

Rolling with the Flow: An Enactive Ethnography of Embodied & Emotional Socialization in
Brazilian Jiu Jitsu

By:

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores Brazilian Jiu Jitsu training at 2 gyms: Mixed Martial Arts Academy (Toronto, Canada) and Team Gracie BJJ (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil). Drawing on enactive ethnography, the dissertation deepens sociological understanding of embodied processes of socialization and emotion work. The first paper advances the concept of “social calibration” to elucidate the embodied processes through which new Brazilian Jiu Jitsu practitioners in Toronto learn to align their intensity levels with prevailing training norms. It examines how intensity breaches are managed by experienced practitioners and highlights how, through social calibration, practitioners either transgress or reinforce broader gender norms and expectations. The second paper takes a comparative approach, unpacking the relationship between social environments and structures *inside* and *outside* the gym, and the embodiment of habitus at the individual level. It uncovers how the unique social contexts in Rio de Janeiro and Toronto lead practitioners at each site to develop varying levels of anticipated violence, which in turn shape how they understand, embody, and choose to show, hide or apply their BJJ practitioner training and identities. The final

paper elaborates the concept of “emotional base work” to illustrate how practitioners in Rio de Janeiro learn to establish and maintain a strong emotional base from which to withstand the pull of emotionally heightened situations, and maintain emotional stability and resilience when facing challenges both inside and outside of the gym. Taken together, this dissertation uses Brazilian Jiu Jitsu as a case study to raise new empirical and theoretical insights into the micro-interactional, embodied processes through which social actors develop the social and emotional competency needed to navigate contexts of interactional risk and adversity.

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CHAPTER 1: DISSERTATION OVERVIEW

INTRODUCTION

Sports offer valuable insights into complex intersecting social forces at play within their respective social fields. They dominate everyday public discourse, serve as anchors for diverse social identities and, act as fields of interactions for a growing number of people (Giulianotti 2015). Sports not only reflect societal values, norms and development processes, but function as a practice of sociability in which participants can accrue social value and belonging (Bourdieu 1988; Weiss, Norden & Tobisch 2021; Chapman, Cock & Swain 2023). To engage in sport is to train the body not only in the rules of sport, but also in the rules of society, and in doing so, participants develop embodied subjectivities reflective of the logics of both sport and society (Grenfell 2015). The symbolic dialogue sports practitioners engage in with fellow participants and spectators, is further understood as having the ability to reveal aspects of the self, that may be covered up in everyday life (Maguire 2017)

In light of this, sociologists have highlighted the value of studying sports as a uniquely apt medium for understanding broader processes of socialization and social stratification (Bourdieu 1988; Washington & Karen 2001). Martial Arts and Combat Sports (MACS) stand out in their explanatory potential because the embodied nature of learning and the extreme behaviors that fighters negotiate make more visible the socialization processes actors engage in, in more subtle ways, across other social fields (Wacquant 2015). Wacquant's (2004) pioneering study on boxing, *Body & Soul*, has been particularly influential for demonstrating how sports operate as privileged fields for understanding "the

lives and social milieu of its practitioners, in their full sensuous, moral and aesthetic aspects” (Sánchez García & Spencer 2014: 4). *Body & Soul* (2004) demonstrates how examination of the boxer’s habitus, i.e. a set of durable and transposable socially structured dispositions, not only elucidates the social dynamics of the boxing world, but also enables us to decipher action and meaning *from* and *with* the body.

Following Wacquant’s pivotal demonstration of the potential of studying MACS, scholars have followed this approach to examine habitus not just in boxing (Paradis 2012), but also Capoeira (Delamont & Stephens 2008), Tae kwon do (Graham 2013), Wing Chun (Brown & Jennings 2013), Mixed Martial Arts (Spencer 2012, Sánchez García 2018), Aikido (Sanchez García 2014), Krav Maga (Samimian-Darash 2013), and Karate (Turelli, Vaz & Kirk 2023), among others. Building on this movement, Wacquant (2015) calls for more “Fighting Scholars” to take up enactive (carnal) ethnography: an immersive approach to fieldwork in which one performs the phenomenon being studied. He holds that enactive ethnography is a uniquely suited approach for allowing researchers to generate knowledge *through* and *within* MACS, while simultaneously developing a more robust and comprehensive understanding of embodied socialization practices (Wacquant 2015).

This dissertation is thus both an answer and an evaluation of this call. I carried out enactive ethnography on Brazilian Jiu Jitsu (BJJ) to refine and expand current sociological understanding of the embodied social processes through which people gain social membership and competence. BJJ is a grappling-style martial art without kicking or punching, in which practitioners use levers, torsion and pressure to dominate and submit their training partners through submission techniques like chokes or joint-locks (Gracie

mag 2007). BJJ training has evolved so that practitioners “tap out” (physically tap the mats or some part of their opponent) when they feel submission is inevitable, and then immediately reset, so that training can continue seamlessly. This allows practitioners to “roll” (spar/grapple) at high intensity for extended periods of time, navigating extreme, risky and physically intimate positions without major injury. The extreme intensity and physicality of BJJ training makes it an ideal MACS discipline for studying embodied socialization.

This project contributes to a sociology of sports (and Brazilian Jiu Jitsu in particular), while also offering a sociology *through* sports, using Brazilian Jiu Jitsu as a vehicle for understanding: 1) The micro-interactional processes through which people learn to adapt to different social norms and expectations; 2) How these processes of socialization are shaped by varying social contexts, and; 3) How people develop embodied and emotional skills to manage interactionally risky situations that call into question their social competence. In doing so, however, I also leverage a social-interactionist approach to critique and refine the explanatory power of habitus as means of understanding how Brazilian Jiu Jitsu practitioners are trained to think, believe, move, act, react and conduct themselves in specific ways as citizens in broader society (Mataruna-Dos-Santos et al. 2020).

