic groups, researchers can recognise that are

always parallel or alternative ways of performing a technique of the body between given societies, as in manners of marching and digging that Mauss observed between different militaries. However, there is also variety within a nation-state, as in the ways in which specific educational institutions develop a gender- and class-based walk and comportment, as Mauss noted with girls' finishing schools in his native France. Furthermore, while some techniques remain traditional within tribal, ethnic and local communities, others are classified by Mauss as being purely effective, indicating an instrumental rather than ritualistic attitude to technique. Mauss (1973) also noted intergenerational differences within swimming, with his own generation's (now quite bizarre) technique reminiscent of a whale's motion and breathing pattern.

Several martial arts scholar-practitioners have heeded Mauss's (1970) call to pay attention to techniques of the body. Anthropologist Ryan (2011), for example, has employed techniques of the body to uncover the realities of learning *juego de garrote* stick fighting in Venezuela. Recently, a special issue of the journal *Ethnography* edited by Nardini and Scandurra (2021) has collated studies examining how techniques can lead to a greater sense of belonging of martial arts cultures, from Italian *boxe popolare* (people's boxing underpinned by leftist Marxist principles) (Pedrini, Brown & Navarini, 2021) in terms of a political belonging to Mexican Xilam (a sense of belonging to a notion of nativist, indigenous Mexicanidad) (Jennings, 2021) and Breton Gouren wrestling (an affiliation to an imagined Celtic ancestry) (Nardini & Épron, 2021).

However, despite the ready applications of this accessible concept, there remain some limitations to the original theory, as a more thorough examination of how and why a technique is created in the first place, as Ben Spatz (2015) notes: "Where does new technique come from? Mauss tells us that a new technique of swimming has been found, but he does not explain who found it or how" (p. 61). Furthermore, Spatz (2015) identifies a gap in understanding around human consciousness and agency: "In pointing out the difficulty of unlearning technique once it has been absorbed to the point of unconscious reflex, Mauss raises another issue: the relationship between knowledge and agency. If technique is knowledge, then how can it become involuntary?" (p. 30).

Spatz (2015), an American contemporary specialist in drama and theatre studies and Aikido exponent, has since adapted and enhanced Mauss's (1973) original formulation of techniques of the body. He summarised the theory under four guiding principles:

- 1) Technique is knowledge; it is acquired and not easy to unlearn.
- 2) Technique is transmissible; it travels across time and space and is always hybrid and mixed.
- 3) Technique is a compromise between "nature" and "humanity."
- 4) Technique can be embodied in the sense that it may work with and through the materiality of bodies as distinct from technologies.

(Spatz, 2015, pp. 32-33).

Regarding technique as a distinct form of knowledge that is valuable in and of itself, Spatz (2015) also postulates that practice is a form of research. In the context of martial arts, then, effective striking techniques are seen as a form of knowledge that sits alongside other distinct forms of knowledge such as understanding of the philosophical principles underpinning the art, as well as a deep understanding of its history, founders and micropolitics. Martial arts instructors and practitioners accrue this knowledge over many years and decades of practice, and simply reading

about these arts or watching videos and listening podcasts (aiding one's cognitive and cultural knowledge) is insufficient in developing rounded knowledge of how to perform the movement properly. This can only be achieved through practice alone and with training partners, testing movements and eventually adapting techniques to suit one's needs and purposes as a given period of one's martial arts career and life.

The dynamic nature of technique, knowledge and practice allows for the continued transmission of technique in specific arts, as Spatz (2015) noted with the case of postural yoga, which has shifted from a male-dominated, ascetic milieu in its native India to a female-focused, commercial and secular environment in the Western context.

Mauss sought to demonstrate that techniques are not tied to particular societies, but rather can be shown to move continuously across national and cultural borders. This suggests that the identity of every nation is essentially hybrid or composite and points towards a view of humanity as united by shared knowledge resources rather than divided by nation of culture...Mauss's basic insight holds: Technique does not belong to any one nation or people. The power dynamics that attach to its movement are complex and deserving of more substantial analysis (Spatz, 2015, p. 31).

This power dynamics helps raise questions pertaining to the methods used to explore the topic of technique through a more inclusive, participatory and community-based approach to practice. In the next section, we examine such a methodological possibility through an introduction to the novel and increasingly influential design of co-production. Such a design responds to calls for granting more agency to our research participants and the potential end-users of practical, public-facing research – something that resonates with Spatz's (2015) critique of the original conceptualisation of techniques of the body as the basic, most exact element of social analysis.

3. Co-Production in Exercise and Health Research

In healthcare, co-design and co-production are creative processes in which staff and patients work together to improve services or develop new interventions (Robert et al., 2022). Both approaches are promoted for their benefits – such as better experiences, more effective and safer services – alongside partnership working and democratic rationales, which enable inclusivity and equity. However, research evidence on the various ways and contexts in which these approaches are applied in the development of sport and exercise interventions remains scarce (Smith et al., 2023; Walker et al., 2023).

In healthcare settings and policy development, co-production and co-design have gained popularity over the last decade. However, there is still a lack of consensus in defining these terms, as well as in providing clear descriptions of methodology and evaluation (Constantin et al., 2022). Co-production has been used as a broad term covering a range of other “co-” words that are often ambiguous and applied to diverse contexts. In research, co-production is considered a slippery and muddled concept that is often misapplied (Masterson, 2022). The concept of co-production originates from the work of Elinor Ostrom in the 1970s, which introduced the idea of variations in the delivery and outcomes of police services by actively involving citizens – for example, by reporting crime and taking preventive measures (Ostrom et al., 1978). In healthcare,

co-production has been used to describe the process in which patients play an active role not only in influencing the delivery and outcomes of services but also in contributing to their development and refinement (Roberts et al., 2022).

The lack of consensus on terminology has led to the emergence of multiple new terms and definitions. A recent systematic scoping review of existing definitions of co-design and co-production by Masterson et al. (2022) identified 60 commonly used definitions and mapped out eight definition clusters related to intervention design and research in health and social care. To navigate these variations and build consensus, Masterson (2022) emphasised the importance of moving beyond creating new concepts and distinguishing contexts toward establishing agreement on the core values and principles of co-production. Similarly, Smith et al. (2023) argue that rather than searching for the “true” definition of co-production, researchers should appreciate definitional heterogeneity and the contextual or disciplinary factors that shape it (Smith et al., 2023). Terms such as co-production, co-creation and co-design are often used interchangeably. While they are distinct, they share similarities in promoting collaboration between stakeholders (Robert et al., 2022). Vargas et al. (2022) proposed that co-creation encompasses both co-design and co-production. In healthcare, co-design represents the earlier phase of the co-creation process, such as intervention development, whereas co-production occurs in later phases, including service delivery, evaluation and iteration (Vargas, Whelan, Brimblecombe, & Allender, 2022).

Our understanding of co-production aligns with the following perspective: an approach in which end-users of services contribute their lived experiences to inform research alongside academics and/or clinicians, thereby enhancing the research’s impact and influence on people’s lives (Smith et al., 2023). We aim to follow best practice guidelines (Smith et al., 2022) and apply co-production in a way that ensures joint ownership, shared decision-making, and equal valuation of the opinions and knowledge of all involved.

Co-production has recently been applied in the development of exercise interventions with and for certain populations. Examples include a physical activity referral programme for people with lifestyle-related health conditions (Buckley et al., 2023), exercise interventions for young people from refugee backgrounds (Smith et al., 2022), and programmes for individuals with severe mental ill health (Walker et al., 2023). The level of involvement of people with lived experiences varies across these research studies; however, all share a common foundation: scientific knowledge is integrated into a social context in the process of knowledge production. Furthermore, these studies used co-production to refine or maximise the impact of interventions and, ultimately, to promote positive changes in well-being and improve engagement.

Our co-production work on MIMA is an iterative process that constantly evolves and shares similarities with previous practices (Buckley et al., 2023; Walker et al., 2023). The key principles of our approach – equity, relevance, impact, inclusion, and sustainability – are presented in Figure 1 below.

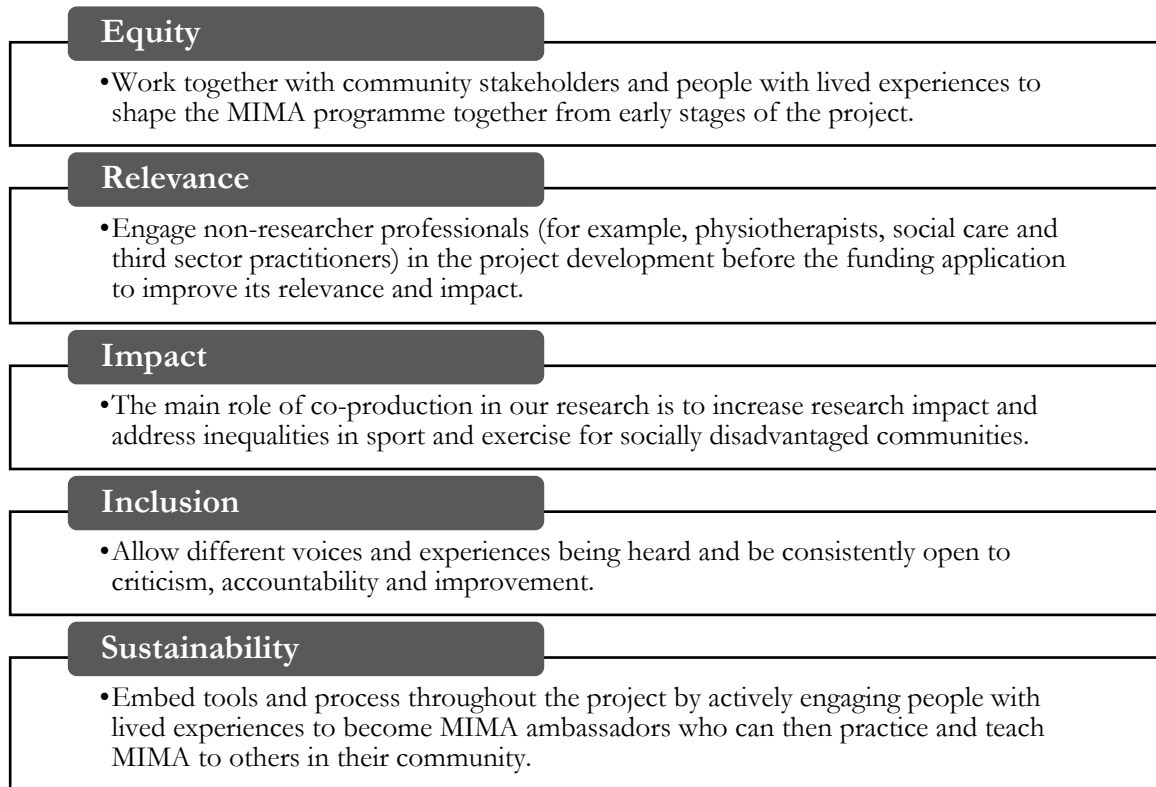


Figure 1. Working principles in the MIMA co-production project

We therefore make every effort throughout the project to widen participation, ensuring that the perspectives of those who cannot be consistently involved but wish to contribute in different ways are included in the co-production process of the MIMA programme.

The benefits of co-production have been widely acknowledged in enhancing research impact and addressing inequities. By involving non-academic partners and people with lived experiences while addressing real-world issues, co-production leads to more impactful research. It provides a platform to ensure that marginalised voices are heard early in the research process, thereby improving equity (Smith et al., 2023). Co-production may also enhance the experiences of participants and practitioners within a given service, leading to quality improvements in healthcare – such as increased effectiveness and patient safety (Roberts et al., 2022) – as well as the development of more user-centred and effective interventions (Buckley et al., 2023). Additionally, co-production values multidisciplinary collaboration and integrates diverse forms of knowledge, including experiential knowledge from people with lived experience (Buckley et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2023). Co-production holds significant potential for creating more inclusive, impactful, and high-quality research in the fields of sport, exercise, and health sciences. Research on co-production, as well as patient and public involvement in health research, shows that patients, communities, and researchers all benefit from the process (Smith et al., 2023). Evidence demonstrates its value in developing tailored interventions for specific populations facing multiple challenges in being physically active (Buckley et al., 2023; Walker et al., 2023).

Our vision with the MIMA programme is to address challenges in our communities and widen participation in marginalised groups. The presented evidence indicates that co-produced exercise programmes could increase engagement through tailored physical activity interventions for more sedentary population groups, for example, older adults and people from diverse ethnic communities. People from diverse ethnic communities and those living in higher deprivation represent a marginalised population experiencing social exclusion and inequalities across many aspects of life (Bansal et al., 2022; Kapadia et al., 2022). Women from diverse ethnic backgrounds are particularly underrepresented in sport and exercise, and they often lack a platform where their voices are heard. Research and co-production of an exercise intervention could provide them with an opportunity to actively contribute and be acknowledged. It is crucial to listen to the voices of these groups to ensure that exercise interventions are relevant, accessible, and designed to improve health in ways that align with real lived experiences.

A collaboratively developed exercise programme would be more relevant to the community, increasing participation and engagement. In our experience to date, co-producing with individuals from diverse ethnic communities requires active and creative engagement from the research team. This process demands compassion, patience and a commitment to building trust. A creative and exploratory relationship between instructors and participants – beyond the traditional provider-consumer dynamic – can generate new insights and innovative approaches to programme development. Co-production enables participants to be active contributors to their own movement experiences. It is essential to develop new strategies that foster inclusivity and equity, particularly within martial arts programmes designed for specific populations. Using co-production in a martial arts setting allows participants to take a leading role in designing their exercise programme. They can identify key priorities, shape the programme's content, and influence how it is delivered. This participatory approach can better address the barriers to exercise faced by individuals with physical, mental health, or life challenges, ultimately enhancing adherence and enjoyment of movement and exercise.

4. The Case of the Movement Inspired by Martial Arts (MIMA) Project in Wales

Like many late-modern Western societies, Wales, as one of the four devolved nations of the United Kingdom (UK), faces challenges of an increasingly isolated, ageing population with limited health knowledge and physical literacy. This lack of exercise know-how is especially problematic in recognised areas of socioeconomic deprivation. It is recognised that high rates of morbidity and mortality and a generally short health life expectancy are linked to heightened levels of sedentary activity – especially due to prolonged periods of sitting on chairs (Henson, De Craemer, & Yates, 2023). Wales is recognised as being a problematic region in terms of blood pressure for men over the age of 50 (British Heart Foundation, 2025). Cardiff, the capital and largest metropolis of Wales, is a culturally diverse city with many such neighbourhoods facing with higher deprivation and communities experiencing several challenges and poorer quality of life. In Wales, there is high inequalities in healthy life expectancy, the average person in the most deprived decile spends an additional period of around 9 years in less than good health versus those in the least deprived decile (22.1 years versus 13.2 years) (ONS, 2022).

As a consequence of challenges and health inequalities, the Welsh Government sets the Healthier Wales strategy that has long-term vision of a “whole system approach” to health and social care. The strategy places strong focus on community-based preventative services and care. Furthermore, the most recent Long-Term Strategy (2023-35) of Public Health Wales sets six priorities with a specific focus on NCD prevention. Four of these priorities relate to our project: influencing the wider determinants of health; promoting mental and social well-being; strong focus on prevention and early intervention; promoting health behaviours (for example, action on physical inactivity).

Effective interventions are needed to improve social inclusion and overall health and wellbeing in diverse communities and to tackle challenges posed by the ageing population (Williams & Kemper, 2010). Physical activity is known to benefit health, slowing physical and mental decline and reducing NCD risk (Ballesteros, Kraft, Santana, & Tziraki, 2015; Whitehead & Blaxton, 2017; Windle, Hughes, Linck, Russell, & Woods, 2010). However, national activity trackers show that in older adults, physical activity has remained lower than the national averages over the last decade both in England and Wales, and more than 40% of middle-aged and older adults lack sufficient physical activity (Sport England, 2022, Sport Wales, 2024). Moreover, across adults in all age groups, individuals from Asian and Black ethnic backgrounds were less likely than average to engage in physical activity (Sport England, 2022). Those from socially disadvantaged or Black or Asian ethnic groups experience a higher burden of physical inactivity (Roe, Aspinall, & Ward Thompson, 2016) and physical activity is well below recommended levels and most physical activity intervention studies have been largely unsuccessful in socially deprived and ethnic minority communities (Ige-Elegbede, Pilkington, Gray, & Powell, 2019; Such et al., 2017).

Enjoyable leisure exercises have better health outcomes than occupational or household activity (Godbey, Chow, & Burnett-Wolle, 2007). Exercise improves cognitive function, possibly through increased social interaction and emotional well-being (Kirk-Sanchez & McGough, 2013) and cardiorespiratory fitness (Angevaren, Aufdemkampe, Verhaar, Aleman, & Vanhees, 2008). Activities like chess, bridge, memory training, and social programmes also boost cognitive function (Evers, Klusmann, Schwarzer, & Heuser, 2012; Mireles & Charness, 2002). Cognitive and socially supported exercise like dancing, Tai Chi (Taijiquan) and other forms of martial art exercises could slow cognitive decline (Ballesteros et al., 2015; Diamond & Ling, 2016; Manson, Rotondi, Jamnik, Ardern, & Tamim, 2013). So far, evidence strongly supported the positive impact of Tai Chi on quality of life, physical function and executive function (Chen et al., 2020; Gao, Greiner, Ryuno, & Zhang, 2024; Shah, Ardern, & Tamim, 2015). Other forms of martial art classes may also be beneficial for physical and mental health in older adults due to the coordination, learning of certain movement patterns, and social interaction embedded in the exercise.

4.1 Methods

A co-production approach has been recommended as a promising method for identifying barriers and facilitators to engagement in physical activity and for collaboratively developing interventions with marginalized groups – shifting from a “done to” model to a “partnership with” design (Walker et al., 2023). In this study, a pragmatic co-production approach was used to develop the

MIMA programme and to evaluate its initial implementation in the community. Participatory and integrated methods may help bridge the gap between research and practice. Co-designing interventions appears to be an effective way to address the needs and preferences of inactive older adults from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

Collaboration between community organisations, exercise providers, and academic institutions offers a strategic approach to advancing research in this field. Such joined-up strategies can help identify key challenges, generate relevant research questions, and develop shared solutions that promote engagement in physical activity. Novel approaches – such as co-design and public involvement – have proven valuable in research targeting inactive older adults (Guell et al., 2018; Stathi et al., 2020; Withall et al., 2020). Establishing an advisory group of older adults during the development phase may support more effective intervention design and improve implementation through tailored recruitment strategies and materials.

While participation in research may influence adherence – potentially increasing motivation to complete post-intervention assessments or strengthening commitment to the project – it also provides valuable insights into promoting exercise and delivering programmes within low-participation communities. Clinical trials often focus on rehabilitation or fall-prevention interventions for patients with a medical motive, limiting the generalisability of their findings to broader community-dwelling older adults. Therefore, better methods are needed to study community-based programmes, such as field testing, advisory groups, evaluation surveys, and qualitative interviews (Szekeres, 2022).

4.2 Co-production Strategy

In our project, we followed a co-production strategy to design, test, and implement the pilot MIMA programme in a diverse community setting. The process involved the following steps:

1. *Co-creating* the MIMA project plan and the movement programme
2. Conducting *system mapping* workshops to explore barriers and facilitators to physical activity in diverse communities, and identifying strategies for community implementation of MIMA
3. *Testing* the MIMA programme through community-based taster sessions to assess acceptability and engagement among middle-aged and older adults living in ethnically diverse neighbourhoods in Cardiff

4.3 Co-creation

A team of three early career researchers developed the co-production strategy through consultation with community stakeholders and members of the Wales Martial Arts Practitioner Researcher Network (WMA PRN). The strategy comprised four workshops with a closed co-production group – including community practitioners, martial arts instructors, and older adults – followed by a three-month pilot phase. The local council's volunteer coordinator and two members of WMA PRN became co-applicants to support the development and delivery of the MIMA intervention. The first version of the movement programme was developed collaboratively, led by George and in partnership with WMA PRN. The hybrid martial arts – inspired exercise set was designed to target full-body movement and could be performed flexibly – indoors or outdoors, with or without the support of a chair.

4.4 System mapping

We conducted focus groups as part of four system mapping workshops to explore how the programme could be effectively implemented within the community. Two in-person workshops were held with 12 and 15 participants, respectively, aged 50 and older, from ethnically diverse backgrounds. Two additional workshops were conducted online with stakeholders who provide services to these communities. Each workshop lasted approximately 60-80 minutes. All participants provided informed consent and received a £10 shopping voucher in appreciation of their time. The facilitated discussions covered themes such as individual motivators and barriers to participating in social and physical activities, strategies for maintaining health and mobility, and the broader cultural and systemic factors that affect activity levels. A semi-structured interview guide was used (see Appendices).

Workshops were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic maps were developed using Kumu system mapping software (www.kumu.io) to visually represent interrelated factors. Following each session, the maps were updated to incorporate newly identified themes and insights.

4.5 Programme Testing

Participant feedback was collected via a short, paper-based survey during four public engagement events that marked the launch of MIMA. Data from the surveys, along with field observations by the research team and verbal feedback from participants and stakeholders, were used to evaluate the acceptability and engagement of the programme and to guide its refinement.

