

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 Zsafia 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".

References

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