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

As I outline in more detail below, my data speak to theoretical debates about habitus, as the socially structured development of mental and physical dispositions

(Bourdieu 1987; Wacquant 2005), as well emotional regulation, as the emotion work done to learn and conform to socially prescribed or normatively required emotions (Hochschild 1983). Not only does my research add empirical insight, further unpacking how habitus and emotional regulation are developed in a socially situated manner, I also extend existing theory by developing the concepts of “social calibration” and “emotional base work” to help us better understand these respective processes. Taking up these debates has further allowed me to address questions of identity: how people agentially negotiate their identities in relation to governing social norms and structures, how identities can be “done by” embodied emotional reactions (Katz 1999), and how embodied socialization processes in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu help practitioners develop resilient identities to better manage interactional risk and adversity inside and outside the gym.

Wanting to gain a first-hand, embodied and embedded understanding of these processes of socialization, I adapted an enactive ethnography approach and carried out two, 6-month rounds of fieldwork: round 1 in Toronto, Canada at Mixed Martial Arts Academy (MMAA), and round 2 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil at Team Gracie BJJ. I put on a gi (BJJ uniform) and trained alongside my research participants to develop knowledge not just “of the body as a sociocultural object but from the body as fount of social intelligence and sociological acumen” (Wacquant 2015: 5). I followed in the tradition of “fighting scholars” analyzing the experiences of BJJ practitioners as “social beings, plural, collectively engaged in embodied activities staged inside circles of shared commitments that make them but extreme instances of what every social agent is and does as she navigates the world” (Wacquant 2014: 17). As such, I undertook this research not just to provide insights

into the norms and practices within BJJ, but because studies of MACS offer broader lessons on how people learn social competence and gain membership in social groups (Wacquant 2014).

To complement the data I developed *intus et in cute*, through my first-hand training experience, I also conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with research participants in both Toronto (n=10) and Rio de Janeiro (n=15). While detailed overviews of my methods are included in each empirical chapter, I want to emphasize here that the combination of both interview and participant-observation data was particularly valuable for teasing out the nuanced dynamics of the interactional processes I was investigating. This approach enabled me to analyze, cross-check and deepen my analyses across multiple dimensions by bringing into conversation: 1) my real-time embodied training experiences, 2) my reflexive interpretations of my and other participants' experiences in field-notes and memos, 3) observations of my research participants' training experiences with me and other partners, 4) my research participants' reflections about these training experiences in the interviews, and 5) in-depth understanding of the broader social contexts and biographic trajectories shaping all these training experiences developed through lived experience and relationship building over the course of my fieldwork. As Jack Katz argues, when engaged in embodied interaction, we cannot maintain attention in real time to every aspect our experiences—there are necessarily some aspects of our embodied experience that remain outside our reflexive perception (Corrêa Silva, Martins & Prado 2020). Methodologically, taking this multi-dimensional approach to understanding embodied social interaction enables me not just to account for aspects of unconscious behaviour

that are visible to others (what Katz calls the “visible unconscious”)(Bidet & Mêner 2013), but also to develop a comprehensive explanatory account of how socialization occurs that simultaneously attends to the interactional, embodied and transcendent phenomena at play (Weenink et al. 2020).

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Collectively, this dissertation moves beyond current sociological work by offering new empirical and theoretical insights into the micro-interactional, embodied processes through which social actors develop the social and emotional competency needed to navigate contexts of interactional risk and adversity. The following 3 chapters are written as stand-alone empirical studies examining 3 different socialization processes that arise across different stages of BJJ practitioners’ training trajectories: how beginners learn to adapt to gym norms and expectations; how varying social contexts shape practitioners’ experience and understandings of their BJJ training and identities, and lastly; how through training practitioners learn emotional strategies that they can deploy to develop resilient identities and better cope with challenges they encounter inside and outside the gym.

In [Chapter 2](#), I examine the socialization of novices at MMAA in Toronto as they gain a new understanding of prevailing norms and expectations and start to develop a BJJ habitus. Within sociology, habitus is commonly understood an automatic process in which “society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways” over time through their involvement in a social field (Wacquant 2005: 318). MACS research tends to view this in a binary fashion, where practitioners either uniformly develop a

disciplinary habitus by function of their training, or self-select out of the sport in question (see for example Wacquant 2005 on boxing, or Spencer 2012 on MMA). This approach fails to account for variation in how social actors come to embody specific mental and physical dispositions through their training, or the role of social interaction and peer-to-peer socialization in this process. In this paper I therefore argue that rather than treating the development of habitus as automatic or unconscious, greater emphasis should be placed on social interactions elucidating the *process* through which habitus is developed.

Drawing on both fieldnote and interview data from my first round of data collection, I show how practitioners engage in a reflexive and embodied process of “social calibration” to feel out and attempt to match the socially-determined ideal level of intensity and involvement in a given interaction. My data illustrate how successful social calibration enables practitioners to maintain interactional frame so that training can flow smoothly and, in turn, practitioners can be viewed by others as good training partners. I also examine how “intensity breaches” occur when social actors fail to engage in successful social calibration and their behavior falls outside of socially acceptable intensity levels in a given field, causing the frame to be broken. My analysis of two common forms of intensity breaches: “spazzing out” (when intensity is too high) and not “being mean” enough (when intensity is too low), reveals how intensity breaches trigger reactions from more experienced practitioners aiming to restore norms at the gym in ways that either can either reinforce or transgress broader gender norms and expectations. This research offers an important extension to existing scholarship as it deepens our understanding of the embodied negotiation of social norms and elucidates a general process of “social

calibration” that practitioners engage in to feel out each other’s expectations of proper involvement and adjust levels of intensity accordingly so as to adapt to social norms across any field.