Each taster session was attended by approximately 15 participants. Sessions were led by George and included the initial version of the MIMA movement programme. Printed feedback surveys were administered immediately after the sessions to capture participants' fresh reflections and experiences. Table 1 provides a summary of participant numbers across the sessions. Overall, 76 participants took part at least in one of the four sessions.

	Location	Number of participants
1.	Splott	26
2.	Butetown	22
3.	Grangetown	16
4.	Health fare in Grangetown	12

Table 1. List of MIMA taster sessions

Background of the MIMA programme and the authors' positioning

Movement Inspired by Martial Arts (MIMA) was developed in 2023 by the two authors in conjunction with a range of specialists in our respective professional networks. George is a martial arts scholar-practitioner and ethnographer who has continuously learned, researched and

written about numerous styles since the age of 14: Taekwondo, Kendo, Judo, three styles Wing Chun, Xilam (a Mexican martial art), historical European martial arts (HEMA, often known as historical fencing) and three styles of Taijiquan, along with shorter explorations of other styles such as Cheng Hsin, mixed martial arts (MMA), kickboxing and Brazilian Jiu Jitsu (BJJ). His main ethnographies to date have been on Wing Chun (Jennings, Brown & Sparkes, 2010), Xilam (Jennings, 2019), Taijiquan (Ma & Jennings, 2021) and HEMA (Jennings, 2022), and although those social scientific studies were on the topics of subculture, embodiment and identity, George is able to draw on this embodied, technical knowledge developed from long-term immersion in those cultures and pedagogies, and this is aided by his previous experience as a former personal trainer, martial arts instructor (in Wing Chun) and exercise rehabilitator specialising in stroke survivors. This bodily knowledge has been modified to devise and adapt a set of suitable exercises for older adults who might have never trained in, and perhaps might have never contemplated trying out, a martial art or combat sport before. Zsofia is not a martial arts practitioner, but her background and network enabled MIMA to be successful and in-demand. Zsofia is a Research Associate and a Networking Co-lead at the Centre for Health, Activity and Wellbeing Research (CAWR). She is an early career researcher in exercise psychology passionate about community-based research that aims to make a difference in improving health and wellbeing across the lifespan.

4.6 Findings

Co-creating

At the outset, we encountered several challenges due to limited funding and recruitment difficulties. In response to these barriers, we adopted a step-by-step, patient, and pragmatic approach to the co-production process. This included maintaining flexibility and working within the constraints of available financial resources, community connections, and emerging opportunities.

As described in the Methods section, this pragmatic process involved outreach activities with community stakeholders, the organisation of system mapping workshops, and the testing of the movement programme through public involvement and engagement events. Attendance at these events was open to all, resulting in a varied group of participants at each session.

Planning commenced in the summer of 2023 with the support of the Wales Martial Arts Research Network, funded by the Wales Innovation Network (WIN), led by George. Additional support came from professionals in social care, healthcare, and third sector organisations, particularly those working in community-facing roles within the local council and health board. These connections were established through the ACTIF project coordinated by Zsofia.

The shared vision of the MIMA project was to collaborate with local stakeholders to develop an exercise programme that effectively addressed barriers to participation. The programme was informed by scientific evidence, the expertise of martial arts practitioners and researchers, the practical knowledge of community stakeholders, and the lived experiences of individuals from Black, Asian, Middle Eastern, and Chinese communities.

As a result, the development of MIMA has been an iterative process of co-production, refinement, and evaluation. Figure 2 provides an overview of this process. The project is currently at the pilot stage. MIMA emerged through co-creation, reimagining martial arts to suit the needs and contexts of diverse communities. Initial consultations with local stakeholders indicated that MIMA would complement existing activities and fill gaps in current offerings.

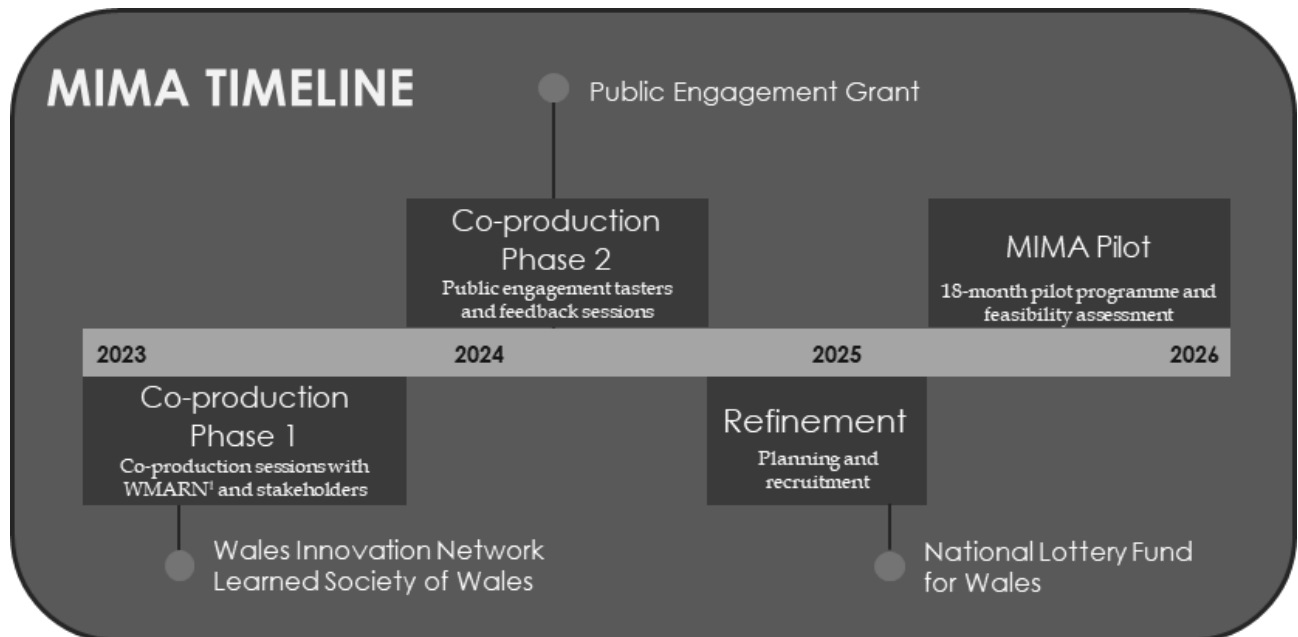


Figure 2. Timeline of activities in the MIMA development¹

The subsequent systems mapping and testing phases of the project was funded by smaller grants provided by the Wales Innovation Network and the Cardiff Metropolitan University Public Engagement grant.

Systems mapping

The thematic analysis of the focus group discussions held during the systems mapping workshops identified several key themes related to physical activity engagement. These included: enabling environments, ageing and disability, knowledge about health and habit formation, positive mindset – “keep going”, social support, and health problems as determinants of engagement. A systems map illustrating the interconnections between facilitators, barriers, and related factors is included in the Appendices.

Environmental-level barriers included limited or inaccessible transportation to activities and a lack of information about available community services and programmes. Interpersonal barriers

¹ Wales Martial Arts Research Network

encompassed a lack of support from family and friends, language difficulties, and communication challenges faced by service providers and professionals. At the intrapersonal level, participants identified barriers such as ageing, disabilities or health conditions, and a reluctance to share problems or seek help (often described as being “stubborn”).

Motivators were identified at environmental, interpersonal, and intrapersonal levels. At the environmental and systems level, participants emphasised the importance of an enabling environment – such as access to local community centres and clubs that offer social and exercise activities, and coordinated efforts between organisations to promote participation.

Interpersonal motivators were often shaped by the enabling environment. Building trust and receiving social support were seen as key factors in encouraging participation.

Intrapersonal motivators were primarily described by participants who were already active. These included knowledge of how habits and behaviours affect health, a desire to stay healthy, and serving as a role model – especially for younger people. Participants also highlighted the importance of engaging in meaningful activities such as volunteering, being creative, spending time outdoors, socialising, and connecting with nature. Many expressed a desire to keep their minds active and to take on responsibilities, such as volunteering, after retirement. A positive mindset – summarised by the phrases “keep going” and “make the most of life” – was a strong motivator among active individuals but was not reported by those who were inactive.

These findings informed the support structures and collaborative strategies necessary for effectively implementing and promoting the MIMA programme. To support inactive individuals in becoming more engaged, we decided to partner with a local charity that provides services for women from minority ethnic backgrounds and to establish new connections with other community organisations for piloting the MIMA programme.

Testing

The public engagement events took place between March and December 2024 and promoted healthy ageing in Cardiff through community engagement. These events were collaboratively designed with community stakeholders and the Wales Martial Arts Practitioner-Researcher Network, and took the form of a health and movement fair.

The format of the events included taster sessions from a range of martial arts disciplines alongside demonstrations of the MIMA movement programme. In addition, information stalls were set up around the venue by social and health service partners to provide resources and advice.

In total, 76 older adults participated in the events. Four taster sessions took place at different community venues in some of the most deprived and ethnically diverse areas of Cardiff (Table 1). The events provided an opportunity to bring martial arts, physical activity and research closer to communities who have low representation in exercise, especially in martial arts. Feedback was collected through short surveys, direct observations, and informal verbal comments from participants and stakeholders. These data provided valuable insights into the levels of interest and engagement with the MIMA sessions, as well as participants’ experiences of performing the exercises. In particular, the feedback highlighted how middle-aged and older adults perceived and adapted to the movements based on their individual physical abilities and limitations. The

evaluation of the taster sessions is summarised in Table 2. The photos from the event can be found in the Appendices.

Outcome indicator	
Volunteers supporting the event	3
Number of individuals attending the event	76
Number of information stalls from stakeholders	13
Number of participants who expressed interest in being part in research and future MIMA sessions	64
Average age of participants	68 years old (range 50-82)
Percentage of participants who rated the event as “excellent” or “good”	92%
Percentage of participants who rated the event as “average”	8%
Feedback from participant	<p>“I enjoyed witnessing the different type of martial arts, it brought a lot of people together from various backgrounds.”</p> <p>“All of it (was a change)”</p> <p>“I like the exercise/age well clinic.”</p> <p>“Nice welcome and informative events.”</p> <p>“The cycling with pedal power was fun.”</p>

Table 2. Outcomes of the four taster sessions run across Cardiff

The martial arts taster sessions were all adapted for older adults and co-designed by three martial arts experts (in Karate, Taijiquan and Wing Chun). These were originally called “Movements Inspired by Karate” and so on. Through these sessions, participants could learn basic movements that are safe and beneficial for their coordination, strength, and balance. The instructors could observe how the movements were received by this population and what safety actions and adaptations are important when delivering a class. Therefore, through this learning, the Movement Inspired by Martial Arts programme was further refined. The description and the link to the video recording of the refined MIMA movements can be found in Appendices. The

project fostered a two-way interaction with the community, generating mutual benefits. Through this engagement event we learnt that we need to build rapport and trust and to “give something back” when we are trying to collaborate with a third sector organisation like Women Connect First and gently plant the seeds for future collaboration. Overall, the learning from the events helped us plan and deliver more inclusive, person-centred programme with the MIMA concept in the future.

We then saw an opportunity to make use of a distinct form of bodily knowledge – novel, accessible and aesthetically-pleasing techniques of the body taken from various martial arts – to modify movement sets, warm-ups, games and exercises for older, less active adults aged 50 and above. Later trials delivered by George took various exercises and movements from an array of martial arts, which seemed to be more accessible for the older adults less accustomed to the set-up of lengthy martial arts classes and their extensive curricula. Initial feedback from a set of questionnaires in various venues indicate that the MIMA exercises are relatively straightforward to copy and execute according to varied physical abilities (mobility issues, the need to sit on a chair, lack of energy, and so on). MIMA has now reached the level of maturity in terms of its exact exercises, routines and mission that we present examples and insights from this initiative. So far, MIMA has been trialled in less affluent areas of Cardiff relatively far from our campus. This is thanks to collaborations with the council-run hybs / hubs (leisure and community centres) as well as through the charitable organisation Women Connect First for women of minority ethnic backgrounds (who are, of course, Global Majority women) and MenoPals, a support group for women going through the often-uncomfortable periods of their lives associated with the menopause and perimenopause. We have also presented at various health fairs and events run by the council and health board. Demand for MIMA demonstrations and taster sessions remains high, and we have managed to secure funding to sustain the programme for a further 18 months (spring 2025 to winter 2026) thanks to the National Lottery Awards for Wales, and more recently, the Spin-D Dementia Network Plus. Showcase events confirmed interest from diverse groups, with attendees enjoying the novel, fun movements and highlighted MIMA’s unique benefits for flexibility, balance, and strength.

MIMA has always been a co-production project beginning as an innovation activity linking to our institution’s civic mission to reach out to local, hard-to-reach communities who do not normally have any professional, personal or familial ties to a university or department specialising in sport and health sciences. The events in the hubs have targeted older adults on the ACTIF project list. The participants are therefore elderly people keen to become more active and independent through group-based exercise sessions. These movements are taken from the ethnographies that George has conducted as a student and apprentice in various martial arts schools in England, Wales and Mexico. The repertoire of exercises is likely to expand over the next few years as George conducts new ethnographies of different forms of martial arts.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Field methods such as ethnography and autoethnography have been utilised to great effect in martial arts studies, offering deep insights into how fighting systems from around the world are

taught and practised within their regular social and pedagogical settings. These popular designs often involve a growing expertise of budding and seasoned scholar-practitioners learning and utilising an array of defensive and offensive techniques as well as body conditioning exercises for developing a particular body for the art in question. However, there remain a paucity of martial arts interventions in the wider community that make use of this embodied and scholarly knowledge. A more recent development in qualitative methodology and social science is the design of co-production, which involves a continuous engagement with the community in question to co-create a novel and specific programme that suits their needs. This has been employed to great effect within the health sector, as in the Welsh National Health Service (NHS) context inspired by governmental co-production initiatives with patients and those that support them.

This article is the first report of an emerging martial art-inspired physical activity programme named Movement Inspired by Martial Arts (MIMA), which adapts techniques and exercises taken from a range of martial arts that its co-founder has learned, taught and researched over the course of several decades. MIMA is co-produced with its intended end users: older adults and women from diverse communities who are less likely to be involved in typical martial arts classes. Specific parts of the body are targeted by adapted exercises performed in unison, while movements can be modified for people requiring a seat or having issues with their range of motion. MIMA remains an open project in which new exercises taken from ongoing ethnographic fieldwork can be incorporated into the repertoire of exercises available to the older adults and their family members and carers.

The article presents MIMA in its relative infancy, charting its early developments as an innovation project supported by initial external funding. With this in mind, there are limitations to the initial reflections due to us not having a sufficient body of data from observations, interviews and questionnaires. Further research into MIMA could uncover the challenges that older adults face in following the exercises, and moreover, the ways in which they attempt to practise the movements at home, away from the instructors. Video recordings and an accessible platform as well as print resources including images of the movements accompanied by simple written guidance could be the next step for the MIMA project, enabling the older adults with no prior training in martial arts to enjoy moving in novel, subtle and creative ways within potentially confined spaces and short, regular periods of “unproductive” time, such as waiting for water to boil in the kitchen, watching television adverts on the sofa, or while standing idly at a bus stop. Future work might also attempt to take MIMA outside the local setting of Cardiff through the development of the aforementioned resources, also translating to a range of languages to better serve increasingly ageing, ailing and ethnically diverse communities by aiding their movement abilities, mobility and motility. We wish to develop movements that are inspired by martial arts classes, while acknowledging what Paul Bowman (personal communication, 2024) once commented on MIMA: “that martial arts are also inspired by movement – those distinct human techniques of the body such as kicking and throwing”.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. - Interview guide

Questions	Materials	Time
<p>Moderator to introduce</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Themselves • Cardiff Metropolitan University and CAWR • Funding source (WIN) • Aims and the main subjects of the discussion • Introduce any observers • Reassure participants of confidentiality • Secure permission to record <p>I believe you have all had the opportunity to read and understand the participation information sheet. Does anyone have any questions? If they have no questions (or if you have addressed the questions they have asked), then complete consent forms and continue.</p> <p>For this discussion, there are no right or wrong answers, and every experience is important. While I will be moderating the process, it should be more of an interactive discussion among you about the questions that will be asked. So feel free to share your thoughts about your experiences and also feel free to disagree with each other but do so respectfully.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let us try not to talk over each other. This would affect transcription and may affect the data and the final report. • Let us switch off mobile phones or put them on silent mode. • If anyone has to leave, for example to use the toilet, quietly leave and when you return quietly have your seat and continue participating in the discussion. • Please use a nickname for yourselves today and write it on your badge. We use the nicknames (or pseudonyms) so we keep the data anonymised when we record the conversation. Does it work for you all? <p>To facilitate transcription and analysis, I will record the discussion with your permission. Are you happy for me to record?</p> <p>.</p> <p>I'd like to begin by asking each of you to introduce yourself. We will do some drawing to help us introduce ourselves. On the paper tag in front of you please draw something or write a few key words about the following:</p>	<p>Recording devices Paper tags Pens</p>	<p>15 min</p>

<p>1. Your favourite activity that you do almost every week or your hobby (something that interests you) 2. An interesting thing about your neighbourhood where you live or the place where you are from</p>		
<p>Group discussion and activity What does the term “purposeful” or “sense of purpose” mean to you? And what are the activities that you do and it gives you a kind of “sense of purpose”? Task 1 Moderator to hand out postit notes. Ask participants to write first 3 words or phrases that come into their head when they think of the reason why you like doing these things. Participants to share their answers with the room</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What three words did you put down? <p>Why?</p> <p>Now please write down as many things as you can that encourages you/ motivates you to do these things? Participants to share their answers with the room</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What three words did you put down? <p>Why?</p>	<p>Post-it notes Recording devices Flip chart Pens</p>	<p>15 min</p>
<p>Group discussion and activity Moderator place a new flip chart on the table with a + in the middle and 4 headings: Keeping healthy, Difficulties to keep healthy, Keeping mobile and active, Difficulties/barriers to keep mobile and active Discussion A: How do they keep healthy? Please write 2-3 things on postit notes and stuck in on the right hand side of the flip chart that in on your table. What are the difficulties that they face to keep healthy? Please do the same and write 2-3 things on postit notes and stuck in on the left hand side of the flip chart that in on your table. Discussion B: What do you do to keep mobile (physically able and strong)? What things encourage or help you to be active and connected to your community? What things discourage or stop you being as active as you would like?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the things that you miss (if there is anything) where you live? 	<p>Post-it notes Recording devices Flip chart Pens</p>	<p>20 min</p>

<p>We would like to identify things what could be improved about the current services and make it easier for people to be up-and-about and try activities and 3ct to others in their neighbourhood.</p> <p>Please list 3 things what we could be improved to make it available and convenient for people and to make it easier to be up-and-about and join a activity programme or social sessions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What could enable you to be more physically active in your local area (e.g. safe routes to walk, local activities and groups, cycle routes etc.)? • What would help people more to stay socially connected? (e.g. more local activities which are culturally appropriate, more accessible community spaces, better transport etc.?) 	<p>Post-it notes Recording devices Flip chart Pens</p>	<p>20 min</p>
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Appendix 2. System map



Appendix 3. Photos from the taster sessions

The link to the photo repository: [Photos MIMA taster sessions](#)

Appendix 4. Description of MIMA Exercises

A typical MIMA session is composed of numerous movements and exercises learned across the course of various ethnographic projects. Common activities in most workshops include:

1. The spinal wave
2. Shoulder rolls
3. Hand circle and punch
4. Squat and block, return and circle
5. Turn and chop
6. Opening and closing the hands
7. Feet circling
8. Spinning plates
9. Squat and kick
10. Balance on one leg

These exercises are performed in unison, with participants standing in rows or in a semi-circle around the instructor (as in many martial arts classes). The images and descriptions provided below illustrate a sample of these popular exercises so that the reader can imagine taking part in a real-life MIMA workshop. There are many other techniques utilised in MIMA, many of which can be performed while sitting or even laying down. We describe the ten select exercises below.

Spinal wave

George learned this exercise from his apprenticeship in Taijiquan – a practice he continues to this day. Standing straight, with the feet around shoulder distance apart, sink down, sagging with the spine so that you become hunched, with the head dropped as if looking for something on the floor. Then, ever so slowly, move upwards from the tailbone, spiralling upwards through the lower, middle and upper back until the head is lifted to stretch the spine. If possible, try to pull from the crown of the head and pull down from the coccyx. Think deeply, peering into the body to visualise each section of the spine. Then repeat for at least one minute, trying to keep a steady rhythm. This exercise will open up the back while helping to warm up the core of the body. It can be taken to a higher level as a balance exercise by closing the eyes or extending upwards to raise upon the balls of the feet.

Shoulder rolls

Most people know the basic limbering exercise of rolling the shoulders forwards and then backwards, following a steady pace to increase the range of motion in these often tight, underused regions. Martial arts such as Wing Chun and Taijiquan have their own variations of underpinning

deep principles within this exercise. Taijiquan stresses the scapula over the frontal shoulders, so try to move the shoulder from the scapula on the upper back. This will prove more of a challenge for the body and mind, and the exercise can be extended by lengthening the arm into a Wing Chun punch (vertical first, with the thumb facing upwards) which is kept out straight while moving in forward circles (again, driven from the scapula), followed by backwards circles using the same driver. This exercise will enhance mobility and awareness of hidden parts of our body.