In [Chapter 3](#), I take a comparative approach, drawing on data from both my first and second rounds of data collection to unpack the relationship between social environments and structures *inside* and *outside* BJJ gyms, and the embodiment of habitus at the individual level. Despite the careful theoretical attention to habitus as multilayered, dynamic and varying across social structures and environments (Bourdieu 2017), within MACS scholarship there has been a tendency to define and focus on the influence of social structures *within* training settings (i.e. the gym, the dojo, the academy) as producing a specific habitus (Downey 2014), without engaging in deeper examination of these as situated spaces influenced by and influencing their surrounding environments (Trimbur 2011). Parallel to this, there is a growing body of research examining the impact of socio-cultural contexts on the development of MACS, and in turn the impact of contextual factors on how MACS training is structured (Channon & Jennings 2014). MACS research has thus both explored how social environments and structures *outside* of gyms shape training norms and practices, as well as how social contexts and structures *inside* of gyms shape the embodiment of habitus at the individual level. This study extends current research and develops a more comprehensive account of habitus by bringing together both these approaches and mapping out the relationships between 1) social contexts of violence outside the gym, 2) social norms and structures inside the gym and 3) how these interact to structure BJJ practitioners’ cognitive, conative, and cathectic schemata.

To achieve this, I adopt a novel multi-sited, enactive ethnography approach, drawing comparisons across data on BJJ training at MMAA, in Toronto, and Team Gracie BJJ, in Rio de Janeiro. My findings highlight that, while BJJ practitioners in Rio and Toronto drill similar techniques and develop the same types of physical abilities, how they take on and agentially engage with BJJ habitus varies based on the respective social contexts of violence and globalized forms, histories, and collective memories of BJJ within each city. Thus, in Toronto where BJJ has undergone a process of sportization and crime rates are much lower, practitioners at MMAA develop a lower embodied anticipation of violence, and as such are less likely to carry over and apply their BJJ embodied dispositions and training outside the gym. In Rio, where there's a higher risk of crime and a strong collective memory of BJJ practitioners participating in urban violence, practitioners from Team Gracie must agentially and strategically negotiate the embodiment of their habitus and identity as BJJ practitioners as potentially protective against street violence, but also potentially exposing them to risks of stereotyping and discrimination. This is especially evident in the comparison of self-defense training at each gym. While both the techniques and drills they engage in are virtually identical, the differing context of violence lead practitioners in Rio and Toronto to develop different understandings of "realness" in training. This in turn has significant implications for practitioners' willingness to engage in mixed-sex training. This study thus also adds to a growing body of literature on mixed-sex MACS as a vehicle for transforming sex/gender norms, identifying how socially constructed understandings of "realness" in training function as an important variable that can weaken or strengthen the transformative power of seemingly transgressive mixed-sex interactions.

Lastly, [Chapter 4](#) draws on data from my second round of field work to examine how through BJJ training, practitioners at Team Gracie undergo a process of embodied socialization which enables them to develop resilient identities and better cope with challenges they encounter inside and outside the gym. While quantitative research has established an association between BJJ and mental/emotional resilience (Hanley 2023, Willing et al. 2019), existing scholarship does not provide a clear account of *how* BJJ functions as an agent of psychosocial change (Blomqvist Micheklsson 2021). This challenge is made more difficult by the fact that scholars have found the concept resilience itself to be a complex and dynamic process that is difficult to account for. Research on the sociology of emotions has examined how “resilience” is increasingly being promoted as a means of creating flexible subjects capable of coping with risk and uncertainty and, has emphasized the intense emotional labour required to “become resilient” (Gill & Orgad 2018). My research illustrates how, rather than developing resiliency through the deployment of emotional elasticity (Dietz 2021) or emotional entrainment (Collins 2015) to adapt to or match the emotional dynamics in different fields, BJJ practitioners at Team Gracie develop resiliency by engaging in “emotional base work” to better control their emotions and withstand or bounce back from the pull of emotionally intense situations.

My findings highlight that having a strong emotional base is not a fixed or innate characteristic, but rather a skill that BJJ practitioners develop through embodied social interactions. Adopting a micro-interactional approach, I elucidate how emotional base is developed and maintained by: 1) creating a safe interactional space to confront and re-

signify emotional threats; 2) expanding one's sense of control through repeated exposure to positions that push one's physical and emotional limits, and; 3) peer feedback on "visible unconscious" (Bidet & Mêner 2013; Corrêa Silva, Martins & Prado 2020) embodied responses to emotionally intense training interactions. In addition to deepening sociological understanding of *how* resilience is developed, this paper also engages with Jack Katz's (1999) conceptualization of people "doing" and "being done by" emotions to extend understanding of the relationship between embodied emotion and identity. My data reveal how the interactional challenge of doing BJJ makes it nearly impossible for practitioners to engage in the front stage emotion work needed to maintain the identity they seek to present of themselves. I identify how this presents a unique interactional opportunity for socialization as training partners act as a moral community, coaching each other to recognize and control the deep, hidden instincts that are revealed when their social masks drop. This paper thus emphasizes the importance of considering the embodied socialization of resilience as a fundamentally social and interactive process, that enables practitioners to embody cultural ideals of a "good" BJJ practitioner.

Taken together, these studies raise new empirical and theoretical insights into the micro-interactional, embodied and emotional processes of socialization. While these insights emerge from the study of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, the theoretical concepts developed in this dissertation are transferable and can be applied to make sense of interactional processes of socialization across other social settings. Methodologically, this dissertation demonstrates the strength of enactive ethnography in generating data attentive to the multi-dimensional nature of social interaction and, offers an example of how this approach

can be extended through a multi-sited comparative approach. Findings from this research also offer more applied sociological benefits, contributing to emerging research on Brazilian Jiu Jitsu as a social intervention to transform gender norms, control violence, and help improve mental health and resilience.

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Chapter 2

“Being Mean” and “Spazzing Out”:

Social Calibration and Gender in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu Training

INTRODUCTION

In any interaction, there is a socially determined ideal level of intensity. The lonely person coming on too strong on a first date, job candidates lacking passion, schmoozers trying too hard to impress—all enter social interactions with too much or too little intensity, often inciting a negative or corrective response. People unable to read social norms and cues, or regulate their emotions and behaviors in a socially acceptable manner, are often understood as deviant (Becker 1966; Goffman 1963). How do those who misstep in adapting to social norms in a new context discover the right level of intensity or involvement, and how do they calibrate their behavior accordingly? How do established members of a group make sense of and manage behaviors that fall outside socially acceptable levels of intensity? What practices do they employ to enforce established social norms?

In this paper, I address these questions using data from an ethnographic study of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu (BJJ) practitioners at a Toronto-area gym. BJJ is a martial art without striking, in which practitioners use “levers, torsions and pressure in order to take one’s opponent to the ground and dominate them” to the point of submission or neutralization (e.g., via joint-locks or chokes) (Gracie Mag 2007). While there are throws, stand-up grappling and take-downs involved in taking a match to the ground, much of BJJ practice

takes place as practitioners “roll” on the ground with their partners vying to first gain a dominant position and then a submission. BJJ techniques emphasize leverage, torsion, and pressure to manipulate an opponent’s resisting body into a vulnerable position even when at a size or strength disadvantage. Within BJJ, relying on explosive force or muscle strength rather than technique to gain a dominant position or escape from a vulnerable one is generally frowned upon, as practitioners are taught (or learn through practice) that more experienced practitioners will frequently use their superior technique to neutralize such efforts. There is also a significant mental aspect involved in working to carry out an embodied technical game plan to overcome an opponent’s defenses, while anticipating and adjusting to outmaneuver their actual and possible responses and advances. Because of this, BJJ is frequently referred to as “the game of human chess” (Fischer 2018).

My research thus explores the processes BJJ practitioners use to calibrate their behaviors within “rolling” (sparring) sessions, to maintain socially acceptable levels of training intensity. Drawing on fieldnotes and interview data, I examine two behaviors: first, when fighters “spaz” (i.e., act too aggressively/do not maintain enough control) and second, when fighters are not “being mean” enough (i.e., are too docile/do not apply enough pressure)¹. I analyze the BJJ practitioners’ understandings of and reactions to these

¹ The terms “spaz” and “spazzing” have problematic roots as derogatory, ableist forms of describing people with disabilities. As Burch (2018) notes, such language has become normalized in everyday parlance to the point that their harms are not recognized. Within the Canadian cultural context of the gym, these terms have evolved and been normalized to the point that practitioners appeared thoroughly unaware of this connotation or association. Indeed, many gym-goers were staunch in their use of, and advocacy for politically correct terminology and pronouns, and yet did not seem attuned to the ableist resonance of these terms. Nonetheless, this does not take away from their harm in reproducing and normalizing ableist ideas and sentiments. Thus, while the terms are used in the article to represent the parlance and culture at the field

behaviors, paying attention to their management through physical or vocal socialization techniques. This case study provides insight into micro-interactional processes practitioners employ as they engage in interstitial work, calibrating levels of intensity with training partners, and adapting to or enforcing the broader, tacit social norms governing the field. I explore how this socialization challenges practitioners to transgress or enact gender roles.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Interaction, Intensity Breaches, and Social Calibration

Microsociologists assert social interaction and meaning-making are ongoing accomplishments that require cooperation and negotiation *in situ*. Garfinkel (1967:30) demonstrates how social interaction requires individuals to reach a shared agreement of a situation, making out the meaning of what is said, rather than accepting and responding to what is literally communicated. This requires inner interpretive work based on an understanding of society and social structures. When societal norms are not shared or attended to, a breach occurs. Garkinkel thus devised “breaching experiments” to make interpretation of everyday situations difficult and to force reconstructions of the taken-for-granted “natural facts.” This process exposed governing social expectancies and

site, they are used in quotations throughout to emphasize that they are applied within this limited capacity, referring specifically to BJJ behaviors and social roles.

structures that otherwise would remain invisible and analyzed how actors could attempt “reparations” (Garfinkel 1967:27, 29, 54).

Similarly, Erving Goffman (1959:22) analyses events occurring in social interactions that “contradict, discredit or otherwise throw doubt” on a social actor’s projected definition of a situation. He identifies two such relevant possibilities: (1) when a social actor “loses face” within an interaction and is unable to maintain the positive social value they want to claim and (2) when actors fail to maintain a cohesive definition of a frame, that is, the “definition of a situation built up in accordance with the principles of organization which govern events—at least social ones—and their subjective involvement in them” (Goffman 1967:9, 1974:10). Framing, Goffman (1974:343) emphasizes, can lead to ambiguity, error, and frame disputes. When actors either (1) fail to maintain face or (2) break a frame, they find themselves in what Goffman calls a state of “ritual disequilibrium” and must attempt reparation.

Goffman argues that a common impetus for improper behavior leading to either frame-breaking or face-losing is improper involvement. He asserts that frames involve normative expectations of how deeply and fully an individual should engage in activity organized in a given frame (Goffman 1974: 345). Involvement thus implies an interlocking obligation: “Should one participant fail to maintain prescribed attention, other participants are likely to become alive to this fact and perforce involved in considering what the delict means and what should be done about it” (Goffman 1974:346).