Circle back and punch

This exercise hails from Xilam, a dynamic Mexican martial art with many games. Standing upright with bend legs, circle one relatively straight arm backwards so that it travels across and behind the body until it circles near the hip. From that hip, generate a horizontal twisting punch while stepping forwards with the opposite foot. Then step back to return to the neutral position. Follow with the circle and punch on the opposite side. This exercise will aid coordination, bodily awareness and balance of control over dominant and non-dominant sides. It can become more complex by making use of the rear hand as a cover, pulling back on the opposite hip to the punch. Furthermore, the mover can clap in the neutral stance between each circle.

Squat and block

This movement comes from a more advanced sequence in Wing Chun, teaching the practitioner to deal with an emergency situation. Standing as with the other exercises, move down into a squatting position while shooting the hands down, crossing them at the wrists as if blocking something. Push up from the floor to straighten up while circling back up with the arms (repeated twice), returning to a basic triangular guard position with one hand slightly in front of the other. As with the previous movement, this exercise will heighten bodily control while helping people move from their centre.

Twist and chop

This set comes from a Wing Chun warm-up that tests people's mobility and upper-body flexibility. Trying to stay relatively still in the lower body, move from the waist while looking behind you, searching behind you with your eyes. Chop behind you with the nearest hand, using the rear hand as a supporting guide. Move from both sides, switching left to right, left to right, until you feel that you have worked out that region of the body. This exercise can aid muscle tone while assisting with one's posture.

Hand clasping

This exercise comes from George's ethnographies of Xilam and Taijiquan, which vary in their approach to opening and closing the hands in rapid succession. A gentle way of doing this comes from Taijiquan, which emphasises relaxing the shoulders and neck while raising the hands around shoulder height. The fingers are flicked out vigorously, and then the fists are grasped tight, as in a fist. Repeat this, paying attention to the correct technique so that the full range of motion is utilised. To make this more athletically demanding, as in Xilam, you can straighten your arms while opening and closing your hands for at least thirty seconds, before repeating this with the hands moved to the side and even above the head (or behind the body). This exercise will aid the mobility of the fingers, hands and wrists while aiding people to avoid repetitive strain injury (RSI) from excessive desk work.

Feet circling

This movement stems from George's learning of Wing Chun in various schools – two of which have been ethnographic field sites. Stand with your heels together, with the toes pointed out around forty-five degrees. Bend your legs and attempt to keep an upright, even posture, with both shoulders and hips pointing forwards in the same direction. Move one foot in a large, outwards circle, moving into the supporting foot and then away from it. If possible, keep a seamless motion without any starts or stops, while retaining the same height in your stationary position without wobbling. This exercise will aid balance – especially when performed with the eyes closed. Relaxed fists can be placed near the ribs, as in the original martial art.

Spinning plates

Also known as “holding a grain of rice”, this exercise is common in Chinese internal martial arts such as Baguazhang and Taijiquan. George encountered it in two such schools he has learned in, and it was also an exercise adopted by his old HEMA instructor, which indicates the cross-cultural nature of these exercises. Standing a shoulder-width apart with slightly bent, relaxed knees, move both hands behind the torso, with the palms facing up to the ceiling or sky. Then pull both hands around to the side, and then in front of the body, finishing by circling them above the head and then back to the starting point near the hips. Repeat for around one minute, or more if desired. This exercise can also be performed one-handed or using alternative hands, swapping each time. It is a challenge for hand-eye coordination, the brain and for spatial awareness, while offering some relief for tight shoulders.

Squat and kick

This is another Wing Chun preparatory exercise that begins to use martial technique. Squat with the hands behind the head, bending low, but not at ninety degrees. Then rise up, bringing one foot out to kick. This can be a low kick to or below your own knee height if needed. Ensure that

you remain relatively still in the upper body, making the most of the “shadowless kicks” principle of the art.

Balance on one leg

This exercise was taught to George by his Xilam instructor. Standing straight with the hands raised as in a “surrender” position, try to raise one leg up so that the knee is parallel with the hip and the foot is relaxed. The balancing leg should be slightly bent. If this exercise is manageable, try to close your eyes for a few seconds. It is likely that you will have a stronger side, indicating an imbalance or misalignment in the body.

Appendix 5. Video of basic MIMA movements

<https://cardiffmet.cloud.panopto.eu/Panopto/Pages/Viewer.aspx?id=6768879a-528e-4426-8089-b2d100ac3728>

**“A boy is always going to be superior to a *girl*” – The ideal of *fighting like a man*
or accepting inferiority for women *karateka***

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Abstract

In a gender binary environment such as karate, oriented by a traditional martial pedagogy (Cynarsky et al., 2012), the way women express themselves is often seen as disconcerting and irrational. For many men, women are far from achieving the ideal of a fighter, what is around a high-performance male model, not attainable even by most non-alpha men. The idea of one-size-fits-all turns into one-size-fits-men. Often, *karateka* women seek to model themselves on men in order to conquer a space in the challenging environment (Turelli et al., 2022a). However, the way they express themselves has differences in relation to the way men do it, given the gendered social embodiment (Mason, 2018; Young, 1980). There are in place bodies' expressions and beliefs, leading to the subject of women's masculinization, in addition to internal martial differentiations in positions occupied by *kata* and *kumite* athletes. In this paper, we will explore these ideas seeking ways to disrupt the hegemonic masculine domination experienced. We researched the Spanish women's karate team in preparation to the Tokyo 2020 (2021) Olympic Games. Athletes interviewed offered narratives of uncomfortable situations they identified related to power and machismo, helping to provide insight for possibilities of subversion.

Keywords: Gender, Martial arts and combat sports, Embodiment, Tradition, Patriarchy.

1. Introduction

Fighting is not a degendered practice. The embodiments of gender we do throughout life are brought to the karate mat as well. Masculine embodiment though has always been privileged in

martial arts and combat sports (MACS) history. With a few exceptions, MACS were created by and for men, and, even today, they remain as male preserves (Matthews, 2016; Theberge, 1985). Male preserves are spaces where *men can be men* by socializing forms of masculinities linked to violence and exclusion of other genders, those others often taken as inferior (Miller-Iddriss, 2023; Turelli et al., 2022a; 2024a). MACS environments usually follow a traditional martial arts pedagogy (Cynarsky et al., 2012) in which gender binary is assumed as the norm and is reproduced and perpetuated in the name of (selected) tradition (Williams, 1975). This is the scenario found in karate, even in its sports format. Despite the migration of martial arts to the West and their conversion into competitive sports, the invention and maintenance of certain features as traditional roots, such as aggression and domination, benefit the hegemonic patriarchal order (Connell, 1995; Hobsbawm, 1983). Karate therefore reproduces a traditional gender binary, as our research provides evidence of, with privileged positions for men while women struggle to achieve recognition of their abilities while craving belonging (Turelli et al., 2023a; 2024b; 2025). Women *karateka* in the Spanish Olympic team reported to us in interviews how they need to deal with demands to perform in a high level which seems to be, however, never good enough because they cannot equal to men, as they were born *girls* (see Young, 1980). They are part of a high-performance team, and as such need to comply with requirements of excellence. Notwithstanding, the point is that they are in constant unfair comparisons with their male peers as fighters. This is considered unfair by us, the authors, because they were all socialized as girls (Mason, 2018; Young, 1980), yet they joint karate under a traditional binary pedagogy. In this binary context, women and girls are not taken seriously by men but remain *chicas*, with the subliminal understanding of them as weak and predisposed to crying and other feminized actions (Turelli et al., 2023b). Thus, they did not receive specific training to potentialize their uniqueness, which is often unknown by trainers (Turelli et al., 2024b). Despite this, they are challenged to emulate men, while never being allowed to do so. A series of mechanisms such as not training them properly and using resources that always inferiorize them, prevents their success in the endeavour of emulation, which is, first and foremost, unnecessary (the constant competition to prove value). However, a competition made of constant comparisons is always there, as a way to supposedly prove male superiority, accusing women of over masculinized, for example, if they get too close of such superiority. Thus, masculinization is used as an offense mechanism. In other words, in this binary world, *men can just be themselves*; women, instead, should be ashamed if they *perform like a man*, and, on the other hand, if they are *too delicate*, they would definitely not be made for martial arts. What we see in the wider contemporary society, despite all advancements of feminism, is not mere coincidence. Disguised manipulation and domination under neoliberal approaches (McRobbie, 2015) are currently undeniable with right wings gaining so much room around the world (Miller-Iddriss, 2023).

In the following pages we present data collected with the women athletes composing the team at that moment, and their coaches who were all men. They spoke to us about the ideal of fighting like a man or accepting inferiority, about accusation of masculinization of women, and yet uncomfortable situations they face and witness on power and machismo. We will report these conversations; before presenting the data, we will briefly present the methods we followed to carry out the research.

2. Methodology

The research was conducted as a doctoral study of the first author of this paper. She is a karate practitioner for more than 30 years now and was a former athlete, training and competing in a number of countries of the Global North and Global South. This is relevant to mention as the motivation for the research came from her wondering about being herself the problem or if the things she faced were shared among women from more developed countries and at high level performance. Fabiana is originally from Brazil and competed vastly in an amateur context. Thus, she embarked on a journey, as carnal sociology (Wacquant, 2015), of experiencing on and in her body and soul the pleasures and pains of training, living and speaking with people in Spain, Scotland, Italy, Australia and most recently, Canada. In her process of discovering she had a voice, she learned how to speak in other languages while strengthening such a voice, to the point that she could say she was carrying out an autoethnography, as she realized what she was speaking about was relevant and important.

The initial goal, though, with the Olympic Spanish team, was to conduct an ethnography. As COVID-19 hit, the plan was disrupted. Fabiana lacked confidence and so her supervisors at the time played a fundamental role in supporting her to tell the story of what she was witnessing through her karate life. This paper is a report of data collected with the women interviewed in the study, not entering the storytelling that was stimulated at that moment, leading Fabiana to broader *conscientizacão* (Freire, 2005) of other things that she became able to reflect on, connect and speak about (see Turelli & Joseph, 2025). Considering the adaptations needed, eighteen people, fourteen women athletes and four men coaches, were interviewed twice each to speak about their experiences of karate athletes/coaches in high performance sport and how this had affected their embodied subjectivities. All participants are identified through pseudonyms. Other sources of data were utilized, such as video analysis of the women's karate performances (Turelli et al., 2022a), (participant) observations (Turelli et al., 2021; 2022b), and as mentioned, autoethnography (Turelli et al., 2023c). The total of 36 interviews, amounting to approximately 45 hours of recordings in Spanish, were transcribed and translated into English. The coding process grouped themes leading to categories specified in Turelli (2022). In this article we focus on the topic of the ideal of fighting like a man or accepting inferiority, as will be described next through sharing and discussing participants' testimonies. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Universidad Autonoma de Madrid, under approval code CEI-102-1930. The stance taken by authors in conducting this study was social constructionism combined with critical feminism, later strongly influenced by intersectionality, specifically.

3. Findings

Women often get asked why they want to be where they are not welcome; at the end of the day, wouldn't it just be easier to be in spaces that welcome them? This leads us to state that being in spaces that are not comfortable for women challenges the status quo. Instead of asking women

why they take on such struggles, we should be congratulating them, because they are the reason change can happen, and things are not worse. They resist, and fight. They may adapt to some things to be able to remain and gain room; but their presence in itself is disruptive. However, their presence in unwelcoming spaces by no means is to say that all is sorted out. The process is arduous, as those benefiting from patriarchy do not want to lose their benefits. So women fighters face overlapping difficulties in the pursue of their goals. We share first their struggles related to the ideal imposed as the real-deal-fighter; then we discuss the accusations of masculinization that women *karateka* are subjected to; and conclude with them telling us a bit about power and machismo felt on the flesh.

3.1. The ideal of fighting like a man or accepting inferiority

To be able to be in the martial arts environment and have high level athletes' positions in the karate team, women fighters engage in negotiations often submitting to the stipulated models. They crave acceptance in the team and recognition for their abilities, a pursuit that may end up in the reproduction of comparisons that are not fair to themselves. Athletes and coaches made comments in this direction. Athletes perhaps want to be included, or have embodied common masculinities composing the martial habitus (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), as can be seen in the following comment from an athlete:

The man's body... really... Although many times the girls say that there is no such issue, the man's body is stronger as a general rule. They can hit harder and come out faster, because they have it innate. (...) We, maybe other things come out better for us. (Afrodite, athlete, Interview 19 (2), 24/08/2020).

Coaches, on the other hand, are giving the standards to be followed, and positioning people according to traditional martial arts pedagogy, in a hierarchical gender binary manner. They shared their views, as follows:

It will be due education, it will be due whatever, boys have fought their entire lives and girls not so much. (Hermes, man coach, Interview 30 (2), 17/09/2020).

At the minimum danger is put to us, the secretion of testosterone, growth hormone, adrenaline and others, is much higher, because we had to be aware of taking care of ourselves and the survival of the whole group, the herd. (...) The girls, all the perseverance, all the work, the sacrifice they make can come a little from the maternal burden of having to take care of children, of having to take what is a family forward. (...) What happens is that the boy will always have more testosterone, he will have more muscle mass, and he will look superior. (...) A boy is always going to be superior to a girl. I don't think there is any possibility of... (Apolo, man coach, Interview 27 (1), 25/09/2020).

Women still have a deficiency in hunting methodology. If fighting is a hunt, they don't hunt well. Some yes, but almost all, no. Look, the shark is said to be a perfect weapon for killing. Well, a shark decides to kill you, and it kills you. Well, a karate competitor has her prey in front of her and many make a lot of mistakes. I believe that 80% of them or 90% make mistakes. Of the boys, 80% do not make mistakes and 20% do. More or less. (...) So it is not that there is a specific way of fighting for girls, it is that they are not at the level of the great male predators. I mean, if this were a predator thing. But not because I could be *machista*, just because you've been less years (as

fighters). (...) I take the Spanish national team, none of them knows how to sweep, none. (...) In our Western culture, there is that equality, but if they give you the same bicycle as to the boys, and the female gender don't measure up. (...) Is there a female way to fight? Yes. It has less level than the masculine one. Period. Period. The woman who gives the masculine level you no longer know if she is a boy or a girl. (Hermes, man coach, Interview 32 (3), 21/09/2020).

Comments bring up and prioritize biological and genetic aspect of performance. It is stated that fighting is a practice intrinsic to masculine nature and artificial for women, in addition to a cultural and genetic heritage of men since prehistory. Yet, hormones would explain and impose superiority, having the coaches in agreement with the “biology-is-destiny formulation” (Butler, 1990, p. 12), disregarding epigenetics and the influence of the environment (Bedregal et al., 2010). The patriarchal dividend (Connell, 1995) clearly benefits men allowing them to rely in supposed merits inherited from the past, in solemn recognition of what someday someone was, e.g., a great hunter who does not make mistakes. However, in the current society most men are not as prepared as hunters were in prehistory, although their testosterone levels are still higher than women's. Karkazis and Jordan-Young (2018, p. 7) corroborate this by pointing out that,

T [testosterone] makes men athletically superior to women” feels like a truth, despite the fact that millions of men the world over have vastly more T [testosterone] than do 95 percent of elite women athletes, yet are not as fast or as strong as those women.

Although testosterone exerts influence on human performance, it is necessary to consider biological, psychological, social, political and cultural aspects and their complex interaction (Schultz, 2019). For example, testosterone levels in children do not differ in boys and girls, but girls overall receive an education that makes them believe in their physical inferiority to boys. Roth and Basow (2004, p. 249) argue that “Femininity discipline begins working upon females during childhood (perhaps even infancy) by transmitting to children a mental connection between femaleness and weakness and by forcing girls to embody that weakness in their bodies”. Girls are not taught how to explore their bodies, how to conquer the world using their bodies (Young, 1980), thus they become docile, fragile, afraid, and less able and confident about their possibilities, which in fact they may not even know exists.

Yet, a coach reveals how to denigrate women when they approach the male model given to them, which is clearly a controversy and a mechanism to keep women in an inferior position, deflecting their threat to male domination. There is the association of women who have some success with the male testosterone model, in this case. If a woman somehow stands out, this is justified by her approximation to some characteristic considered masculine in the field. Even so, this is not positive for women, leading to questioning of their sexuality as a tool for undermining of female physical power. Roth and Basow (2004, p. 253) explain how it occurs in a process of “threaten[ing] women's power by admitting it [power] exists and claiming that its very existence implies that the woman is not a real woman. When is a woman not a real woman? When she is a lesbian”. While among men those who stand out become alpha, women who stand out are discriminatorily classified as all sorts of freak.

Athletes and coaches speak about how is it to work with the two genders –binary is the limit. Although there are differences, there does not seem to be a different form of karate addressing

specific needs but, at the same time, comparisons and hierarchizations are made. A testimony from an athlete speaks for her impression, and then coaches are reported as well:

The guys kind of have used more resources. The sweeps, it is very noticeable that the boys use more than the girls. (Vesta, athlete, Interview 16 (2), 18/08/2020).

Working with boys is a more intense job, much more body to body. (...) Boys can try to throw their opponents to the ground many times. The girl practically does not use this resource. To do this, she is going to need many hours of training. (Hefaistos, man coach, Interview 36 (1), 09/30/2020).

Why don't girls know how to sweep? Well, I don't know, but when you explain, it is difficult for them to understand the concept and I really explain it well, eh. (Hermes, man coach, Interview 30 (2), 17/09/2020).

Tactically she evolves less, or a little later. Less strength, yes. I think the notion of tactics is a bit simpler for women, more basic, as if they have less tactical development. Note that women are more cerebral, but they have less development, they have "something that suits me and I keep that all the time." The man changes more in tactical aspects "well, now I'm changing and I'm going to do something else." (Ares, man coach, Interview 35 (2), 29/09/2020).

Coaches need to aim for the best results. Athletes know this too, they submit to it, and it is all basically agreed. What seems to cause discomfort, however, is that women do not make some movements according to idealized expectations, do not matching up to men's performances. Notwithstanding, they do not receive specific training on that, what seems to be a burden. Also, they assume they are not good for that, as Vesta commented, and keep receiving models to imitate that reinforce a lack of confidence and self-sufficiency. Vesta adds:

Many times they try to make us fight like a boy, because in the end they always put them as a reference to us, almost all the boys. (Vesta, athlete, Interview 16 (2), 18/08/2020).

There is no appreciation of differences, but instead an attempt at standardization. As we saw, according to the trainers, women have less sophisticated tactical capacity, and great difficulty in understanding and performing melee work and sweeping, all of this in relation to men. Women can build their capacity for strength, tactics, and sweeping through training. There are no body determinants preventing women from throwing opponents to the ground, especially since it takes technique to do so more than brute force, and because fighters are in a similar weight range by categories, and women do not fight men in competitions. The fact that women do not do so much melee or sweeping work is not associated with genetics either. The physical structure of the hips and shoulders may affect the aesthetic form of movement and even the levels of difficulty, which unfortunately has not been scientifically studied to date. However, these are perfectly trainable elements. If melee work and sweeps were an irreversible disability for women, they would not be able to fight *judo*. Similarly, tactical work can be optimized. *Karateka* women acknowledged they are strong, denying assumptions, as in the following statement from Hera:

Within karate, I can take any kind of punches, no problem. (...) We do not shrink about being a woman... because we are brave. (Hera, athlete, Interview 9 (1), 27/07/2020).

However, this may lead to discomfort due to the destabilization of the male preserve, therefore, power expressed by women tends to be denied by men. Women need to continue occupying these and other spaces generating beneficial nuisances. Furthermore, this will force more studies to be carried out in relation to female performance, possibly promoting advances in training technologies, and filling knowledge gaps.

3.2. Masculinization of women?

Athletes highlighted that the incorporation of characteristics considered masculine (Marcuse, 2018) is not negative for women. Indeed, people's subjectivities are complex and plural, made of intersecting factors. Young (1980, p.140) points out that "it is not necessary that any women be 'feminine' – that is, it is not necessary that there be distinctive structures and behaviour typical of the situation of women". It could even be positive and subversive to take positions that somehow confront normativity, destabilizing it (Berg & Kokkonen, 2021; Carlsson, 2017; Landi, 2018; Maor, 2018). In the researched karate context though, women might deliberately want to resemble men as a way to reach acceptance and some level of personal worth. In doing so, they face stereotypes on and off the mats. The fact that some women enter terrains understood as masculine, can generate some level of instability in the sense of security and power for men. So, the inconveniences generated may lead to aggression and violence, attacking and accusing women as a defence mechanism, as Atena pointed out:

In the course about machismo [that she provides karate coaches with], I noticed that men get super aggressive when I talk about these things, and I am not accusing them specifically. (Atena, athlete, Interview 14 (2), 15/08/2020).