Interactions flow well when participants reach shared understandings of expectations based on governing social norms and structures (Garfinkel 1967) and maintain face and frame by enacting proper levels of involvement (Goffman 1974). Conversely, they break down when one or both elements are lacking. This study seeks to unpack the middle ground: the process whereby in a new interaction individuals must conduct interstitial work on a micro-level to explore the situation and ascertain the expectations of those with whom they are interacting. I aim to elucidate the process of *social calibration*, in which actors attune their intensity levels and demonstrate proper levels of involvement to maintain the frame, and in turn a positive interaction. While social calibration of intensity is implied or alluded to within each of the theories above, it has not been sufficiently theorized.

This paper examines the training interactions of BJJ practitioners, analyzing the micro-interactional processes of social calibration through which individuals balance their intensity levels with those of their partners to achieve successful training/rolling sessions. These are analytically important as they bring to the fore the cooperation needed for successful social interactions. They highlight how groups socialize new members into shared expectations around intensity. Breaches occur when behaviors fall outside acceptable levels of intensity. Experienced BJJ practitioners seek to restore balance in accordance with tacit social norms and expectations by teaching less experienced practitioners to do things in a technical way, helping them learn a new way to be in the world. As my data show, this sometimes involves teaching people to subvert or suspend gendered roles for men and women to better take on the role of a BJJ practitioner.

Gendered Interactions and Intensity

West and Zimmerman (1987) argue we cannot segregate gender from the serious business of social interaction. Building on earlier analyses of gender as an accomplishment (Kessler and McKenna 1978) that structures social interactions and is embodied and read through social cues (Garfinkel 1967), they argue that people “do gender” in their everyday interactions so that, no matter what they do, the outcome is always seen and interpreted as gender-appropriate (West and Zimmerman 1987:135). As a person is “doing gender,” others are taking descriptive accounts of their behaviors. Thus, societal members orient themselves and design their actions based on how these might come across to others in a given circumstance (West and Zimmerman 1987:136). Indeed, one is held accountable to their gender in virtually any context.

Experiences and understandings of gender are shaped by intersecting statuses and contested modalities of masculinities and femininities (McGuffey and Rich 1999). Gender is enacted through interactions within “specific historical, social and political configurations” (Walters 1999), constraining and enabling specific gendered identities and interactions (Messner 2000). Connell’s (1987) concept of hegemonic masculinity implies an idealized way of doing gender, enforcing the normative gender order, and privileging some more traditionally valued masculine qualities over feminine and other masculine qualities. The “doing” of gender as either appropriate femininity or masculinity thus upholds and reproduces a binary of two and only two genders that are not only different, but specifically unequal.

Traits of acceptable masculinity in North America include “status-seeking, achievement and success in work and sports, independence, confidence, competitiveness, risk-taking, aggression, and the eschewal of femininity in behavior, speech, and emotion” (DiMuccio and Knowles 2020:25). Connell (1987) emphasizes that men’s domination of women is a defining feature of hegemonic masculinity. To “do” masculinity is thus to assert such dominance (West and Zimmerman 1987). Traditionally feminine traits, in turn, include nurturing, caring, passivity, and subordination (Thompson et al. 2011). According to Bourdieu ([1998] 2001:63), the female experience is characterized by “the universal experience of the body-for-others, constantly exposed to the objectification performed by the gaze and discourse of others.” Young (1980:146) further specifies that the feminine body is typically underestimated in terms of its real capacity based on size, strength, skill, and coordination: “Feminine bodily existence is an inhibited intentionality, which simultaneously reaches toward a projected end with an ‘I can’ and withholds its full bodily commitment to that end in a self-imposed ‘I cannot.’” The weakness and submission essentialized as part of “doing” femininity, can thus limit women’s embodied experience of their own physical strength and capacities.

Individuals experience “role conflict” when expectations to conform with gendered roles conflict with the behaviors and actions expected or desired in a given context (West and Zimmerman 1987:140). For example, Channon and Jennings (2013) find that some female martial artists experience a double bind wherein they are not treated on equal grounds with men in their gyms if they make themselves sexually available to or have relationships with male training partners. Davies and Deckert (2019) similarly outline how

some female Muay Thai fighters find they are not taken seriously as fighters if they look or act too sexy or feminine. In both cases, to protect their fighter/martial artist status women may self-impose limits on romance/sexuality within the gym, downplay their femininity, or avoid doing anything sexy or quintessentially feminine. At the interactional level, living up to the role-specific expectations of a “good” or “serious” martial artist or fighter may thus put at risk the management of their “essential” nature as a “good, heterosexual woman” and, in turn the successful accomplishment of their gender.

The precarity inherent to the accomplishment of gender can be a significant cause of distress. The fragility of masculinity often is experienced as particularly threatening because it not only involves risk of punishment for transgressing gender norms, but also the loss of membership in the high-status “man” category, and the corresponding privilege this membership accords (DiMuccio and Knowles 2020). Research suggests that “men’s, but not women’s, cultural scripts for establishing or restoring precarious gender status includes physical aggression” (Weaver et al. 2010). Men who experience masculinity threats or feel anxious about living up to masculine norms may exhibit (among other things) anger; aggressive ideation, beliefs, and behavior; and risk taking (DiMuccio and Knowles 2020).

Martial Arts and Social Calibration of Intensity

According to Wacquant (2014:17), people engaging in martial and combat arts are fundamentally “social beings, plural, collectively engaged in embodied activities staged inside circles of shared commitments that make them but extreme instances of what every

social agent is and does as she navigates the world.” The research and teachings of “fighting scholars” extend beyond insights into combat sports’ practices and norms, providing lessons on how people learn social competence and gain membership in social groups (Wacquant 2014). The embodied nature of this learning and the extreme physical behaviors that fighters negotiate make more visible the socialization processes actors engage in across other social fields.

Within sociology, scholars practice martial arts and combat sports to gain first-hand knowledge of the embodied processes through which habitus develops. Habitus, defined by Wacquant (2005: 318) refers to how “society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways.” While Wacquant (2004) examines the pugilistic habitus that defines a boxer, others have taken up the method of enactive ethnography in martial arts to examine the processes by which body and mind come together within the training contexts of Tae kwon do (Graham 2013), Mixed Martial Arts (Spencer 2012), and Aikido (Sanchez Garcia 2014). Few explore what happens when participants fail to acquire or follow socially accepted and desirable physical and mental dispositions. Wacquant (2004) asserts that youth from the most disadvantaged families often are pushed out of boxing because they lack the expected habits and inclinations. Similarly, in Spencer’s (2012) research, an MMA practitioner explains how gym members exhibiting unwanted attitudes are seen as problematic and taking up too much space. In these cases, members are assumed to self-select out over time, or uniformly adopt accepted dispositions by function of training at the gym.

In my fieldnotes and interviews, I found that practitioners' motivations for starting training were quite heterogeneous: some joined to lose weight or find a sense of community; others joined already having knowledge about and appreciation for BJJ or with very little familiarity, not knowing what to expect. This resulted in members adapting to norms governing BJJ training in different ways and at different speeds, and many expressed conscious awareness of their progress (or lack thereof) in adapting to the field. While recognizing coaches' interventions as playing a role in the socialization process, BJJ practitioners also emphasized the importance of social calibration occurring at the micro-level through conscious peer-to-peer socialization. This suggests that greater emphasis should be placed on the social interactions elucidating the *process* through which practitioners come to adopt the normative mental and physical dispositions at the gym, rather than treating the development of habitus as automatic or unconscious. In this paper I therefore focus on micro-interactions, the most basic acting unit of social analysis (Blumer 1962:186–187), to elucidate the embodied negotiation of social norms.

In his ethnographic study of professional wrestling, Tyson R. Smith (2014:73) found that to put on a successful performance, wrestlers use “light touches” or “soft grasps” to lead or manipulate their opponents. This loose physical contact enables opponents to ascertain their partner's expectations and move their bodies in the necessary way. Goals in BJJ and professional wrestling are different; but, to achieve successful interactions (based on the definition in each type of encounter) actors, across both situations, must engage in the same embodied process of *social calibration*: the ongoing interstitial work by

which actors assess each other's expectations of proper involvement (focus, intention, pace, and force), and adjust levels of intensity accordingly.

Mixed-Sex Training Interactions in Martial Arts

The male-centered context of organized sports, according to Messner (1988), has historically served as a sphere for men to separate themselves from femininity and prove their “natural superiority” over women. In the contexts of crises of masculinity and increasing numbers of women taking up and excelling in sports, Messner argues that organized sport has become an important site for practically and ideologically contesting concepts of masculinity and femininity, and in turn power relations between men and women. Earlier waves of studies on gender and martial arts tended to focus on single-sex training encounters as sites for challenging gender norms and hierarchies—for example, exploring the transformations of some female martial artists who “un-learned” aspects of their embodied socialization as women to succeed as martial artists or fighters (Channon and Jennings 2013). More recent work has looked at mixed-sex training interactions, particularly in martial arts and combat sports, as having the potential to “undo” gender (Deutsch 2007).

Mixed-sex martial arts and combat sports training in particular has the potential to challenge the primacy and naturalness of sexist, binary concepts of biological sex difference and (hetero)sexist conceptions of sexual relations and gendered social hierarchies (Channon and Jennings 2013). For example, in mixed-sex training contexts women go through the transformative process of re-discovering their own embodied

capabilities and limits (Channon and Jennings 2013; Maor 2019) and learn to take up space and be loud (Maclean 2019). Male practitioners also learn first-hand that women are tough, able training partners who may physically dominate a male partner if men hold back out of chivalry or fear of injuring women (Channon 2014; Channon and Jennings 2013; Guérandel and Mennesson 2007; Maclean 2016). Mixed-sex training thus effectively undermines the assumption that all men are sufficiently different in ability from all women to warrant separate training. Instead, it assumes a broad overlap between individual men and women who can train with and compete against each other on equal terms (Channon et al. 2016).

Mixed-sex encounters can challenge (hetero)sexist conceptions of sexuality and gender hierarches through the normalization of non-sexual physical contact and relationships between male and female training partners. Channon and Jennings (2013) found, for example, that some martial artists reported repeated exposure to non-sexual touch helped decrease the sexual implications of male-female physical contact and facilitated getting over associated feelings or weirdness/sensitivity. Maclean (2016) shows how the ongoing closeness of training interactions in martial arts settings enable men and women to develop emotionally intimate and respectful friendships in ways that they did not find possible outside of the gym. Maor (2019) argues that experienced male practitioners and coaches also learn to develop more nurturing, caring, and giving relations with (less experienced) female practitioners. In each of these examples, the interactions work to circumvent traditional hierarchal gender relations wherein women are understood to be objects for men's pleasure and become seen as agentic subjects also worthy of (non-protectionist) care and nurturing.