There are different ways for reactions to show up. Vaczi (2016) researched women's presence in male sport, having the characterization of "fatal woman". As a fan, athlete or girlfriend, women could be destabilizing men, since they would be "a 'dangerous destabilizer', a woman whose sensuality may threaten the male order of sport performance" (p. 301). From then on, women are given some characteristics and responsibilities such as "demonization, fetishization, the pathologization of sex and the proliferation of erotic fantasies" (p. 299). Another way of reacting to fear of loss of power to women turning into attacking them is through accusing them of *Mari-machos*, a woman who likewise heterosexual men, "likes women". This would justify them coming to share space with men and having less feminine traits. This is taken as an accusation because by no means it is a respectful understanding of a sexual option, but a way to denigrate people. Athletes elaborate on the prejudiced view thrown at them:

They talk a lot about "well this girl does karate, she *likes* girls; look at her, what a *machunga* (lesbian)". (Venus, athlete, Interview 22 (2), 02/09/2020).

Even girls used to say the typical to me, "you're a *machorra* (lesbian), *machorra*", I didn't care because I knew that... I didn't care, I would play soccer with the children, basketball, karate. (...) And now I'm older, I don't care, people know I'm not a *machorra*. (Juno, athlete, Interview 24 (1), 05/09/2020).

I think the last time I heard it was doing the national trainer course, about being a man. Many times they tell me that I am a boy, “you are a boy, you are half a boy”, the typical phrase. (Atena, athlete, Interview 14 (2), 15/08/2020).

Roth and Basow (2004, p. 253) observe that “The fear of being labelled or outted as lesbian can lead to an even greater emphasis on femininity by female athletes either to prove that they are not lesbians or to hide the fact that they are”. Tajrobehkar (2016) provided evidence that women who do bodybuilding need to show that even though their bodies are strong and muscular, they are feminine. Muscles, strength and aggression seem to reduce the aesthetic capital (Anderson et al., 2010) of women in the normative society. Although there are various discomforts for women facing stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination, appearance and physical power (Roth & Basow, 2004) and even sexual orientation (Rich, 2010) can become somewhat subversive attitudes adopted by women to further transgress spaces of male preserve. Through these attitudes they emphasize they are strong enough, for example, to protect themselves freeing men from this supposed need, another destabilization in the sense of security and power for men, causing then offensive reactions, as when someone is cornered, so they attack.

It is common that women do not know how to deal with offenses, so usually MACS have high rates of abandonment by women and girls (there is also an absence of pedagogical models of how to teach them). With this high rate of attrition compared to boys, spaces are kept under male domination. So, if they become capable of saying, as Juno put it, “I don’t care” about accusations addressed at them, they are making space for manoeuvre. Such posture, embracing accusations of masculinization and not denying or fighting it but queerly performing, somehow confront men’s power, because it interrupts the habitus (Gorely, Holroyd, & Kirk, 2003). However, it is a specific posture, not the submission to diktats.

The interaction between men and women in combat sports in mixed-sex training (Channon, 2013; Maclean, 2016; 2017) strengthens participants and adds value to the spaces as a whole. This does not invalidate equitable work in parallel though, considering specifics of groups. If women just conform to the power dynamics and accept that they do not have space if they do not achieve what men say to them, they will continue not having space and this could result on increasing disadvantage. As Criado-Perez (2019) writes, everything that is previously established and said to be not gendered, presented as “neutral”, is not neutral but masculine. Yet, in the offensive actions taken to control women, men can blame women of being those generating the problems. An example of this, can be seen in the next claim of a male coach:

I don’t think it’s the sport’s fault. (...) The women themselves are the ones who label and then inequality is created. (Apolo, man coach, Interview 33 (2), 25/09/2020).

It seems that theoretically men would not see differences between women and men if women did not point them out to men. An argument for manipulation and domination and, an attack using symbolic violence, making women responsible and guilty for the flaws in the gender order. Considering all this, the next section stands to athletes’ testimonies on uncomfortable offensive experiences in the martial world.

3.3. Uncomfortable situations: power and machismo

In sports environments there is some permissiveness for things that outside them are not allowed, like levels of violence and ways of manipulating/touching bodies. Inside sports' fields, a variety of things happen, but they must remain there, being suspended when people leave. Athletes know how this works. Horkheimer and Adorno (1985) speak about reification, which in the sports world can be read as a kind of method that disciplines the body to the point of machinization, teaching how to submit to tough training regimes by developing a certain insensitivity towards oneself. This leads to things such as prejudicial jokes being tolerated, becoming "part of the game". This can get mixed with situations that go way beyond what can be managed, but they are then messed through confusion disguising episodes of harassment, for example. All starts in a ladder of discrimination though, with gender stereotypes and prejudices being at the root of these issues. They are found abundantly in karate, as a couple of examples illustrate it:

A colleague commented that if she was going to train and there were just two girls for a training session, the coach wouldn't train them. But if they were two boys, or even a boy and a girl, he would. (Ceres, athlete, Interview 17 (2), 23/08/2020).

I know many coaches who believe that coaching girls is not cool, that "the level" is with boys, and male *kumite* [fighting]. (Atena, athlete, Interview 14 (2), 15/08/2020).

The Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games Organizing Committee president, Yoshiro Mori, in February 2021 made macho statements about women. He said that "Boards of directors with many women take a long time. If you increase the number of female executive members, and if their speaking time is not limited to a certain extent, they will find it difficult to finish, which is annoying". And he added: "We have eight women on the organizing committee, but they know how to stay in their place."¹ According to the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper, male assistants present at the meeting laughed at Mori's macho statements. He, after the polemic, resigned his post. In addition to the obvious misogyny, this brings up another important problem surrounding women's leadership and representation in positions of power in sports. Women's presence in the Olympic Committee does not meet the requirements of the entity's governance project (Gonçalves & Vaz, forthcoming). In relation to karate specifically, athletes also have things to say:

I think several generations will pass until we start to see female referees, coaches, and women in assemblies. (...) There was a photo of the WKF [World Karate Federation] assembly in which eight, nine people were members of the assembly – all men, over 50 years old, all in the same role. There was not a single woman. (Minerva, athlete, Interview 12 (2), 12/08/2020).

They [men] have created like their circle, that they can do very well in sport... but it does bother me, because I see around me how there are many prepared women who do not have opportunities. (Minerva, athlete, Interview 12 (2), 12/08/2020).

Pfister (2003), in an analysis of quantitative data from Germany, Denmark, the United States and Australia, already pointed out that female leadership in sports organizations was far from being

¹ The report can be accessed at <https://globoesporte.globo.com/olimpiadas/noticia/presidente-do-comite-toquio-2020-faz-declaracoes-machistas-sobre-presenca-feminina-em-reunioes.ghtml> (accessed on 27/05/2021).

the same in relation to men's. Fasting and Pfister (2000), and more recently Melo and Rubio (2017), reported how the positions of power in the sports market are yet not occupied by women. This leads to the establishment of quotas through laws to ensure that basic rights and respect are guaranteed to people, in addition to preventing some contexts from being configured as "male clubs" (Pfister, 2003, p. 12) or "women-free' zones" (p. 16). Diana highlights this in karate:

If there were not this inequality, we would not have the need for that women's programs to exist. (Diana, athlete, Interview 13 (2), 13/08/2020).

If it had been possible to achieve equality by other ways, it would not be necessary to resort to mandatory legal means, which undeniably signals social injustice, summarizing the point Diana makes. Minerva also expresses her opinion in this regard:

It is curious to see how it is strictly enforced. If there must be two girls out of 12 people in the assembly, there are two girls. Why can't there be four, five or six? That bothers me as you fix nothing there, because they are complying with the law, but they are not complying with it in a way that they understand, they comply because it has to be that way and that's it. (...) For me that is also a reality of machismo, that the law is strictly enforced, period. The boys say, "why does it have to exist?" Well, because it is something historical that has happened, and we must fight against it. (...) You have to say "yes, there has to be a gender violence law; yes, there has to be a woman and sports law", because we have historically been fighting against a lot of barriers that if they don't support us a little, we won't be able to break down. (Minerva, athlete, Interview 12 (2), 12/08/2020).

In the patriarchal society where all of us were socialized, some women may end up not sharing Minerva's view, and sometimes agreeing with the norm as an attempt of avoiding exclusion. Thus, some women themselves at occasions reinforce bias and stereotypes, and men in this environment, highly benefiting from the patriarchal dividend, emphasize a sort of *modus operandi* of things. Earlier in this paper, we provided a quote from a coach posing women as guilty for issues they face, something that Pfister (2003, p. 30) explained saying that "traditional supply-based approaches place the 'blame' of female segregation in the market on women themselves and their 'decisions'". We can find evidence of this issue in the following statements:

I think that the woman has started to work and has realized that she cannot alone, or that she cannot handle both. Before, culturally the woman did not work, then the housework was done by herself, while the man worked. Now women have gone to work. (...) And we want to change things that cannot be changed from education. (Apolo, man coach, Interview 33 (2), 25/09/2020).

I'm not *machista*, huh? But I insist that it is a bit of history. (Hermes, man coach, Interview 30 (2), 17/09/2020).

I have not seen any machismo. I feel lucky to be where I am. I have not seen anything strange, that is, I cannot comment on a subject of those. (Hefaistos, man coach, Interview 37 (2), 30/09/2020).

In the opposite sense to what was explained in Apolo's comment, Pfister (2003, p.27) contributes by saying that "In relation to the sexual hierarchy, sports organizations are a faithful reflection of

societies as a whole, characterized by an imbalance of power and status”. She also provides considerations about the history:

When reflecting on the reasons why women are a minority in the highest positions in the sport, one should keep in mind the history of this practice. As already mentioned, the sport was “invented” and developed by man and for man and, for a long time, “it was obvious” that men were the athletes and also the “born” sports leaders. And it takes a long time to change traditions... (p. 28).

In line with Pfister are comments from other athletes, who are more firmly positioned in relation to the problem:

The world of karate is a bit *machista*, on a historical level. In the end, the great masters were all men, right? I imagine that there would also be women who practiced karate, but the karate world has been a bit *machista* in that sense. (...) It is about being national coaches, a coach of your community, little by little, to get into that world. (Hera, athlete, Interview 21 (2), 27/08/2020).

I think it goes a bit for historical reasons and because the industry revolves around men, which sells more. So, changing something that pays a lot, to bet on something that you do not know if it will give money, it is complicated. (Ceres, athlete, Interview 17 (2), 23/08/2020).

It is worthy to note the role attributed to history, which is intriguing, as both coaches and athletes use it as justification for the points they make, although both groups speak from different standpoints. The general idea of a powerful inherited historical tradition would supposedly be behind what men keep reproducing in the present time in a way that honours and renovates such tradition. Notwithstanding, there are many flaws to such history and tradition reported. Yet, the present time is no longer paying debts to the past, where women should remain loyal to unfairness, mistreatment and silence. Instead, they may want to take ownership of their lives and build a new history, with forms of sports that do not erase, deny or ignore permissiveness of, e.g., violence and harassment inside sports environments, as mentioned at the beginning of this section. They may want to fight objectification as reification and insensitiveness that leads to mental illness, becoming more coherent to their own truths. All of this is certainly demanding and challenging, as reactions to instability and loss of power could be exacerbated by those feeling defied. However, this seems to be a path to disrupt the hegemonic masculine domination experienced, which requires women to keep marching and fighting, giving continuity to a chain in a movement started a while ago.

4. Conclusion

Despite all the paths already traced by feminist waves, women still face several adversities to perform as themselves/authentically in different environments, the MACS’ being one of them. With this paper we aimed to present struggles that *karateka* women face to remain and gain space in the environment, analysing and providing an interpretation of why this happens and how this could, not easily though, be overcome or start to change by being challenged. In searching for

acceptance and some degree of prominence, women may start to pursue the male model of someone who knows how to fight, which is given to them from outside. The masculine ideal of fighting, or the acceptance of inferiority for fighting like a woman, who would not know how to fight was, as we saw, supported by comments on genetics, testosterone and prehistory. The lack of practice or intense training of some movements, as well as specific training considering the general female specifics are issues to be considered, as well as the gendered social embodiment. Persecution for personal worth and recognition in the world can lead many women to submit to the role models imposed on them. Thus, they often adapt and mould to the contexts in which they are seeking acceptance and belonging, in addition to, sometimes, intentionally avoiding being noted to avoid harassment.

Bodies' expressions and beliefs lead to the subject of women's masculinization, which brings to women the need to face questions about their sexual orientations, and the suffering of accusations of tempting/seducers of men or accusations of being their equals regarding *taste* in sexuality (as lesbians). We offered invitations to subversion of normativity by taking actions that could destabilize the traditional martial male preserve, through embracing accusations of masculinization. We also approached uncomfortable situations experienced by women throughout their *karateka* lives. They reported prejudices and machismos that they suffered personally or witnessed in the environment. The field is highly dominated by men globally, with rare female figures in positions of power. Notwithstanding, many athletes are aware of and somewhat militant towards the issues, to then hopefully take action.

This study shows how it can be uncomfortable for those experiencing some level of questioning and perhaps uncertainty about their future and long-lasting positions that women threaten men by just entering a terrain that is not "naturally" theirs. This inconvenience, generated by women in male spaces, was reported when female journalists proposed to cover male sporting events in the 1960s and 1970s, for example. In those situations, they were viewed as invaders of men's spaces.² They were forbidden to access changing rooms, as other men reporters did, and so they simply could not do their jobs. For advocating for the right of doing their job, those women were accused of being prostitutes, faced harassment, and mental rape, as the journalist Lisa Olson described it. This is just an example of how reactions get irrationally violent due to fear among the privileged. Although the argument shows this discouraging reaction, such effect can also be taken as something that works for the goal of destabilizing unfair patriarchal structures, to change the hegemonic logic of traditional male preserves, at least as a start.

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² ESPN Films – Nine for IX – *Let Them Wear Towels* <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x6h48pk>

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Fight like a girl. The impact of menstruation on female athletes in combat sports

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Abstract

This paper aims to investigate the relationship between menstruation and sports, specifically from the perspective of women who play combat sports. Much of the research concerning sports, and the factors that affect sports performance, is based on a universal male subject and fails to account for sex- and gender-related differences. There is a male bias in the assumption that the ‘normal’ body is immutable and characterized by stability. Such a conception excludes the female body which undergoes cyclic changes on a monthly basis. Starting from this assumption, the aim of this paper is to see how female athletes¹ deal with this norm. The study centers on the experiences of female athletes, spanning from their physical education during schooling to their current training and competitive activities. Employing the concept of menstruation as both a biological and socio-cultural factor, this work seeks to deconstruct the prevailing sports canon, revealing that the notion of neutrality often corresponds to a male-centered ideal of neutrality.

Keywords: Menstruation, Combat sports, Medicalisation, Training, Weight.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, women’s participation in combat sports has increased significantly, not only quantitatively—such as in membership of boxing federations—but also in terms of public visibility. We see more women on the ring at the Olympics, more professional women’s fights are broadcast, all the way to one of the most important events of 2024 for those interested in boxing: the bout between Katie Taylor and Amanda Serrano, the first female boxers to have the main event at Madison Square Garden.

The increase in women’s participation in combat sports has made it more evident even to experts in various fields that there are factors, both biological and cultural, that influence the performance of female athletes, one of the most important of these being the menstrual cycle. However, the idea of investigating the effect of the menstrual cycle is not new. As early as 1995, Reis et al. conducted a study showing that resistance training based on the follicular phase produced better results than regular training. In the study, participants trained one leg every other day in the follicular phase and only once a week in the luteal phase, while the other leg was trained consistently throughout the cycle. The group that had followed the training focused on the

¹ Female athletes’ here denotes athletes assigned female at birth (AFAB) competing as women, focusing on those experiencing menstrual cycles.

follicular phase showed a 32.6% increase in maximal strength compared with 13.1% in the control condition. Despite these promising results, research on this topic has remained scarce. A 2020 systematic review (Prelchi Gallego) identified only four studies on the topic, three of which confirmed the benefits of training focused on the follicular phase. However, the limited number of participants and the methodologies used do not allow definitive conclusions to be drawn. Nevertheless, available evidence indicates that hormonal fluctuations influence strength, endurance, body composition, and injury risk (McNulty et al., 2020; Oosthuysen & Bosch, 2010). In high-intensity sport settings, such as combat sports, these effects can have a significant impact on physical fitness and competitive strategy. Recent studies have shown that female athletes may experience variations in fatigue perception, recovery capacity, and pain management related to different phases of the menstrual cycle (Carmichael et al., 2021). However, the literature specific to combat sports remains limited and is often based on data extrapolated from other disciplines. In addition, factors such as weight cutting, nutritional strategies, and sport culture may amplify or mitigate the effects of the menstrual cycle on female athletes, necessitating a more in-depth and contextualized investigation.

This article analyses the impact of the menstrual cycle on female athletes in combat sports, grounded in the theoretical assumption that biological and cultural factors should not be considered as parallel entities but rather as intersecting dimensions. Accordingly, the study draws on Foucault's analyses of the medicalization of bodies and Haraway's concept of natureculture, which frames menstruation as a phenomenon where biological data and cultural meanings cannot be separated. In addition to this we specify that the perspective adopted is that of the feminist literature on the subject.

Accordingly, the following sections will engage with extant literature encompassing both biological aspects and socio-cultural approaches, while also incorporating the firsthand experiences of women actively involved in combat sports. In fact, 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 women ranging in age from 20 to 35 years old, all in the Italian context and practicing it either at a competitive or amateur level. The interviewees were recruited through a mailing list to which the author gained access after participating in a women's boxing workshop. The workshop coach helped disseminate the call for participants among the registered members. The mailing list included practitioners of both boxing and Muay Thai, with varying degrees of experience; however, none were complete beginners, as participation in the workshop already required a certain level of preparation. Approximately half of the interviewees had taken part in official matches. Because the author also trains in a combat sport, the interviews were anchored in practical and detailed questions about training. The collected data were analyzed using *thematic analysis* (Braun & Clarke, 2019), which provided a systematic framework for identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning within the narratives. Coding was conducted iteratively, moving from descriptive to interpretative levels, and the emerging themes reflected both the participants' lived experiences and broader gendered discourses surrounding women's engagement in combat sports. The results of the interviews, together with the existing literature on the topic, brought out the issues that will be discussed throughout this article.

Drawing on Foucault and Haraway, the study critiques the construction of the "neutral" athletic body – rooted in male physiology and marginalizing cyclical female processes. Through interviews with female athletes the analysis reveals persistent cultural taboos surrounding

menstruation, particularly in sports environments where pain resistance is valorized and open dialogue is often lacking. The discussion further explores how technology, such as cycle-tracking apps, offers potential for personalized training while risking new forms of biopolitical control. A key tension emerges in the section on menstrual suppression via hormonal contraceptives, where athletes navigate whether such practices reflect empowerment or compliance with performance-driven demands. The issue of weight management underscores structural inequities, as regulations fail to accommodate hormonal fluctuations, forcing athletes into precarious health trade-offs. Ultimately, the conclusion calls for a paradigm shift in sports science and pedagogy, advocating for policies that recognize menstruation not as a hindrance but as a variable requiring integration into training methodologies. By centering athletes' lived experiences, the paper dismantles the myth of neutrality in sports, exposing how gendered norms are embedded in both institutional practices and bodily disciplines.

Though the article explicitly adopts a feminist natureculture framework – positioning menstruation as both a biological reality and a cultural construct – its empirical focus at times leans disproportionately toward hormonal and physiological effects (e.g., training adaptations, weight management). To fully realize its interdisciplinary potential, the analysis would need to more consistently articulate how cultural forces (e.g., medicalization, gendered sports norms) actively shape the very biological experiences it describes.

2. The neutral body of female athletes

Many studies in the field of sports research, and particularly those related to factors affecting athletic performance, rely on a universal male model, treating the body as neutral, stable, and unchanging. This bias is evident not only in scientific research but also in instructional manuals. Both the academic curricula that train exercise science professionals and the technical manuals used by federations to prepare coaches contain few, if any, sections that address gender-related variables in sport. This approach ignores differences related to gender and sex, excluding the biological specificities of the female body and its cyclical nature.

Indeed, there is a male bias in the medical conception of what constitutes a healthy body. The dominant model is one of stability and balance—qualities implicitly aligned with male physiology. A healthy body, on the other hand, if we follow the theories of Georges Canguilhem and Foucault (2015), is not an objective and neutral reality, but a historical and social construction that varies according to cultural and political contexts. Canguilhem (1998) asserts that health is not just the absence of disease, but the ability to adapt and redefine one's life norms, a perspective particularly relevant in sports, where the body is constantly being shaped to maximize performance. Foucault, a few years later on this track, shows how biopower disciplines bodies through practices of control and normalization, making sport a privileged arena for the imposition of standards of efficiency and performance. Moreover, the concept of the healthy body is deeply influenced by gender norms: ideals of strength, endurance and agility are often declined differently for men and women, reinforcing stereotypes and body hierarchies. In this sense, the “healthy body” is not just biological but a normative product that reflects and reproduces power relations. This view of a healthy body in constant balance effectively excludes the female body, which instead goes

through cyclical variations on a monthly basis due to the menstrual cycle. Sports medicine and athletic performance research often adopt benchmarks built on male physiology, overlooking how hormonal changes affect key aspects of performance such as strength, endurance, recovery, and injury risk (Smith et al., 2022). The concept of a neutral body in sport ignores the specific needs of female athletes and the need to adapt training methods, nutrition, and recovery based on physiological variations in the female body (Webb, 2008). Building upon this theoretical framework, the study aims to explore how female athletes perceive and navigate health-related norms associated with menstruation within the sporting context.