As noted by Channon et al. (2016), not all forms of sex integration in sport are equally positioned to challenge traditional sex/gender hierarchies. Indeed, Maclean (2019) contends that in some mixed-sex sports environments men may spatially and socially dominate women. Women in mixed training environments might also place themselves with lower-skilled/ranked male practitioners, instituting a de-facto gender hierarchy (Guérandel and Mennesson 2007; Maclean 2019). Gendered scripts might take precedence over those of the sport, shaping the form and intensity with which men and women carry out techniques (Maclean 2019). Further, gender transformation within these spaces does not automatically lead to the adoption of transgressive or gender-queer identities outside of these spaces (Maor 2019). Indeed, as Guérandel and Mennesson (2007) and Hamilton (2020) find, outside of training male and female practitioners may adopt behaviors and displays that reinforce traditional gender roles and perhaps compensate for transgressive practices inside the gym. Thus, to develop training environments that foster the “undoing” of gender, Channon (2014) recommends: highlighting the abilities of “senior” female practitioners and making them visible especially to younger members, encouraging integration in training as much as possible (including in physically intense activities), but doing so on a case-by-case basis, being sensitive to those who might not feel comfortable and need easing into such interactions over time.

BJJ gyms are thus compelling sites for observing how people calibrate levels of intensity through interaction because (1) they bring individuals of different socio-demographic backgrounds, who otherwise might never engage in sustained interactions,

into extremely intimate physical contact; (2) the intimacy of BJJ rolling (in terms of its proximity, speed, physicality, and emotional dimensions) amplifies and brings to the fore processes of interaction that might otherwise be overlooked; and (3) the mixed-sex nature of training and the emphasis on technique over size/strength allows us to explore how the process of social calibration within the gym is both shaped by, and shapes, gendered norms and hierarchies.

FIELD SITE AND METHODS

Frustrated by repeatedly encountering scornful judgment at my enjoyment of watching “savage,” “violent,” and “barbaric” mixed martial arts (MMA) fights, in winter 2014 I decided to make the leap from spectator to practitioner. After obtaining approval for the project from the University of Toronto research ethics board, I joined a local gym, Mixed Martial Arts Academy (MMAA), keen to explore how social norms around physical force and intensity in interaction are learned and negotiated. This gym was selected as it was centrally located and had a strong reputation among the local MMA community. I also had two contacts in my personal and professional networks who had been members of the gym. These contacts facilitated my entry into the field by helping me make connections to the owner, the gym manager, and several coaches, which in turn helped me gain institutional consent for my research and socially integrate into the gym.

Before joining, I never had trained MMA or its constituent disciplines with any regularity. I entered the field as a newcomer, prepared to experience first-hand how new gym members learn and engage with gym norms. I did however have an athletic baseline,

as I was competing on the varsity rowing team at the time of this research. This seemed to help me, and fellow white-belts with other sports or martial arts backgrounds, pick up technique quickly. It also may have given us more embodied spatial awareness and strength/stamina compared to white-belts without a sports background. As a result, within 2 months of training I was invited to attend the all-level BJJ classes and roll with more advanced gym members, in addition to the gym's white-belt only introductory BJJ classes. On a typical weekday, I would do on-the-water training with the rowing team for 2 hours in the mornings, go to campus and work throughout the day, and then skip the team afternoon strength and conditioning sessions, instead heading over to MMAA for their evening classes. I also attended Saturday morning classes when I wasn't out of town for regattas. While I participated in several different martial arts classes while training at MMAA, the data in this paper are based on fieldwork conducted over my first 6 months training BJJ.

Putting on a BJJ gi (kimono) and training side by side with gym members for 2 to 3 hours, 4 to 6 times a week over those 6 months, gave me a first-hand embodied perspective of how practitioners learn to practice and control intensity within BJJ training. It also helped me gain the trust of practitioners. Before training, there was often a period of waiting on the mats for the prior class to end. This was a time when people stretched, chatted, and introduced themselves to unfamiliar faces. I took advantage of such informal social moments before/after classes to tell others about my research and obtain verbal informed consent to write about my training interactions with them. After training with me and learning about my research, often gym members would eagerly volunteer to share

their BJJ training journeys, recommend books, or angles of inquiry. They also typically would introduce me to others at the gym by explaining that I was doing research there on training BJJ. In addition to joining and observing BJJ classes, I participated in community events organized by the gym, including movie nights, fight nights, beach days, and networking socials. Because many gym members lived, worked, or studied within close proximity, there was a strong sense of community and I frequently had spontaneous social interactions with gym members I'd bump into in the street, on campus, and in local businesses. Thus, while I define my ethnographic field site as MMAA, I extend this beyond the physical boundaries of the gym to include MMAA events and interactions off-site.

Throughout my fieldwork, I worked iteratively among data collection, coding, and analysis to develop and refine theories regarding how gym members manage intensity during rolling sessions and use different approaches to deal with partners failing to embody appropriate physical and mental dispositions. Data collection followed the guidelines in Emerson et al.'s (1995) *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Fieldnotes were written within a 12-hour period of field visits. I also obtained written informed consent from and conducted semi-structured interviews with eight key informants at the gym. These consisted of training partners and coaches selected to cover different training and coaching perspectives (male/female, beginner/mid-level/advanced, kids/white belt/all level coaches, competitive/recreational). These were conducted at the interviewees' choice of local coffee shop within walking distance from the gym. Pseudonyms were used in all research materials to maintain the confidentiality of participants. The familiarity I developed with participants and BJJ life through training and immersion in the social life of

the gym, helped inform my interviews and enabled me to collect vignettes of BJJ training, detailed biographical information about practitioners, and rich accounts of how they perceive BJJ training as influencing their lives beyond the gym.