2.1 The medicalization of menstruation

The medicalization of menstruation has historically helped to define what is considered “normal” or “abnormal” in terms of symptoms, often reducing the complexity of the female experience to a series of disorders to be managed (Markens, 1996). From a Foucauldian perspective (2005), the medicalization of menstruation represents a central mechanism of biopolitical control, where bodily variability is transformed into a site of normalization and expertise. By translating the menstrual cycle into a series of pathologies, risk factors, or symptoms to be managed, medical discourse produces a disciplined subject whose body must be continuously monitored and corrected. Within sport, this logic manifests in the tendency to interpret menstrual irregularities as deviations from an ideal of stability—an ideal implicitly modeled on male physiology. The idea of a stable, unchanging body, typically associated with the male body, has also influenced the world of sports, where training and performance standards have been built on male parameters to the exclusion of the cyclical variations typical of the female body. This leads to a fundamental question: does adapting training to menstruation really mean recognizing the specificity of the female body, or does it risk creating a new rigid standard that imposes a one-size-fits-all way of managing the cycle in sport (Colenso et al., 2023)?

It is very interesting this topic, there are hormonal variations that can also be exploited to the advantage and not only to the disadvantage of performance, try to make the most of the various phases of the cycle, have a strategy (Anna, competitive boxer).

Adapting training to the menstrual cycle can have both advantages and criticalities. On the one hand, it represents progress in recognizing biological differences and personalizing athletic preparation. Recent studies show that the luteal and follicular phases can influence strength, endurance, and injury risk, suggesting that targeted programming can optimize performance and reduce the risk of overload (McNulty et al., 2020). On the other hand, there is a risk of over-schematization, which could turn individual variability into a new prescriptive norm. For example, if an athlete feels able to compete at high performance during the menstrual phase but the training program involves a reduced load, she may find herself forced to follow a pattern that does not reflect her personal experience.

To think that the federations do this development, which to me is only positive, I don't know--I see it very far away yet. But I did have a (woman) coach who cared a lot about it, especially from a psychological point of view, she was advocating that we needed a mental coach for the team to take care of this very aspect here. (Anna, competitive boxer).

A further critical aspect concerns the perception of menstruation within the sports world. As Billington (2023) notes, premenstrual syndrome (PMS) has been classified as a medical condition with specific effects on the body, but it has also become a social stigma, associated with weakness and emotional instability. In sports, this narrative may contribute to the idea that menstruation is a hindrance to performance, leading female athletes and coaches to view it as a limiting factor rather than a manageable physiological variation. Some female athletes may internalize this view and experience the cycle as a moment of vulnerability to dominant athletic standards, while others may perceive it simply as a fluctuation to be lived with and adapted to individually.

3. The Taboo of Menstruation

Menstruation has always been the subject of cultural stigma (Gottlieb, 2020), a phenomenon that is also reflected in the language and behaviors of female athletes. The menstrual cycle is often described in negative terms, contributing to a sense of shame or inadequacy.

Building on Foucault's notion of discourse and power, the taboo surrounding menstruation in sport can be understood as a disciplinary silence that regulates which bodily experiences may be spoken and which must remain hidden. The unspoken nature of menstruation thus functions as a mechanism of normalization—producing “docile bodies” (Foucault, 1977) that conform to the masculine ideal of the neutral athlete. In this sense, the silence surrounding menstruation is not merely cultural but operates within what Haraway (1991) calls a *natureculture*: an intertwined domain where biological processes and social meanings co-constitute each other. The taboo enacts a false division between nature (the biological fact of menstruation) and culture (the social context of sport), rendering the menstrual body simultaneously hyper-material and unspeakable. To break this taboo, therefore, is to reclaim the menstrual body as a site of situated knowledge—where biology and culture meet, resist, and redefine the boundaries of what counts as a legitimate athletic body.

If we think, with Judith Butler (1996) that language is performative—not merely descriptive of reality but constitutive of it—then the words used to refer to menstruation gain particular significance. More telling still are the words not used. In fact, menstruation is often not named directly; other words are used that allude to menstruation. This not naming something actually makes it a taboo. In this way they are not just another occurrence but something to be hidden. The lack of open discussion about menstruation leads many female athletes to hide their physiological status or not communicate any discomfort to their coaches. This silence perpetuates the marginalization of women's needs in sport and limits the adoption of training strategies appropriate to hormonal changes. Most female athletes in interviews state that they do not feel a sense of shame talking about menstruation, also tying this to a path of body awareness linked on the one hand to adulthood and on the other precisely to being athletes, thus people who *work* with their bodies. The common perception is therefore that it is not a taboo at all and that menstruation is given its own name and perceived as just another event. If one goes further, however, to the first answer to the question, “do you talk about menstruation during training? in what terms?” one slowly discovers that it is talked about, but preferably with female training

partners “for comparison”. With coaches—particularly male coaches—they felt no need to talk about it, fearing it would be treated as something exceptional rather than ordinary.

When it came out of the protected space of the women’s locker room and reached the ear of some of her teammates, the most common reaction was to remain disgusted and in rare cases would end with a middle school joke (Julia, amateur boxer).

4. Educating the body

Sports can be a key tool in building the relationship between adolescent girls and their bodies during puberty. Despite the benefits of physical activity, women are still less active than men, and menstruation may be a factor contributing to their estrangement from sports, this mainly because, as we have already mentioned, it is still a phenomenon subject to cultural taboos (Moreno-Black & Vallianatos, 2005). Young female athletes face misconceptions about the compatibility of menstrual cycle and athletic performance, as well as fears related to cycle visibility (e.g., spotting, odor, cramping). Female athletes develop strategies to conceal menstruation during training and competition. These include the use of tampons (preferred over pads for reasons of mobility and discretion), checks between teammates, and the use of medications to reduce pain. This is where interactions with gym mates and coaches prove crucial. Some female athletes feel the need to hide the cycle to avoid judgment or be considered less of a performer. Others develop an “athletic attitude” that emphasizes control and resistance to pain (Moreno-Black & Vallianatos, 2005). The sports environment promotes the idea that pain should be ignored. This is reflected in a sports ethos that encourages “pushing the envelope”, likening menstrual pain to that of injury. The sports environment systematically promotes the normalization of pain through the “culture of no excuses” – an ethos that valorizes “pushing the envelope” while pathologizing bodily limitations. This paradigm is particularly entrenched in combat sports, where pain tolerance is ritualized as a marker of athletic legitimacy. Feminist sport scholars identify this as a gendered disciplinary mechanism: where male athletes’ pain is framed as heroic (Theberge, 2008), female athletes face double binds when menstruation-related pain becomes visible – either dismissed as biological weakness or erased to prove “equality” through suffering. On the other hand, sports practice helps young female athletes develop greater body awareness and perceive their bodies as a source of strength rather than limitation. However, education about the menstrual cycle is often fragmented and from disparate sources, such as parents, teachers, media, and peers. Placing sports in this context can offer a positive alternative, where the changing body is welcomed and supported through physical practice.

Beyond a series of unpleasant episodes that occurred in adolescence, during which my relationship with my period was horrible for obvious reasons of adolescent discomfort, lack of education on the part of the family/school that led to an inevitable inability to handle a very normal event in every girl’s life, in adulthood I have no negative or positive memories related to menstruating and playing sports. (Paola, competitive boxer).

Also in the interviews, it often emerges how those who were educated in sports as a child/girl have a different perception of menstruation, that they have incorporated it into their daily life,

which includes sports. However, this does not always mean a greater awareness of what happens physiologically to one's body but most often involves individual management of the menstrual cycle.

I really started it as late as 26 years old so not when I was a teenager and that is, it is not that I delved into it as a topic, however certainly at some point I started trying to understand that is, it is not that I started trying to understand and there were times when during the workout either my ovaries would hurt and I would feel pain and so I had to stop and in a way, I had to understand what was a little bit the relationship between the masses the menstrual cycle and the and physical activity is actually over time what I realized that physical activity helps and improves the relationship with the pain of one's menstrual cycle (Giulia, muay thai competitive)

These are all questions that I started asking myself in adulthood, from the age of 35 onwards I was much less able to understand period for example what week I was in before, certainly between the ages of 20 and 30 I was absolutely unaware of what was the week of my of my menstrual cycle [...] no one told me anything over time even when vabbè in the era I am 14 years old I was doing volleyball (Arianna, amateur boxer).

5. The negotiation of sports activity versus pain

Menstrual pain (dysmenorrhea) and other associated symptoms, such as fatigue and cramping, can affect female athletes' ability to train and compete. However, many female athletes are forced to *negotiate* their presence in competition and training, often minimizing their discomfort to avoid appearing weak.

I have always shied away from thinking of the cycle as a variable, forcing myself to push harder even if my body can't handle it later (Valeria, amateur boxer).

The culture of pain resistance, particularly entrenched in combat sports, as already mentioned above, can lead to poor symptom management and increased risk of injury. From a Foucauldian perspective, the valorization of pain in combat sports exemplifies how disciplinary power is inscribed upon the body through repetition, endurance, and control. Athletes are trained to interpret suffering as a sign of moral strength, transforming pain into a practice of self-regulation and obedience. For female fighters, this dynamic intersects with gendered biopolitics: menstrual pain becomes a test of legitimacy, where acknowledging discomfort risks being read as weakness, and concealing it becomes proof of strength. Within Haraway's framework, this negotiation illustrates the *naturecultural* entanglement of pain—neither purely biological nor merely symbolic, but a material-semiotic practice through which the athletic body is produced and disciplined. Reframing menstrual pain as a *situated* experience rather than a deviation from normality challenges the medicalized and masculinized narratives of control that dominate sports culture, opening space for new understandings of vulnerability, endurance, and embodied knowledge.

Despite the taboo and pain, physical activity can have beneficial effects on menstruation (Lorzadeh, 2021). Scientific studies have shown that regular exercise helps reduce menstrual pain and improve mood by releasing endorphins and reducing muscle tension. Movement promotes blood circulation, which can alleviate bloating and fatigue. In addition, the experience of

menstruation is subjective: some female athletes report debilitating symptoms, while others find no significant influence on their performance (Bruinvels, 2016). It is essential that training programs take into account the individual needs of female athletes and the phases of the menstrual cycle, avoiding unnecessary overload at times of greatest physical vulnerability.

The role of coaches in this process is crucial. While greater awareness about menstruation can help structure more inclusive workouts, there is a risk of reproducing biases that view the female body as less reliable than the male body. It is therefore essential that training adaptations are not imposed as a new form of control but instead serve to empower athletes with tools to manage their bodies.

6. Communicating for change

There is a disconnect between physician and patient perceptions of menstrual cycle symptoms: while medicine tends to categorize and standardize menstruation-related complaints, women describe their experience in more fluid and subjective ways Barnack-Tavlaris (2015). This phenomenon can also be observed in the world of sports, where communication between female athletes and coaches can be influenced by language barriers, differences in perception, and gender dynamics. Just as it happens between doctor and patient, discrepancies may also emerge between coach and athlete in understanding menstrual symptoms. Female athletes might describe their condition based on subjective feelings-fatigue, heaviness, cramps, irritability-while coaches might interpret them through the filter of sports performance, wondering to what extent these factors affect performance in training or competition. If coaches do not have a thorough understanding of the physiological variations related to the menstrual cycle, they might underestimate or generalize symptoms, not considering that the impact of menstruation varies greatly from person to person. A key element in communication between female athletes and coaches is the language used to describe menstrual symptoms. Often, to avoid stigmatization or judgment, female athletes may downplay their condition or use more neutral language, speaking, for example, of “low energy” or “feeling heavy” rather than mentioning menstruation directly. In some sporting contexts, menstruation may still be taboo, and female athletes may feel uncomfortable talking about it openly, especially if their coach is a man or if they perceive an environment that is unwilling to accommodate these issues. On the other hand, some coaches-especially those who have received specific training or who work closely with high-level female athletes-may take a more open and technical approach, asking female athletes to monitor their cycle and report any changes that might affect performance. In this case, the language used is often more objective and related to physical and recovery parameters, rather than subjective feelings.

The gender of the coach may influence how the topic of menstruation in sports is addressed. Studies on women’s coaching suggest that female coaches may be more likely to address these topics openly, creating a more inclusive dialogue environment. A female coach, having firsthand experience with the menstrual cycle, might better understand the challenges associated with hormonal variation and more easily adapt coaching based on the individual needs of female athletes.

I felt lucky to have a female coach, there is some modesty from male coaches and fear of not being understood (Jenin, muay thai competitive).

Male coaches, on the other hand, may feel less comfortable broaching the subject, either due to lack of firsthand experience or fear of crossing boundaries considered private. Some may avoid the issue altogether, leaving female athletes to manage their symptoms themselves, while others may take a more technical approach, relying on physiological data rather than the subjective feelings of female athletes. However, increasing scientific attention to the impact of menstruation on sports performance is leading to more education of coaches, regardless of their gender, on how to support female athletes effectively. As already mentioned, the disconnect between physicians' and patients' perceptions of menstrual cycle symptoms reflects a broader tendency in medicine to medicalize and standardize bodily experiences that women, instead, describe in subjective and fluid terms. This phenomenon also occurs in sports, where communication between female athletes and coaches is influenced by gender dynamics, language barriers, and differences in how menstrual symptoms are perceived. The theory of *biomedicalization* (Clarke et al., 2003) helps explain how the female body is often interpreted through rigid medical categories, while athletes describe their symptoms in terms of personal experience (e.g., fatigue, irritability). This communication gap can lead to an underestimation of the menstrual cycle's impact on performance, especially if coaches lack specific training on the physiological variations linked to hormonal fluctuations. Furthermore, studies on *language and stigma* (Krane et al., 2010) suggest that female athletes may resort to euphemisms ("low energy") to avoid judgment, particularly in sports environments where menstruation remains a taboo. *Gender relations theory* (Messner, 2002) explains how the athlete-coach dynamic is influenced by gender: female coaches, due to firsthand experience, may foster more open dialogue, while male coaches might avoid the topic out of fear of crossing perceived private boundaries. However, with growing research on the impact of the menstrual cycle in sports, a more scientific and inclusive approach is emerging, promoting technical and personalized language that moves beyond gender stereotypes. The experience shared by athlete Jenin highlights the importance of a safe and understanding environment, regardless of the coach's gender, as long as there is awareness and sensitivity toward these issues.

7. Skipping menstruation

Another technology to evaluate when it comes to sports and menstruation concerns the continued use of the birth control pill to suppress menstruation, a common practice among high-level female athletes, especially in disciplines that require rigorous preparation and detailed competition planning such as combat sports (Burrows et al., 2007). However, the debate between gynecology and sports medicine remains open, with conflicting positions on the long-term effects of this practice and its implications for the health of female athletes. The question that interests us most here is whether female athletes perceive this choice as an act of personal autonomy or as a necessity imposed by the demands of competitive sport. Currently, there is no consensus opinion among gynecologists and sports physicians on the use of the pill to suppress the menstrual cycle in female athletes. Some specialists believe that cycle suppression may offer practical benefits, such as reduction of premenstrual symptoms, prevention of iron deficiency

anemia, and greater control over hormonal stability (Elliott-Sale et al., 2020). On the other hand, there are concerns about possible side effects, including alterations in bone density, reduced endogenous estrogen synthesis, and possible psychological and cultural implications related to the perception of the body and femininity. The study by Kunz et al. (1998) highlights the diversity of opinions among women on cycle suppression: 44% of respondents preferred to maintain a monthly bleeding pattern, while 34% preferred a menstruation-free regimen. D’Arcangues et al. (2010) found that cultural and social factors influence the propensity to modify the menstrual cycle, with younger, unmarried women who are accustomed to hormonal contraceptive use more likely to deviate from the natural menstrual rhythm. Female athletes, particularly those who compete internationally, often choose to use the pill continuously to avoid the risk of menstruating during crucial competitions. However, the degree of perceived freedom in this choice can vary considerably. Some female athletes see this strategy as an opportunity to improve their performance and reduce the negative impact of menstrual symptoms (McNulty et al., 2020).

I am afraid that I will not be able to push hard enough, that I will be less resilient and run out of energy too soon, that the presence of the cycle will frustrate, at least in part, any athletic performance, especially maximal ones. I am no longer using pills, otherwise I would have just blown off my cycle. Probably the previous month’s, too, so I don’t have to train with the dizziness and anxiety of doing overly explosive movements (Clara, amateur boxer).

For others, however, the need to suppress the cycle might be perceived as an external pressure imposed by the dynamics of professional sports, where the body must adapt to performance standards that do not take into account female physiology.

Another critical element is the level of information and awareness among female athletes. Many receive advice on hormone management directly from their coaches or sports physicians, but these professionals do not always have specific training in gynecology. As a result, some female athletes may not be fully informed about the possible risks or alternatives to cycle suppression. We then return to the central question for us: determining the extent to which the use of the pill to suppress the cycle is a free choice or a functional adaptation to the demands of sport. In a context where athletic standards are historically modeled on male bodies, the need to alter the menstrual cycle may reflect a lack of inclusion of female physiological specificities. In addition, perceptions of choice may vary based on the support received by female athletes. In settings where women’s health is considered a priority and female athletes are actively involved in decisions about their bodies, cycle suppression may be experienced as a conscious and self-determined option. Conversely, in settings where the pressure of competition is high and female athletes’ well-being is secondary to performance, this practice may be perceived as a compulsion rather than a choice. Although many female athletes see this strategy as a means to optimize performance and reduce menstrual discomfort, there is a risk that this practice becomes an implicit norm, where cycle suppression is not a fully free choice but a necessity imposed by the rules of the sport. To ensure greater awareness and self-determination, it is essential that female athletes receive comprehensive information, training alternatives and qualified medical support so that they can make informed decisions about managing their bodies.

8. How to use technology

Chelsea FC Women was one of the first clubs in the world to integrate the use of an app to monitor their female athletes' menstrual cycles in order to optimize performance and reduce the risk of injury. Starting in 2020, under the leadership of coach Emma Hayes, the team began using the FitrWoman app, developed by sports science company Orreco. This app allows female players to record information about their menstrual cycle and associated symptoms. This data is analyzed to individually adapt training and nutrition programs, taking into account the different phases of the cycle. For example, during certain phases, female athletes may be more susceptible to ligament injuries or may experience changes in coordination and mood. By closely monitoring these aspects, technical staff can implement preventive and ameliorative strategies. The introduction of FitrWoman has led to increased awareness among female players about their bodies and their needs. Athletes such as Erin Cuthbert and Jessie Fleming pointed out in an interview how understanding their cycle has enabled them to optimize recovery and performance, reducing negative symptoms and improving daily management of their physical and mental state. The introduction of a menstrual cycle monitoring APP is a significant step toward a more personalized approach to sports training that takes into account hormonal fluctuations and their impact on athletic performance. This technology makes it possible to build exercise programs and diet plans based on the different phases of the cycle, seeking to maximize performance and reduce the risk of injury. However, as authors such as Haraway and Plant point out, the relationship between gender and technology is never neutral, and the use of digital tools in monitoring women's bodies raises several critical questions. One of the main questions concerns the perception of this technology by female athletes: is it seen as an opportunity to improve performance and adapt training to the specificity of the female body, or rather as an invasion of privacy? While monitoring may represent a recognition of the need to differentiate athletic training by gender, it may also be perceived as an additional mechanism of control over women's bodies. The technoscientific management of menstrual cycles through digital tracking tools embodies what Haraway (1991) termed the "informatics of domination" – a paradoxical convergence of empowerment and biopolitical control. While cycle-syncing apps ostensibly enable personalized training regimens aligned with physiological fluctuations they simultaneously extend Foucault's (1977) disciplinary regimes into the most intimate spheres of female athletic embodiment. This duality reflects Plant's (1997) contention that technologies developed under patriarchal capitalism inevitably reproduce its logics, even when designed for women's benefit. The surveillance dimension proves particularly fraught. As Lupton (2016) notes in her analysis of self-tracking cultures, the quantification of bodily processes transforms subjective experiences into algorithmic data points, creating a "menstrual panopticon".

The daily recording of such personal data could generate anxiety and a sense of surveillance, especially if the information collected is not handled with transparency and informed consent.

I see more and more a "tracktization" of performance, now even with a very low expense you can monitor everything, and with menstruation it has become almost an excuse to sell supplements, even on instagram I get sponsorships of workouts related to menstruation, which are very basic, in the follicular phase you do weights, in the ovulatory phase you run... but always connected to a sale of services and products that on the one hand uses a positive thing which is the awareness

that our bodies change but always focusing on increasing performance by attaching a very heavy commercial part to it. To me it sometimes has the opposite effect: don't be annoying, it's a natural thing... (Julia, competitive boxer).

In addition, one must consider the risk of technological standardization of menstrual cycle management, which could turn a subjective and variable experience into a rigid model that does not always reflect the individual needs of female athletes. This could lead to new forms of medicalization of the female body in sports, with the risk that technology, instead of fostering self-determination, will end up imposing a new normative paradigm. However, there is also the issue of professionalization of sport to consider:

On the app... this kind of control at this level is normal, it's their job, I don't like so many safety measures in my job either, but that's their salary, they earn it that way (Anna, competitive boxer).

In conclusion, while tools such as the APP used by Chelsea represent progress toward greater attention to the gender dimension in sport, it is essential to question how such technologies are implemented and what the ethical implications are. A conscious and participatory use that gives female athletes a voice in decision-making could turn these tools into a real opportunity, preventing them from resulting in new forms of control and disciplining the female body. The solution in combat sports could be a *"situated"* approach: letting fighters control their data, co-interpret it with coaches.

9. The issue of weight

Shannon Courtenay, the 28-year-old British boxer who held the WBA world bantamweight title until October 2021, faced a dramatic weigh-in incident ahead of her title defense against Jamie Mitchell. On October 8, during the official pre-fight weigh-in, Courtenay unexpectedly registered over 1kg above her contracted weight limit. Following standard boxing protocols, she was granted the customary two-hour window to attempt weight reduction and requalify for the championship bout. Courtenay not only refused to drop weight in two hours but the next day explained her choice from her Instagram account saying:

"Yesterday I had reached the right weight. I was ready to go. Then last night I unexpectedly got my menstrual cycle which is known to cause weight gain. During preparation training we never had such problems. I was fit all week, I was ready. To say that I am devastated is an understatement, something like this has never happened to me before. I am always professional, but what happened this time was beyond my control. And I can't do anything about it. But what I can do is go out there tomorrow [Saturday] night to win and take the belt back. And that's exactly what I'm going to do".

Never in boxing had such a statement been made, explicit in language and clear in questioning the rules of the discipline of boxing.

And this is a theme that also came through strongly in the interviews.

In the period of cutting weight, the periodic variation of 1 kg/1.5 kg weighs on the perception of preparation progress and weighs down the moment (almost the ambush) when the coach weighs her. One day, warning that at the end of training, the dreaded weigh-in moment would come, and sensing that on that day the scale with the plumbs would show a particular weight out of the possible range, I contrived for the entire hour an arduous escape plan... Then he desisted from the escape, I got weighed, and stoically cashed in on the coach's look of disappointment at the revealing of the weight.

On the way back he thought endlessly, but who the fuck made me do it, at over thirty years old, put me in a weight fight when all my life I had escaped this curse (Beatrice, competitive boxer).

The issue that seems to emerge from interviews with female athletes is that the cycle is seen as a problem the moment it creates a disparity that is not dependent on one's own will and athletic preparation. As we have seen, many female athletes use the birth control pill to regularize it and some use it continuously as needed precisely so as not to menstruate during competitions, however, this does not solve the problem of water retention and therefore weight. There is also the fact that women's hormonal balance is more delicate than men's, and excessive fat loss tends to alter hormonal cycles. One of the main consequences is hypomenorrhea, or decreased menstruation and with reduced flow, which could also evolve into amenorrhea, their total absence. In the long term, this condition can have effects on the reproductive system.

There was a girl who had been training for a few months already; they were, at the time, in the same weight category and about the same age; the girl at that time was close to her debut. Due to match requirements she needed to lose a couple of pounds, so in addition to constant training she was also following a diet. One day a companion, before training asks for a tampon and the girl says that she had not had her period for months, the naturalness with which she said this shocked her more than the news itself; he asked her if it was a normal thing for her to have delays due to some pathology or syndrome that can cause this symptom, but almost with amazement the girl said that she was perfectly healthy and that the lack of menstruation was, she believed, related to eating little, training a lot and being very stressed about the debut. He then asked her if she had talked to the coach about it, she said yes and said he told her it was for the best. This dialogue left her there and then very puzzled but not particularly upset, perhaps because when you are immersed in an environment you do not notice its distortions; but as she grows up and looks with increasing detachment at that world, she still wonders how many girls (perhaps teenagers) think it is normal not to menstruate for months, how many coaches rejoice at the news that female athletes do not menstruate? (Anna, competitive boxer)

The only real concern associated with the cycle has always been weight gain near the pre-competition weigh-in. When I stopped my professional activity I also stopped taking the contraceptive ring. It took me almost 2 years to return to having a regular cycle since in the early days it would skip for several months but I think this aspect was still related to the combination of iron diet/intense training for multiple daily sessions 6 days a week. Upon returning to consistent but non-competitive physical activity and a less restrictive diet, the body began to function normally again.

As mentioned I never wanted the cycle to affect my daily life and somehow it never did. I couldn't tell if it was luck or will (Marta, competitive boxer).

The fact that Shannon Courtenay, a world champion boxer, stated this in a press conference means first of all to begin to break down taboos and sense of shame that still hover around menstruation, and secondly to highlight precisely the mechanisms of a sport calibrated only to the male body. It seems significant to us that precisely on this specific aspect the female athletes

interviewed seemed particularly involved and with rather uniform views. In the variation in weight and disadvantage in competitions that follows from this it becomes evident to the female athletes that the norms are built on a male body and here, where the disparity is “objective” it is perceived as unfair, while other more minor or not immediately identifiable discriminations are either not perceived as such or are underestimated precisely in order not to highlight the difference that there may be between the bodies.

10. Conclusions

Analysis of the impact of the menstrual cycle on female athletes in combat sports highlights how hormonal variations cannot be reduced to mere. Rather, they must be recognized as integral aspects of female physiology that can be strategically incorporated into training and preparation. The traditional approach, which has historically ignored these variables on the basis of an implicitly masculine neutral body model, proves inadequate in addressing the needs of female athletes, perpetuating a medicalizing view of the female body and underestimating the socio-cultural dimension of the issue.

The evidence gathered, both through the literature review and through the testimonies of female athletes, underscores the need for a critical rethinking of training methodologies, coach education, and federation policies, so that the menstrual cycle is not treated as a limitation, but as a physiological variable to be consciously integrated into sports programming. The case of weight management in weight-category disciplines, in particular, reveals how relevant regulations and practices are structured around parameters that do not take into account the biological specificities of female athletes, leading to consequences that can negatively affect their long-term health.

The experience of the female athletes interviewed highlights the crucial role of communication and education, not only in terms of the transmission of scientific knowledge, but also with respect to the construction of a language to overcome the cultural taboo of menstruation in sports. The absence of open dialogue on these issues, as evidenced by the difficulties in involving coaches in the discussion, perpetuates an individualized and often unconscious management of the menstrual cycle, with possible repercussions on the performance and physical and mental well-being of female athletes.

The gym’s spatial politics create what Turelli (2024) calls “assimilative disruption”. Female presence inherently combat sports patriarchal traditions, yet maintaining access requires adopting what is called “the posture of grateful invaders”. Reflecting on the relationship between sport and menstruation therefore extends beyond performance optimization: it requires rethinking the very concept of sport itself.

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Media e Pugilato, tra rilevanza storica e futuro incerto. Il caso italiano di “The Art of Fighting” Promotion

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Abstract

This commentary aims to explore the relationship between media and boxing in Italy, through the analysis of *The Art of Fighting* promotion, a newly established organization that promotes boxing events, making communication practices one of the pillars of its ontology. Four semi-structured interviews were conducted to investigate in depth the underlying dynamics and motivations of the case study. The paper highlights pronounced processes of mediatization, which result in a growing dependency of contemporary boxing on media dynamics.

Keywords: Boxing, Media, Mediatizzazione, Intervista qualitativa.

1. Il quadro teorico: sport e dipendenza dai media

Il rapporto tra media e sport è caratterizzato da un'affermata interdipendenza. Se, infatti, lo sport è da sempre un primo protagonista nel mondo della stampa – si guardi alla diffusione dei giornali sportivi – altrettanto grande è stato in passato ed è oggi l'impatto dei media sul mondo sportivo (Wenner, 1989; Beck & Bosshart, 2003; Hutchins & Rowe, 2012). I ruoli dei media nel mondo sportivo sono molteplici ed eterogenei, dal più universale – la moltiplicazione dei pubblici – ai più specifici, che variano a seconda del medium – es. la condivisione delle vite private degli atleti nelle storie Instagram. Nel corso degli anni, passando dai giornali, a radio, tv e, infine, internet e social network, i media hanno contribuito a cambiare radicalmente la percezione delle varie discipline. Questa ricerca si basa, tuttavia, su un quadro teorico specifico, quello della dipendenza dai media, seguendo il *frame* ipotizzato da Ličen et al. (2022), i quali hanno strutturato uno specifico modello di analisi per comprendere il rapporto sport-media, semplificato nella seguente tabella:

Tabella 1 - Matrice delle dipendenze e dei sistemi social nella mediatizzazione dello sport.

	Dipendenza Transazionale	Dipendenza Rituale	Dipendenza funzionale
Interazione/struttura	Mediazione degli atleti	Mediatizzazione degli atleti che agiscono come figure mediate	Personalità sportive come <i>media figures</i> (es. atleti influencer)
Organizzazione/Istituzione	Organizzazioni Sportive mediate	Mediatizzazione delle organizzazioni sportive	Le organizzazioni sportive diventano organizzazioni mediali
Società/Contesto	Mondo dello sport mediato	Mediatizzazione del mondo dello sport	Il media-sport si fa sistema a sé

Fonte: Ličen et al. (2022) (trad. dell'autore)

La matrice prende in considerazione da un lato (colonne) le note tre forme di sistemi sociali teorizzati da Luhmann (1995), dall'altro (righe) i tre livelli di dipendenza dai media concepiti, invece, da Jansson (2018). Nelle varie celle si trovano le diverse modalità di rapporto media-sport, le quali possono fornire chiavi di lettura interessanti rispetto a una o più discipline sportive. I livelli sempre più "alti" di dipendenza sono, qui, intesi come parti di realtà sportive che cedono più o meno spazio ai media e, di conseguenza, pervadono i vari campi del mondo sportivo.

2. Contesto della ricerca

2.1 Il rapporto tra media e pugilato

Il pugilato internazionale ha con il mondo dei media da sempre un rapporto di ambiguità, in virtù della sua natura di sport violento, accompagnato, però, da un altrettanto forte valore simbolico. I due elementi costituiscono un fattore di attrazione per i media, con i quali il pugilato è stata una tra le prime discipline a instaurare un solido rapporto. Già a metà del 1700, infatti, compaiono cronache di incontri sulle gazzette (Sowell, 2008), mentre, con la radio, si afferma tra le discipline più popolari tra il pubblico. La televisione ha compiuto un ulteriore passo avanti, ampliando il *coverage* dal solo evento sportivo ai retroscena delle vite degli atleti. Sul suolo italiano si pensi, a esempio, al recentemente scomparso Nino Benvenuti (1938-1925), protagonista di iconici spot pubblicitari, film e show televisivi che lo resero figura pubblica, apprezzata e conosciuta dal popolo per cause "mediali", oltre che solamente sportive¹. In epoca contemporanea, una serie di fattori – tra cui l'ampia frammentazione dei titoli e quello che viene definito *fenomeno Mayweather*² – hanno consacrato, nel rapporto media-pugilato, una serie di regole non scritte. Prima fra tutte,

¹ Documentario "Nino Benvenuti: una leggenda italiana": <https://www.raiplay.it/video/2025/06/Nino-Benvenuti-una-leggenda-italiana-5e891eb1-a66d-4c2d-b605-2964f4d0bdcb.html>

² Vedi, per esempio, <https://www.newyorker.com/sports/sporting-scene/the-mayweather-era>

la sempre maggiore importanza dello storytelling fuori dal ring che ha trovato terreno fertile con i new media e i fenomeni di piattafomizzazione. A questo proposito, non è possibile non citare l'incontro tra lo Youtuber Jake Paul e Mike Tyson, cinquantottenne, trasmesso in esclusiva su Netflix, che ha fatto registrare il record di streaming³. Alla luce di queste evidenze, il pugilato contemporaneo, quindi, appare fortemente condizionato dai fenomeni di mediatizzazione descritti da Ličen et al. (2022).

2.2 Inquadramento del caso di studio

Le dinamiche di mediatizzazione descritte finora, tuttavia, non sono le stesse per tutte le realtà pugilistiche internazionali. Questo articolo sposta, infatti, il focus sul panorama pugilistico italiano che, contrariamente alle tendenze d'oltreoceano, non sembra dare troppa attenzione agli aspetti promozionali e, quindi, mediatici, specie in epoca contemporanea. Questa mancanza di cura nei confronti degli aspetti comunicativi oltre a quelli sportivi si concretizza in una narrazione di carattere statico e verticale, senza una reale costruzione di aspettativa rispetto all'esito del match.

Questa ricerca ha come oggetto una realtà di promozione, *The Art of Fighting*⁴ (da qui TAF), nata nel 2022, che, invece, ha tra gli obiettivi della sua mission proprio gli aspetti comunicativi. Già a uno sguardo "di superficie", questa attenzione è incarnata da una serie di evidenze quali la presenza di una piattaforma dedicata: TAF, attualmente, è l'unico ente organizzatore che presenta un sito web centralizzato tramite il quale promuovere i propri eventi; inoltre, riprende dinamiche di stampo internazionale nella narrazione di match e atleti, per esempio tramite la costruzione delle rivalità tra pugili, che viene enfatizzata e messa sotto i riflettori tramite interviste *face to face* e occasioni pubbliche di confronto, poi incorniciate negli ambienti digitali. Un'altra delle strategie immediatamente osservabili è quella del "pugile influencer", incarnate, in questo caso, nella figura di Dario Morello, pugile professionista che riserva gran parte della sua promozione ai social media. L'interesse della ricerca è quello di osservare in maniera approfondita la struttura, gli scopi e il funzionamento di TAF, attraverso un'analisi di tipo esplorativo, al fine di identificare in maniera chiara quei meccanismi di dipendenza dai media e tracciare una linea della direzione narrativa del pugilato italiano.

3. Metodologia

Lo studio ha carattere prettamente esplorativo ed è volto a evidenziare il grado di importanza che gli aspetti comunicativi hanno nell'ecosistema dell'organizzazione presa come caso di studio. La tecnica utilizzata è quella dell'intervista qualitativa. Una prima fase esplorativa ha previsto l'osservazione del modus operandi di TAF rispetto sia all'attività online e, quindi, l'utilizzo dei vari canali fino ai contenuti proposti per promuovere gli eventi, sia a quella dal vivo, partecipando a uno degli eventi organizzati. La fase preliminare ha portato sia a una struttura concettuale utile a identificare le dimensioni da esplorare attraverso le interviste, che all'identificazione delle figure più opportune all'analisi delle suddette dimensioni. In totale sono state realizzate quattro

³ <https://www.hdblog.it/curiosita/articoli/n599737/tyson-paul-recori-pubblico-netflix/>

⁴ <https://www.taftheartofighting.com/>

interviste semi-strutturate, le quali sono state articolate intorno a temi quali a) il pugilato in Italia, b) il ruolo della comunicazione nella boxe, c) TAF nel panorama pugilistico italiano. Le persone intervistate sono:

- Edoardo Germani, fondatore e presidente;
- Alessandra De Pasquale, responsabile della comunicazione;
- Dario Morello, pugile professionista⁵, parte del roster di pugili promossi dall'organizzazione;
- Mohamed Elmaghraby, pugile professionista⁶, primo pugile promosso dall'organizzazione.

4. Risultati

Nelle parole del Presidente Germani si elencano i tre principi fondativi dell'organizzazione: match competitivi, eventi-spettacolo, comunicazione. Gli aspetti comunicativi rivestono, quindi, un ruolo cruciale, senza i quali l'ente non avrebbe modo di esistere. Si parla di “comunicazione 360°” come uno degli obiettivi principali, volto principalmente a *«Raccontare il pugile anche dopo il match, poiché quello che accade è che i ragazzi combattono e poi spariscono [...] una narrazione quotidiana»* (ADP). Il tema dello storytelling, anche questo emerso durante le interviste, è una delle strategie di prima linea degli aspetti promozionali *«la chiave del successo, poiché permette di andare oltre la nicchia di soli appassionati»* (EG). Un punto di vista prettamente “lato sportivo” lo offre Dario Morello, raccontando la sua esperienza con la comunicazione social, anni prima di entrare in contatto con TAF. Le parole del pugile richiamano indirettamente il concetto di dipendenza dai media, dal momento in cui lui stesso dichiara come, a determinate condizioni, sarebbe quasi più interessato ai numeri sui social piuttosto che al conseguimento di un titolo prestigioso: *«Perché se tu vinci un mondiale e non lo sa nessuno e io vinco un italiano e lo sanno 20.000 persone, il mio titolo è più importante del tuo»*. Nel corso dell'intervista questo concetto è stato ribadito più volte, anche durante considerazioni, da parte di Morello, di carattere più generale sulla scena nazionale e internazionale del pugilato. Infine, l'impatto mediatico è discusso, anche se in copertura minore, non solo rispetto ai media digitali, ma anche a radio e televisione, specificando come l'interesse da parte di questi ultimi sia diminuito, e che riportare l'attenzione su questo sport e, quindi, strutturare nuovi percorsi comunicativi sia al centro di TAF: *«il pugilato piace, ma deve arrivare a tutti. Se nessuno lo vede come fa piacere?»* (EG)

5. Conclusioni

Il caso di studio osservato ha messo in luce aspetti interessanti rispetto all'impatto dei media nel mondo del pugilato professionistico italiano. Le parole degli intervistati confermano come i processi di mediatizzazione abbiano un impatto sempre maggiore nel panorama pugilistico. Questi, infatti, incidono sia sulla carriera degli atleti che nella sopravvivenza degli enti di

⁵ Profilo ufficiale Boxrec: <https://boxrec.com/en/box-pro/730760>.

⁶ Profilo ufficiale Boxrec: <https://boxrec.com/en/box-pro/911000>.

promozione e organizzazione di eventi. Allo stesso tempo, la nascita e il bisogno di organizzazioni come quella osservata sembrerebbero essere indicatori di un sempre maggiore allargamento dei processi comunicativi in questo sport. La matrice strutturata da Ličen et al. (2022) [tabella 1] può, in questa sede, essere utilizzata come strumento analitico rispetto alle dinamiche illustrate, ricordando che gli autori stessi sottolineano che i confini tra le varie celle non sono statici (p. 801).

TAF non è un'organizzazione esclusivamente "mediale", ma riguarda, in primo luogo, gli eventi dal vivo, che, tuttavia, hanno bisogno di un solido piano di comunicazione per raggiungere i successi sperati. Questo fatto denota, in ogni caso, un posizionamento nella matrice che va oltre la singola azione mediata (prima colonna). Discorso analogo vale per gli atleti: Dario Morello non si considera un influencer, tuttavia, non ha difficoltà nell'ammettere che senza un determinato tipo di comunicazione non è possibile avere accesso a possibilità di carriera che possano definirsi "autorevoli". Anche sul piano strettamente sportivo, dunque, l'atleta deve modellarsi e tenere conto del suo impatto mediatico, oltre che sportivo. In conclusione, il pugilato ha instaurato con i media un rapporto del tutto singolare, che incontra chiaramente i principi della mediatizzazione illustrati sul piano teorico. Pugilato e media sono, a oggi, due realtà in un rapporto sempre più simbiotico e si ha modo di pensare che l'evoluzione della disciplina non potrà prescindere da una consapevolezza sempre maggiore del panorama mediale. Ricerche successive potrebbero riguardare a) l'analisi dettagliata dei vari processi di comunicazione online dei pugili o dei singoli incontri, per esempio, tramite netnografia (Kozinets, 2019); b) il punto di vista dei pubblici, andando a osservare nel dettaglio il ruolo e le motivazioni dell'audience pugilistica.

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**L'impatto sociale delle due ruote. Biciclette e trasformazioni contemporanee –
Un'analisi interdisciplinare tra storia, sociologia e innovazione tecnologica.
Landri, P. (a cura di) (2023). *Bici & Società*, FrancoAngeli**

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1. Introduzione

Il volume *Bici & Società*, curato da Paolo Landri, risponde a una crescente esigenza di analizzare la mobilità ciclistica come fenomeno interdisciplinare, abbracciando storia, sociologia, tecnologia e pratiche culturali. Questa prospettiva interdisciplinare riflette l'idea che la bicicletta non sia solo un mezzo di trasporto, ma che il ciclismo rappresenti una pratica contro-egemonica, capace di sfidare le dinamiche di potere che modellano le città moderne, come sottolineato da Cox (2020). Nato durante la pandemia di Covid-19, questo progetto editoriale riflette l'espansione della bicicletta come mezzo essenziale di mobilità sostenibile in un periodo di crisi sanitaria globale. Landri ha saputo aggregare diversi contributi che offrono visioni complementari su come la bicicletta sia diventata, e continui ad essere, un simbolo di resilienza urbana, di salute pubblica e di adattabilità socio-tecnologica.

Un'analisi particolarmente approfondita della dimensione storica della bicicletta in Italia è presentata nel Capitolo 2 da Eleonora Belloni, intitolato "La mobilità ciclistica in Italia. Una prospettiva storica". Belloni ripercorre la storia della bicicletta dall'avvento del velocipedismo pionieristico fino agli anni Ottanta del Novecento, quando la bicicletta era diventata pressoché "invisibile" nel panorama dei trasporti italiani. Attraverso una periodizzazione accurata, Belloni analizza come la bicicletta sia passata da mezzo d'élite a strumento di massa e come, nel corso del tempo, il suo utilizzo sia stato influenzato da cambiamenti economici, culturali e infrastrutturali. La trattazione storica mette in luce momenti cruciali, come la fase in cui la bicicletta divenne un mezzo di trasporto di massa tra il 1920 e il 1955, e il successivo declino a partire dagli anni Cinquanta con l'ascesa dell'automobile. Questa analisi si collega alla periodizzazione storica proposta da Belloni (2019), che illustra come la bicicletta abbia attraversato diverse fasi di trasformazione culturale ed economica in Italia tra il 1870 e il 1955. La ricostruzione storica proposta evidenzia il potenziale del ciclismo per affrontare sfide contemporanee, offrendo spunti su come riavvicinare la società moderna all'uso della bicicletta attraverso politiche di promozione e infrastrutture dedicate.

2. Il discorso sulla mobilità ciclistica e le strategie di cambiamento

Maria Cristina Caimotto, nel terzo capitolo, si sofferma sulle modalità in cui il discorso pubblico influenza le percezioni e le pratiche della mobilità ciclistica, spesso rafforzando l'“automobilità” a scapito dell'uso della bicicletta. Attraverso un'analisi critica del discorso, Caimotto mostra come la retorica dominante possa rendere marginale la velomobilità, riflettendo sui modi in cui le narrazioni, persino inconsapevolmente, impediscano il cambiamento. La sua analisi suggerisce che strategie di comunicazione alternative potrebbero contribuire a ridefinire la bicicletta come un'opzione di mobilità primaria e non solo come un hobby o una scelta di stile di vita. Questa riflessione trova un parallelo con le osservazioni espresse in altre sedi della stessa Caimotto (2020), che evidenzia come le narrazioni dominanti possano influenzare negativamente la percezione della bicicletta, relegandola a una scelta secondaria o marginale. La trasformazione delle pratiche ciclistiche non è solo un fenomeno di mobilità, ma un riflesso dei cambiamenti tecnologici e culturali. In contesti come la Cina, ad esempio, l'integrazione del bike-sharing con le piattaforme digitali non solo ha reso la mobilità più accessibile, ma ha anche facilitato un cambiamento nelle percezioni culturali del ciclismo, trasformandolo da semplice mezzo di trasporto a un simbolo di sostenibilità e innovazione sociale (Ferrari *et al.*, 2024).

3. Innovazione e tecnologia nel settore ciclistico

Paolo Magaudo e Dario Minervini introducono prospettive rispettivamente tecnologiche e pragmatiche sull'innovazione nella velomobilità. Le tecnologie emergenti come GPS, serrature intelligenti IoT e applicazioni mobili hanno rivoluzionato il mondo della bicicletta, aumentando l'efficienza operativa e migliorando l'esperienza dell'utente (Ferrari *et al.*, 2024). Magaudo descrive la nascita e l'evoluzione della “gravel bike”, nata come pratica dal basso e successivamente consolidatasi come segmento di mercato competitivo. Il racconto di Magaudo permette di comprendere come l'innovazione possa emergere da esigenze degli utenti per poi trasformarsi in un prodotto commerciale. Dario Minervini, in una prospettiva pragmatista, propone invece che la bicicletta non sia solo un prodotto tecnico, ma anche un'“entità socio-materiale” influenzata da valori culturali e norme sociali. Minervini discute il concetto di “engagement”, evidenziando come il ciclismo possa contribuire a un più ampio discorso sulla sostenibilità e sulla giustizia sociale. Da un punto di vista critico, questa sezione, potrebbe essere arricchita analizzando le limitazioni strutturali ed economiche che frenano l'adozione di innovazioni ciclistiche più costose, come le e-bike, che pur rappresentando una soluzione sostenibile, non sono ancora accessibili a una parte significativa della popolazione. Tuttavia, l'accessibilità economica di tali tecnologie rimane un problema cruciale, come suggerito dal concetto di costruzione sociale della tecnologia elaborato da Bijker, Hughes e Pinch (1989).

4. La platformizzazione dell'esperienza ciclistica

Nel capitolo intitolato “La platformizzazione dell'esperienza ciclistica. I casi Zwift e Strava”, Mario Tirino, Lorenzo Di Paola e Simona Castellano analizzano come la pratica del ciclismo sia stata trasformata dall'integrazione delle piattaforme digitali e dei social media, con particolare attenzione alle piattaforme Zwift e Strava. Questo capitolo esplora le tre fasi della digitalizzazione del ciclismo (terza fase della mediatizzazione), mostrando come l'esperienza ciclistica sia stata gradualmente influenzata e modificata dai social media e dalle piattaforme specifiche. Questi fenomeni riflettono quanto osservato da Behrendt (2018), che analizza l'impatto della digitalizzazione sulla mobilità e il modo in cui essa ridefinisce le pratiche sostenibili.

Nella prima parte del capitolo, si descrive come l'utilizzo delle piattaforme social abbia introdotto nuove pratiche nella comunità ciclistica, consentendo ai ciclisti di condividere esperienze, percorsi e statistiche, e creando una comunità virtuale coesa e interconnessa. Il caso di Strava rappresenta un esempio paradigmatico di come la piattaforma abbia reso possibile monitorare e condividere dati sulla performance sportiva, trasformando l'esperienza ciclistica in una pratica di *datafication*. L'analisi critica evidenzia come queste pratiche possano generare una “cultura della competizione” che influenza il modo in cui gli individui si relazionano con la propria attività fisica, spingendo verso l'iper-controllo e il confronto continuo. Tuttavia, questa rappresentazione della pratica ciclistica potrebbe risultare limitante, escludendo coloro che vivono il ciclismo come un'attività ludica e non competitiva.

La seconda parte del capitolo esplora l'impatto della virtualità, con un focus particolare su Zwift, una piattaforma che ha guadagnato popolarità durante la pandemia di Covid-19. Zwift ha permesso ai ciclisti di continuare a “pedalare” virtualmente in scenari simulati, mantenendo la connessione con la comunità sportiva in un periodo di isolamento. Questo “virtuale bello pedalare” è analizzato come una forma di *gamification*, dove elementi di gioco vengono integrati nell'esperienza sportiva, trasformando il ciclismo in una pratica ludica e socialmente connessa. Simili pratiche di monitoraggio e confronto continuo possono essere interpretate come una nuova forma di narrazione politica individualizzata, come suggerito da Butryn e Masucci (2003) nel loro studio sulle dinamiche sociali legate al ciclismo. La *gamification* e la *datafication* rappresentano sia limiti che prospettive per il futuro della mobilità ciclistica. Se da un lato queste pratiche possono ampliare le possibilità di coinvolgimento e migliorare la motivazione individuale, dall'altro lato pongono interrogativi sulla sostenibilità di un modello che incentiva la competizione costante e il monitoraggio continuo dei dati. Questo fenomeno solleva anche questioni di accessibilità e inclusività, poiché non tutti i ciclisti hanno accesso alle risorse economiche e tecnologiche necessarie per partecipare a queste piattaforme.

5. Turismi in bicicletta: dalla nascita alla riscoperta

Il settimo capitolo, scritto da Raffaele Di Marcello, esplora l'evoluzione storica del turismo in bicicletta, partendo dal primo prototipo del velocipede di Karl Drais nel 1818. Dapprima strumento di svago e mobilità personale, la bicicletta ha alimentato un movimento cicloturistico

che ha trovato nella fine del XIX secolo il suo apice, con la nascita di associazioni dedicate come il Touring Club Italiano. Questi sodalizi hanno contribuito alla creazione di infrastrutture e servizi specifici per i ciclisti, promuovendo una cultura del viaggio in bicicletta tra la borghesia e il proletariato. Tuttavia, l'avvento dei mezzi motorizzati e il turismo di massa hanno relegato la bicicletta a un ruolo marginale, limitandone l'uso al contesto urbano o sportivo. L'interesse è rinato dagli anni Ottanta del Novecento, quando organizzazioni come la European Cyclists' Federation hanno promosso il cicloturismo come alternativa sostenibile, con progetti come "Eurovelo", una rete ciclabile paneuropea. Il capitolo sottolinea i benefici economici e ambientali del cicloturismo, oggi sostenuto anche da normative italiane e dal "Piano Generale della Mobilità Ciclistica", che mira a rilanciare l'infrastruttura e l'attrattività del turismo in bicicletta.

6. Napoli e la bici: tra movimento e istituzioni

Luca Simeone, nel capitolo ottavo, sostiene che Napoli, tradizionalmente poco *bike-friendly*, ha visto negli ultimi due decenni un progressivo avvicinamento alla mobilità ciclistica, anche grazie all'attivismo culturale e sociale. Il capitolo traccia le tappe di questa trasformazione, iniziata con le prime "Critical Mass" e l'apertura delle ciclofficine popolari, spazi autogestiti che hanno promosso la manutenzione e l'uso consapevole della bicicletta come atto politico e culturale. Nonostante una storica carenza infrastrutturale e istituzionale, iniziative come il lungomare liberato e la rete ciclabile urbana hanno segnato una svolta sotto l'amministrazione de Magistris. L'emergere di eventi come il Napoli Bike Festival e collaborazioni con l'Ambasciata dei Paesi Bassi hanno rafforzato il ruolo della città come promotrice di una nuova cultura della ciclabilità. Tuttavia, la realizzazione concreta di una rete ciclabile integrata rimane una sfida, in un contesto amministrativo spesso lento e ostacolato da priorità contrastanti. L'autore evidenzia che il futuro di Napoli potrebbe passare attraverso politiche integrate che favoriscano l'intermodalità e il turismo sostenibile, rendendo la bicicletta una protagonista centrale della mobilità urbana.

7. Conclusioni

Bici & Società offre un contributo significativo alla letteratura sulla mobilità sostenibile, riuscendo a coniugare analisi storiche, sociologiche e tecnologiche che restituiscono una visione complessa e sfaccettata del fenomeno ciclistico. Il volume è particolarmente efficace nel proporre la bicicletta come uno strumento per ridefinire le città e l'ambiente, mostrando come il ciclismo possa essere non solo una forma di mobilità, ma un mezzo per affrontare problemi sociali e ambientali. Come evidenziato da Cox (2020) e Belloni (2019), la bicicletta rappresenta un fenomeno multidimensionale che combina aspetti culturali, storici e tecnologici, offrendo una risposta concreta alle sfide della mobilità sostenibile.

A questo sforzo e a questa visione bisogna, però, legare un'altra prospettiva che tenga maggiormente conto anche degli aspetti meno chiari e più problematici dell'industria della bicicletta in un'ottica internazionale. È essenziale osservare cosa accade lontano dai modelli

tradizionali del mondo occidentale, in particolare da quello dei Paesi dell'Europa del Nord, che spesso domina il discorso sulla mobilità sostenibile. Il caso cinese analizzato da Ferrari *et al.* (2024) – utilizzato in termini di paragone con un approccio macro e rivolto a realtà lontane dalla nostra – dimostra come l'adozione di sistemi di bike-sharing possa seguire percorsi differenti, favorendo una sperimentazione su vasta scala che ha rivelato sia le potenzialità in termini di sostenibilità e rigenerazione urbana – come messo in evidenza nel testo curato da Landri – sia, però, anche le problematiche legate a una gestione eccessivamente rapida e decentralizzata e ad una speculazione del mercato della bicicletta che ha portato ad una sovrapproduzione del bene bicicletta con conseguenze nefaste non solo per l'impatto ambientale, ma anche per problematiche legate alla gestione del traffico e degli spazi urbani. Questo approccio offre spunti preziosi per arricchire il dibattito, considerando anche i rischi di un'espansione non regolamentata o poco regolamentata su mercati di vasta scala.

A questo discorso si lega la riflessione condotta nel suo capitolo Dario Minervini dove sottolinea come il ciclismo non sia semplicemente un mezzo di trasporto, ma un'entità socio-materiale influenzata da valori culturali e norme sociali. Questa riflessione si integra con le esperienze del caso cinese, evidenziando che i modelli di mobilità sostenibile devono essere adattati ai contesti locali, tenendo conto delle pratiche quotidiane e delle specificità culturali delle comunità. In questo senso, il ciclismo non è solo una pratica individuale, ma anche un fenomeno collettivo che richiede un'analisi critica delle strutture economiche e sociali che lo sostengono.

Questo libro rappresenta un primo passo verso la creazione di un percorso storico e culturale della velomobilità in Italia. Seguendo questa linea indicata da testi come questo curato da Landri o quello scritto da Pivato (2019), si apre anche nel nostro Paese, e potremmo aggiungere, a ragion veduta, questo filone di studi che potrebbe offrire a sociologi, policy-maker e urbanisti un insieme di strategie e best practices replicabili per migliorare la mobilità ciclistica. Infine, la sinergia tra analisi locali, come proposta in *Bici & Società*, e casi internazionali, come quello cinese, potrebbe fornire strumenti utili per affrontare le sfide future in modo innovativo e sostenibile, ampliando la visione della bicicletta come strumento di trasformazione sociale e ambientale.

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Si bien desde inicios del siglo XX los deportes de masas constituyeron una dimensión central de los procesos identitarios y de las industrias culturales en Latinoamérica, hasta los años ochenta fue una temática relegada de los debates teóricos por parte de los intelectuales regionales. Desde esa década en adelante, los estudios sobre deportes lograron una progresiva consolidación que se materializó en la participación en congresos, el desarrollo de instituciones, su progresiva constitución como campo científico y la adquisición de legitimidad dentro de las Ciencias Sociales.

El sociólogo Pablo Alabarces argumenta que esta ausencia durante el siglo pasado se debió justamente a la omnipresencia de los deportes - con centralidad del fútbol - en la vida cotidiana latinoamericana, y que por ese motivo se produjo entre los intelectuales una suerte de temor a trabajar sobre una temática considerada “inferior”. Como consecuencia, adoptaron dos posiciones: o bien el silencio absoluto sobre el tema, o un amor incondicional que negaba toda posibilidad crítica (Alabarces, 1998, p. 2).

Este silencio comenzó a disiparse a partir de la aparición de los estudios del argentino Eduardo Archetti (2003) y de la compilación a cargo del brasileño Roberto DaMatta, *Universo do Futebol* (1982). Mientras el primero trabajó sobre todo en la ligazón del fútbol con la identidad nacional y de género, y realizó las primeras aproximaciones al abordaje de los aficionados al fútbol, sus cánticos y violencias, DaMatta indagó en las dramatizaciones que se ponían en escena en el espacio futbolístico. En una sociedad como la brasileña, en la que el color de piel y el apellido definen estratos, este antropólogo argumenta que el fútbol posibilitaría la experiencia de la igualdad, donde las élites no pueden sino acatar las leyes del reglamento. Por eso, propone que el fútbol es “una máquina de socialización de personas, un sistema altamente complejo de comunicación de valores esenciales” (Da Matta *et al.*, 1982, p. 40).

Ambos intelectuales fueron iniciadores de una segunda camada de investigadores. En Argentina, amerita mencionar al historiador Julio Frydenberg (2011) - enfocado en los procesos de desarrollo del fútbol en nuestro país - y a Pablo Alabarces, quien desde la publicación de *Fútbol y Patria* (2021) se convirtió en referente del incipiente campo. Ellos, a su vez, dieron lugar a tres líneas de trabajo: una principalmente enfocada en la historización de etapas y procesos del fútbol argentino, otra que tuvo como foco la vinculación entre el fútbol y la nación, y una tercera que abordó la violencia en el fútbol asociada a los aficionados denominados “barras bravas”.

Traccionadas por el fútbol y por la violencia en los estadios, experiencias similares comenzaron a desarrollarse en otros países de Latinoamérica. La influencia del Grupo de Trabajo Deporte y Sociedad de CLACSO - cuyo nacimiento data de 1999 -, el surgimiento de espacios de investigación en Colombia, Uruguay, Chile o México, y mesas en congresos internacionales como la Reunión de Antropología del Mercosur posibilitaron que numerosos investigadores e investigadoras comenzaran a encontrarse y a entablar redes¹.

Si bien en estos cuarenta años se fortaleció una red regional, no se produjo en paralelo un proceso similar entre académicos sudamericanos y los europeos o estadounidenses. Ahí se ubica la centralidad y el aporte que representa para la investigación actual y futura el volumen *Cartografía de los estudios sociales sobre el deporte. Debates clásicos y actuales*. Coordinado por Alejo Levoratti, Dr. en Cs. Sociales y Humanas por la Universidad de Quilmes, se trata de una compilación que reúne investigaciones y perspectivas teóricas que se produjeron en diversas regiones del globo y permite acceder a los procesos que allí dieron lugar al campo de estudios sobre el deporte.

Por esa vacancia previa, el trabajo posibilita acceder a los modos en que se constituyó el campo en otras latitudes, a las polémicas teóricas que allí se disputaron y a numerosas referencias bibliográficas que a futuros investigadores les permitirán ampliar el repertorio de debates. Y si bien el trabajo resulta de importancia para el investigador sudamericano, el lector europeo también lo encontrará útil, no solo porque se incorpora un capítulo sobre Argentina, uno sobre Brasil y un tercero dedicado a Latinoamérica, sino y sobre todo gracias a las múltiples y diversas referencias que son incorporadas a lo largo del trabajo.

Fernando Segura Millán Trejo, Dr. en Sociología por la École de Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales de París, se encarga del capítulo 1, dedicado al campo de estudios en Inglaterra. Con un detallado recorrido por los pilares bibliográficos, su abordaje pone el foco en dos grandes ejes, que se tornaron relevantes para la investigación latinoamericana: en primer término, la relevancia para el campo del trabajo de historiadores, que encontró una de sus principales vertientes en el trabajo de Elías y Dunning (1992) sobre los procesos de modernización a través del deporte.

En segundo lugar, el autor destaca los trabajos sobre hooliganismo, que fueron centrales en el análisis de la violencia en el fútbol en nuestras tierras. Al respecto, destaca tres estudios pioneros: en primer término, los estudios de John Williams sobre los viajes de los hooligans para acompañar a la selección británica en el extranjero, y los combates que allí realizaban frente a ultras de otras nacionalidades. Otra lectura surgió de la perspectiva sociohistórica sobre violencias a partir de relevar las agresiones que se habían producido antes de que irrumpiera como fenómeno social en los sesenta; y una tercera puso el foco en las relaciones estructurales que daban lugar al surgimiento de los hooligans, como el vínculo con la policía, las condiciones de los estadios y la organización de los eventos.

El capítulo 2 pone el foco en el caso estadounidense, donde el Dr. en Sociología Jeffrey Montes de Oca de la Universidad de Colorado explica que, tras una primera perspectiva cuantitativa y

¹ Una amplia recopilación de las publicaciones producidas en esa etapa puede encontrarse en Martínez (2010, p. 19).

positivista, desde las décadas del 70 y 80 surgió una corriente crítica enfocada en temáticas vinculadas a la clase y al género.

Montes de Oca indica que la organización liberal del deporte estadounidense, que no cuenta con un Ministerio ad hoc y que se orienta en función del mercado, condicionó la producción científica, ya que al carecer de apoyo estatal debieron encontrar su curso en departamentos como el de gestión deportiva o kinesiología. Sin embargo, el auge de la teoría feminista y la aplicación de teoría queer al análisis del deporte de mujeres y a las masculinidades que se ponen en escena en las competiciones deportivas posibilitó un nuevo impulso y la apertura de numerosos espacios de investigación.

El intelectual brasileño Alexandre Fernandez Vaz, Dr. en Ciencias Humanas y Sociales por la Universidad de Hannover, se dedicó en el capítulo 3 al caso alemán, aunque, a diferencia de sus colegas, aclara que propone una reflexión sobre las condiciones sociales en las que surge el deporte y delimitación como tema en dicho país. En ese sentido, el autor propone dos grandes influencias para el avance teórico en el país germano. En primer término, la Guerra Fría, que suscitó que el deporte se desarrollara en estrecha vinculación con el impulso militar. De aquí surgió, sobre todo en la Alemania oriental, manuales de entrenamiento deportivo y una pedagogía asociada al deporte, mediante la cual se buscaba promover deportistas que defendieran la patria y la ideología socialistas.

Un segundo condicionante, en tanto, fue el nazismo, que dio lugar a dos tendencias: por un lado, a un amplio corpus de estudios sobre la utilización política del deporte a partir de los Juegos Olímpicos de 1936, y, en segundo lugar, a una serie de trabajos desde la perspectiva de la Teoría Crítica. Desde esta corriente se realizó una lectura de la educación física como mecanismo de reproducción del proceso social en el que se desarrolla, a partir de la idea de que el modo de producción se torna tan dominante que influencia el tiempo libre y torna a los atletas en mercancía.

Un nuevo capítulo a cargo de Fernando Segura Trejo, en este caso en conjunto con Diego Murzi, aborda el caso francés. La teoría crítica también se desarrolló en la academia gala, sobre todo a partir de Jean Marie Brohm, y desde la década del ochenta surgió otra perspectiva, encarnada en intelectuales como Christian Bromberger o Patrick Mignon, que analizaron vínculos entre deportes e identidades, nacionalidad o el rol comunitario de las prácticas. Sin embargo, fue Pierre Bourdieu y su estudio sobre el deporte como marcador de clase (Bourdieu, 1990) quien se tornó en la posición legítima dentro del campo, y que tuvo en Christian Pociello y Loïc Wacquant a sus principales continuadores.

El capítulo culmina con una serie de ejes temáticos que se desarrollaron desde la década del 90: la capacidad del deporte para integrar a los hijos de migrantes; la participación de las mujeres en los deportes, y el vínculo entre deporte y espectáculo.

El libro examina además dos trayectorias que inicialmente estuvieron rezagadas en la consolidación de sus campos de estudio y el fortalecimiento institucional: las de España y Australia. El caso hispano fue abordado en el capítulo 5 por Xavier Medina y Ricardo Sánchez, quienes aclaran que ponen el foco específicamente en la antropología del deporte como

disciplina. Estos autores indican que las primeras influencias teóricas consistieron en el estudio de las prácticas corporales y deportivas en las sociedades tradicionales y que esto derivó, entre otras líneas de análisis, en el estudio de las fiestas populares españolas. Sin embargo, desde la década del noventa adoptaron los trabajos franceses, mexicanos, argentinos, y hacia los 2000 las investigaciones versaban entre el fútbol, deportes propiamente españoles como la pelota vasca, y disciplinas contemporáneas como el skate o el fenómeno *runner*, entre otros.

Respecto del caso australiano, en el capítulo 6 Brent McDonald señala que desde finales del siglo XX parte del campo se constituyó allí gracias a los estudiantes migrantes que llevaron sus perspectivas y temáticas académicas. De esa manera se fue gestando una sociología crítica del deporte que se sostuvo sobre cuatro ejes: la globalización y el Estado-Nación, las cuestiones de género, la desigualdad social y los medios de comunicación. Sin embargo, dos líneas de trabajo se tornaron destacadas: el aporte de la perspectiva feminista en las culturas del deporte, cuya referencia más notoria es el trabajo de Raewyn Connell (1995) sobre masculinidades, y los estudios sobre indígenas y deporte, que mediante una lectura crítica pusieron en escena los modos en que el deporte reproduce prácticas racistas.

Tras un capítulo dedicado a la experiencia latinoamericana, donde Alabarces, Levoratti y Garriga Zucal desandan las cuatro décadas desde el surgimiento de *Universo do Futebol* (DaMatta *et al.*, 1982), el capítulo 8 está dedicado a la experiencia brasileña, país precursor en términos de producción académica sobre la temática. La Dra. En Educación Física Mariana Zuanetti Campins inicia su capítulo con una observación: encuentra que los estudios sobre prácticas deportivas en Brasil parecen operar entre la celebración social de la diversidad y la crítica política a sus usos instrumentales y significados ideológicos, y que ambas posiciones responden al vínculo del fútbol con la fundación del Estado-Nación moderno.

En ese proceso, la autora recupera a autores como Gilerto Freyre, Mario Filho o el ya mencionado Roberto DaMatta para proponer que el fútbol fue el que mejor interpretó el mestizaje racial sobre el que se basó el proceso de colonización, que le dio al varón negro un rol fundamental. Por este motivo, sostiene que este deporte se convirtió en una arena donde se ponía en escena dramas sociales -la desigualdad y el racismo- propios de la sociedad brasileña. A continuación, hace una detallada lectura en torno a la aplicación de la perspectiva marxista y althusseriana en el campo brasileño y un recorrido sobre la influencia de Elías y Bourdieu en los estudios contemporáneos. El trabajo culmina con un capítulo sobre el campo argentino, a cargo de Alejo Levoratti y Diego Roldan, y un epílogo escrito por Pablo Scharagrodsky en el que realiza una lectura transversal de la compilación, con sus líneas teóricas fundamentales.

En resumen, el libro presenta una serie de recorridos sobre los estudios del deporte que auguran la continuidad de su crecimiento. En términos temáticos, tras un inicio signado sobre todo por investigaciones en torno del fútbol, numerosas disciplinas comenzaron a ser analizadas, se incrementó la trama de actores y también los problemas observados. Apareció así el vínculo con la industria del espectáculo, con los procesos de inclusión a través del deporte, con la utilización productiva del tiempo de ocio o la relación con los espacios públicos, que permiten complejizar los trabajos pioneros. Asimismo, la teoría crítica, que fue uno de los pilares en los orígenes, hoy

convive con estudios inspirados en Bourdieu, con la teoría feminista y con aquellos influidos por Foucault, entre otras perspectivas.

La diversidad de voces y de abordajes posibilitan, entonces, una lectura con entradas múltiples: es posible ingresar al texto de manera transversal con la mirada ubicada en las líneas temáticas, una segunda orientada al despliegue institucional que propició el campo teórico, una tercera entrada que recopila el mapa conceptual sobre el que se sostuvieron los debates; una cuarta, incluso, sobre las disciplinas analizadas. Por estos motivos, como se ha expresado previamente, el libro constituye un aporte clave en la evolución del campo teórico y da lugar al desarrollo de nuevas relaciones entre las academias europeas y las sudamericanas.

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Loisir e sport: identità e dinamiche sociali
**Bortoletto, N. (2024). *Tracce per una sociologia dello sport in Italia: 1948-1962*,
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1. Sport e società

Nel panorama delle scienze sociali contemporanee, lo sport si presenta come un fenomeno ricco e complesso, che attraversa molteplici sfere della vita collettiva. Non si tratta soltanto di un'attività ricreativa o di intrattenimento, ma di un autentico specchio della società, capace di riflettere dinamiche identitarie, trasformazioni del tempo libero, logiche mediatiche e processi sociali profondi. Come sottolineano Bifulco e Tirino, lo sport «abbraccia tutti i livelli dell'interazione sociale», rendendolo un oggetto di studio imprescindibile per comprendere la modernità (Bifulco, Tirino, 2019, p. 12).

In Italia, tuttavia, la sociologia dello sport ha impiegato molto tempo a guadagnare legittimità accademica. Fattori come il peso dell'idealismo, la compartimentazione del sapere sociologico e la tradizione marxista – che spesso considerava lo sport come mera superstruttura o distrazione ideologica – hanno contribuito a questo ritardo (Barbano, 1970).

Solo dagli anni Duemila in poi, grazie al lavoro di studiosi come Dal Lago, Porro, Martelli, Russo, Lo Verde, Bifulco e Tirino, la sociologia dello sport ha iniziato a consolidarsi come campo autonomo e riconosciuto. In questo contesto si inserisce il contributo di Nico Bortoletto con il suo volume *Tracce per una Sociologia dello Sport in Italia: 1948-1962*. Una raccolta di saggi che si distingue per l'approccio storico-genealogico e per l'attenzione al contesto socioculturale dell'Italia del secondo dopoguerra.

Fin dalle prime pagine, l'autore chiarisce il suo obiettivo, ricostruire e analizzare le “tracce” – i primi segnali, ancora embrionali – di una riflessione sociologica sullo sport nell'Italia tra il 1948 e il 1962. Un periodo in cui lo sport cominciava a radicarsi nella nuova società di massa, ma ancora faticava ad affermarsi come oggetto di studio scientifico, complice anche la lenta istituzionalizzazione della sociologia nel nostro Paese. Il libro si articola in quattro capitoli principali, ognuno dei quali affronta un aspetto chiave del percorso sociologico dello sport. Nel primo capitolo, l'autore offre una panoramica comparativa, mettendo a confronto lo sviluppo della sociologia dello sport in Italia con quello di altri contesti internazionali, come Stati Uniti e Germania. Bortoletto evidenzia come, altrove, già negli stessi anni, si stessero consolidando approcci teorici strutturati, legati a pensatori come Weber, Elias, Dunning e Bourdieu. Questo confronto serve a far emergere le ragioni del ritardo italiano, che si possono rintracciare nel peso dell'idealismo, l'assenza di una tradizione sociologica forte, il ruolo poco stimolante delle

istituzioni politiche e religiose, e un CONI più interessato alla gestione pratica dello sport che alla riflessione critica. È questo il vuoto teorico che l'autore si propone di esplorare.

Nel secondo capitolo vengono introdotti i concetti fondamentali per analizzare il rapporto tra sport e società, con particolare attenzione a quello di *loisir*. Bortoletto ne ricostruisce l'evoluzione teorica, mostrando come si sia passati da una concezione di tempo residuo a un vero e proprio spazio sociale carico di significati. Il testo si sviluppa attraverso un dialogo serrato con il pensiero di autori classici come Marx e Veblen, passando per l'apporto dei moderni Dumazedier, Riesman e Friedmann, fino ad arrivare ai contributi più recenti di Minardi. In questo modo, l'autore costruisce una solida cornice teorica che permette di comprendere il ruolo dello sport nelle trasformazioni della società industriale e dei consumi.

Il terzo capitolo, cuore del volume, presenta i risultati della ricerca di Bortoletto sulle prime riflessioni socio-sportive in Italia. Vengono analizzati articoli, atti di convegni e testi ancora poco noti, che affrontavano temi oggi centrali, quali l'identità, la stratificazione sociale, i media, il divismo, la violenza, l'educazione. A questi contenuti si affianca un'utile rassegna dei principali approcci internazionali alla sociologia dello sport, dalla scuola di Elias e Dunning, a Guttmann, fino all'approccio critico di Bourdieu. L'integrazione tra riflessione italiana e quadro teorico globale consente di apprezzare tanto le specificità quanto i limiti del dibattito italiano dell'epoca. Infine, nel quarto e ultimo capitolo, Bortoletto esplora la figura di Achille Ardigò, uno dei primi studiosi a trattare lo sport in chiave sociologica, considerandolo come un "fatto sociale totale" (Mauss, 2002). Ardigò analizza lo sport nel contesto della società dei consumi e del tempo libero, anticipando temi cruciali come la commercializzazione e l'alienazione. Bortoletto ne valorizza il pensiero, evidenziando cinque punti di convergenza tra la riflessione di Ardigò e la propria impostazione, quali il legame tra sport e società, l'importanza del *loisir*, la critica alla mercificazione, l'analisi del contesto storico-sociale e la funzione di controllo sociale dello sport. Entrambi gli autori sottolineano come lo sport non sia un fenomeno isolato, ma un riflesso delle trasformazioni sociali, confermando la sua rilevanza come elemento centrale nelle dinamiche culturali ed economiche della società.

2. *Loisir*

L'analisi del *loisir* rappresenta una prospettiva privilegiata per indagare le modalità attraverso cui la società si struttura, si trasforma e si ridefinisce nel corso del tempo. Bortoletto propone un'accurata disamina dell'evoluzione storica del concetto di *loisir*, evidenziando le diverse configurazioni che esso ha assunto nelle varie epoche. L'autore si colloca in una posizione intermedia tra le due principali correnti interpretative, quella marxista e quella liberale, riconoscendo la presenza di un terzo orientamento teorico, la cui massima espressione si ritrova nella prospettiva di Joffre Dumazedier (Bortoletto, 2024). Quest'ultimo sostiene che il tempo libero, «quale che fosse la forma assunta, è costituito dall'espressione di un nuovo bisogno sociale dell'individuo di disporre di sé stesso per sé stesso» (Dumazedier, 1993, p. 63).

Rilevante nel contributo di Bortoletto è la capacità di concettualizzare il tempo libero non solo come uno spazio di autodeterminazione e di emancipazione sociale, ma anche come un fenomeno intrinsecamente "edonistico" (Bortoletto, 2024, p. 47). In tale accezione, la ricerca del

soddisfacimento individuale e del benessere si coniuga con la dimensione collettiva e sociale dell'esperienza. Questa lettura permette di riconoscere il *loisir* come elemento strutturante della qualità della vita, superando una concezione meramente ludica o residuale. Pur non facendo esplicitamente riferimento a questo concetto, l'analisi di Bortoletto sembra potersi inscrivere in un orizzonte teorico più ampio, in risonanza con l'idea di "esponia" delineata da Carmelo Cottone (1963) e ripresa da Lo Verde (2019, p. 41), che definisce un tempo libero "spiritualizzato", dotato di un valore intrinseco in quanto spazio privilegiato di autenticità e realizzazione del sé.

Per inquadrare la complessità del *loisir*, è utile richiamare il contributo di Pierre Bourdieu, un riferimento centrale nel dibattito con cui l'analisi di Bortoletto si misura criticamente. Bourdieu, com'è noto, analizza il tempo libero e lo sport attraverso la lente della stratificazione sociale, evidenziando come, attraverso il concetto di *habitus*, le preferenze e le pratiche nel *loisir* siano profondamente influenzate dall'appartenenza di classe e varino in funzione del capitale culturale ed economico posseduto dagli individui (Bourdieu, 1991). Secondo tale prospettiva, il *loisir* si configura non soltanto come spazio di autodeterminazione, ma anche, e forse soprattutto, come arena per la riproduzione delle disuguaglianze sociali.

Tuttavia, proprio nel confronto con letture che interpretano il *loisir* primariamente quale espressione di *status* – sia esso inteso come consumo vistoso dell'élite (Veblen, 2011) sia come distinzione legata all'*habitus* di classe (Bourdieu, 1991) – Bortoletto propone una visione che, pur senza negare il peso delle determinanti sociali, appare meno radicale e più sfaccettata. L'autore valorizza infatti quelle che definisce, richiamando un suo precedente lavoro, "attività di compensazione" (Bortoletto, 2013, p. 2); si tratta di pratiche che sottraggono l'individuo alla routine quotidiana, introducendolo in uno spazio temporale e simbolico altro, ove l'identità può esprimersi in forme più autentiche e svincolate dalle logiche performative, produttive o socialmente imposte. In questa prospettiva, l'arte, il *loisir* e il gioco rappresentano ambiti privilegiati per l'esplorazione e l'espressione identitaria, sebbene possano essere socialmente percepiti come una perdita di tempo (Bortoletto, 2013, p. 2). Essi costituiscono, al contrario, fondamentali occasioni di libertà e autorealizzazione. L'approccio di Bortoletto, dunque, problematizza l'idea che il *loisir* sia esclusivamente un marcatore di status, riconoscendogli una funzione più ampia e complessa nella costruzione del sé e, potenzialmente, nella promozione della coesione sociale.

3. Lo Sport tra struttura e soggettività

Una figura pionieristica che emerge con forza e che viene ripresa e approfondita da Bortoletto è quella di Achille Ardigò, studioso bolognese, il quale "ha promosso numerose iniziative dirette a collegare l'analisi scientifica con l'intervento della società italiana" (Cesareo, 2008, p. 276). Mediante un'accurata esegesi di due contributi specifici dell'autore – *Note di sociologia sull'organizzazione e la pratica sportiva* (1961) e *Lo sport contemporaneo e il controllo delle tensioni* (1962) – Bortoletto mette in luce un impianto teorico originale e precorritore, che riconduce il fenomeno sportivo a un nodo critico di intersezione tra strutturazione sociale, regolazione normativa, codificazione simbolica e processi di integrazione identitaria. In tale prospettiva, lo sport si

configura, nella lettura ardigoana, quale dispositivo sociologico privilegiato, un laboratorio empirico e concettuale in cui si condensano – e, simultaneamente, si negoziano – le tensioni strutturali e simboliche proprie della modernità avanzata. La proposta di rileggere lo sport attraverso la lente dell’eterodirezione e dell’ integrazione normativa, infatti, permette di superare letture dicotomiche – come quelle tra alienazione ed emancipazione, controllo e libertà – restituendo allo sport la sua natura ambivalente di spazio regolato e al tempo stesso generativo di senso.

Si tratta di una dinamica che Bortoletto avvicina al funzionalismo parsonsiano, ma che se ne distanzia attraverso l’introduzione di una dimensione relazionale e processuale, più vicina, per certi versi, a quella proposta da Luhmann, laddove lo sport appare come un sistema capace di autoriprodursi attraverso comunicazioni codificate e performative (Luhmann, 2022).

Il contributo di Ardigò, come evidenzia Bortoletto, si distingue anche per l’attenzione rivolta alla funzione “catartica” e regolativa dello sport nella gestione delle tensioni sociali (Ardigò, 1962, p. 109). In ciò, l’autore si avvicina alle intuizioni di Norbert Elias, per il quale lo sport rappresenta una forma socialmente accettata di canalizzazione delle emozioni e delle pulsioni, funzionale al “processo di civilizzazione” (Elias, Dunning, 1989, p. 24). Il “campo” sportivo, nella prospettiva ardigoana, si configura come un’arena istituzionale dove la tensione viene ritualizzata, la competizione normata, e la devianza temporaneamente legittimata (Ardigò, 1961, p. 97). Un processo che richiama anche il concetto di “cornice” elaborato da Erving Goffman, dove l’agire sociale è mediato da aspettative condivise e regole situazionali (Goffman, 1974, p.40). Lo sport, dunque, è inteso da Ardigò non solo come fenomeno sociale secondario, ma come campo cruciale per comprendere la relazione tra struttura e soggetto, tra condizionamento e creatività sociale (Ardigò, 1961). Di particolare rilievo, nel lavoro di Bortoletto, è la scelta di affiancare i due testi di Ardigò non solo per ragioni filologiche, ma per evidenziare l’evoluzione teorica del sociologo bolognese. Dal primo scritto, centrato sulle strutture organizzative e sulle logiche sistemiche del fenomeno sportivo, al secondo, che ne esplora con maggiore profondità la dimensione simbolica, emozionale e antropologica. È proprio questa transizione – da una visione strutturale a una più complessa comprensione dell’agire sportivo come spazio intermedio tra soggetto e sistema – a conferire all’opera ardigoana una sorprendente attualità. Ardigò anticipa, infatti, una visione dello sport come luogo di soggettivazione mediata, dove l’individuo non si limita a interiorizzare norme, ma le rielabora in funzione della propria identità, delle proprie emozioni, e dei propri bisogni di riconoscimento sociale.

4. Conclusioni

L’operazione di Bortoletto si avvicina a una forma di “archeologia teorica”, nel senso foucaultiano del termine (Foucault, 2013, p. 155). Egli riporta alla luce, da una sedimentazione disciplinare che ne aveva obliterato il valore, una prospettiva originale capace di offrire chiavi di lettura inedite per comprendere lo sport come campo sociale poliedrico. L’inclusione dei due interventi scientifici assume, in tal modo, una valenza meta-teorica. Essa non solo sostiene e corrobora la lettura interpretativa proposta dall’autore, ma ne esplicita il metodo. Bortoletto invita implicitamente il lettore a esercitare un’attività di co-interpretazione, a muoversi tra il commento

e la fonte, a verificare direttamente l'originalità e la densità concettuale delle ipotesi avanzate. In ciò risiede la dimensione didattica e, al contempo, epistemologicamente rigorosa dell'operazione, che restituisce al testo scientifico la sua funzione generativa, non come prodotto chiuso ma come campo aperto di interrogazione e approfondimento. La decisione di allegare i due contributi ardigoani assume così un significato che eccede la funzione documentale. Si configura piuttosto come un gesto teorico pienamente coerente con l'obiettivo dell'opera: rilanciare una sociologia dello sport capace di riconoscere la centralità dei processi simbolici, l'articolazione tra norma e soggetto, e la natura plurale dell'agire sportivo nella modernità stratificata. In questa prospettiva, Bortoletto non si limita a riscattare un pensiero "inatteso", ma lo restituisce alla sua piena dignità teorica, proponendolo come possibile fondamento per una riflessione rinnovata sullo sport contemporaneo.

La solidità metodologica dell'analisi, l'originalità dell'oggetto di studio e la sensibilità con cui l'autore intreccia fonti, sguardi e riflessioni rendono questo volume un contributo prezioso, capace di aprire nuove piste di ricerca e stimolare interrogativi di lungo corso. Ciò detto, alcuni limiti strutturali restano evidenti. La scelta di concentrarsi esclusivamente sul quindicennio 1948–1962, sebbene motivata, finisce per circoscrivere l'analisi, rinunciando a esplorare le implicazioni successive e le trasformazioni più recenti del campo. Allo stesso modo, un confronto più sistematico con la cornice teorica internazionale — in particolare con la sociologia dello sport anglosassone — avrebbe potuto ampliare la portata comparativa del discorso. Inoltre, l'attenzione rivolta quasi esclusivamente ai contributi teorici e istituzionali tende a lasciare in ombra la dimensione empirica delle pratiche sportive e le esperienze vissute dai soggetti.

Si potrebbe infine osservare come il libro manchi di una vera e propria sintesi conclusiva, capace di restituire l'unità dell'indagine e di rilanciarne il potenziale teorico. Tuttavia, questi aspetti non compromettono il valore complessivo dell'opera, che si distingue per lucidità, finezza interpretativa e una tensione critica autentica. Bortoletto non promette al lettore una sociologia dello sport già costituita, ma lo guida in un percorso di scoperta, attraversando intuizioni sparse e contributi spesso dimenticati, per restituire profondità storica e dignità teorica a una disciplina ancora in via di definizione. È in questa apertura — epistemologica, politica e pedagogica — che si coglie forse il merito più grande del volume, quello di rilanciare il pensiero sociologico come pratica viva di scavo, interrogazione e rinnovamento.

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