This enactive ethnographic approach (Wacquant 2015) was selected as most effective in capturing the nuanced, embodied processes through which gym members work to maintain frames and sustain positive interactions. Immersing myself in the field, and training BJJ, gave me a first person experience, *intus et in cute*, of the process of social calibration within the gym. In turn, the approach mandated that I bring “bodies-in-interaction into the center of [my] theorizing” (Collins 2015:13). MMAA is one of several mixed martial arts gyms in downtown Toronto. It runs classes for all ages, offering members a welcoming environment and positive vibe. Classes are well-attended and crowded, especially in the evening when multiple sessions happen simultaneously. Adult members include a diverse multicultural and multilingual (White, East-Asian, Black, Latinx, Arab, South Asian) assortment of undergraduate and graduate students (~18 to 28 years old) and working professionals (~25 to 60 years old) with a more recreational approach, alongside more advanced members (~20 to 30years old) who trained more seriously and competed in BJJ. As a white, female graduate student in my mid-twenties I felt very at home training and bantering with other gym members. Typically, mixed-sex classes were made up of anywhere from 60 to 85% male practitioners depending on the day and timeslot (though Muay Thai classes at the gym tended to have higher female participation). Two of the gym’s seven BJJ coaches were women. In addition to mixed classes, the female coaches led popular women’s-only classes once a week. The mixed-sex classes

immediately before/after these also tended to have higher rates of female participation.

On rare occasions I ended up being the only woman in a class, but even in these instances being known as a strong athlete and “BJJ researcher” tended to grant me acceptance and legitimacy among male peers.

The gym offers classes, unstructured “open mat” time, and a variety of recreational and networking events for members, including free monthly women’s self-defense seminars. It also runs off-site BJJ training workshops infused with anti-violence messages, encouraging participants to problematize links between violence and masculinity. Professor Jonah, the founder of MMAA, previously owned a women-only gym dedicated to self-defense and empowerment. His personal philosophy of compassion, unity, and positivity is reflected in the gym’s atmosphere. Martial arts are understood both as sport and a form of healing.

While MMAA shares many features with other gyms, its members cite its distinct atmosphere, emphasizing the lack of “tough guys” or “douches” vying for status and making others at the gym (especially women) uncomfortable. Several regulars I chatted with attributed the absence of “tough guys” to MMAA’s higher membership fees compared to other gyms. They seemed to understand the presence of such “meatheads” as fundamentally an issue of social class. That said, some of the most well-liked and respected gym members were from working-class backgrounds and managed reception, cleaned, and/or taught classes as sweat equity to cover their training fees. While not inextricable from class, I would argue attitudes toward gender were salient here. Indeed,

MMAA's origins as a women-only gym and its progressive tacit norms around gender relations, likely are significant in the absence of "tough guy" attitudes. Within this context "tough guys" might encounter social sanctions and be coached to modify their behavior and attitudes to conform with gym norms. Those projecting such attitudes may also be, or feel, pushed out of the gym. They may be screened out during the registration process, or in the initial stages of training. When interviewed by local media, Professor Jonah emphasized that he will not teach bullies. While during my fieldwork one individual told me he was asked to leave another gym, I did not hear of anyone being asked to leave MMAA. It is likely that people unable or unwilling to take cues and adapt to the gym's norms leave on their own accord.

MMAA gym members take a different approach to martial arts than that of the violent warrior culture promoted in street fighting and some commercial MMA cultures. A strong anti-violence sentiment is promoted through formal anti-violence workshops, and informally through coaches' instructions, announcements, and ways of teaching and framing techniques. Instructors make clear differentiations between techniques for training and for fighting. While MMAA is a mixed martial arts gym, not everyone attends official MMA classes. There is an understanding that one can become a mixed martial artist by learning, practicing, and mastering various forms of martial arts. Some train exclusively Muay Thai, wrestling, or any combination of the various disciplines offered by the gym. This was reflected in how MMAA members speak about MMA, referring to people training as "players," "artists," or "practitioners" rather than "fighters," and about

developing their “game” or “style of play.” This sentiment was especially strong among those focused on BJJ.

DATA & ANALYSIS

Social Calibration

The set-up of BJJ rolling sessions at MMAA is quite ritualized and predictable: coaches start off by giving instructions, practitioners find or are matched with a partner, the pair determines and gets into starting positions to wait for the starting timer before bumping fists to signal their readiness to begin. After this, the interactions become unpredictable and ambiguous. You never know what you’ll get from a partner, especially if they are inexperienced or you have never trained with them. The same partner might approach rolling with vastly different intentions depending on factors such as energy level, mood, or goal for the day. While training partners might agree on a certain type of rolling before they begin (e.g., “flow rolling” that is more relaxed, playful, and has more give-and-take, or “hard rolling” involving more pressure, intensity, and active hunting for submissions), there’s an inherent instability as the meaning and intensity of a roll can evolve quickly as partners react to one another.

I observed and experienced a process of “feeling out” that occurred in training whereby BJJ practitioners “read” and attempted to “match” their partner’s intensity levels. This involved a complex reading of and reaction to their partner’s focus (their energy, involvement, or concentration), intention (their goal, emotion, or purpose), pace (their

speed, rhythm, or endurance) and application of force (how light and loose, or resistant and heavy they are). While two people may apply the same technique in a training context, each of these factors will determine how the very same technique is read and reacted to. Cole, for example, explains that when rolling with a partner he will “feed off their energy”: “Sometimes you get a guy who’s really trying to take your head off. And then you start to try to take his head off too [...]. But if they’re going super relaxed then I’ll definitely relax as well.” Similarly, Phil asserts: “In the moment though it really is all about how somebody is reacting to you ... a lot of how I roll is about how you are reacting to me.” Thus, while outside of a martial arts/combat sports context choking or pinning-down a person may be considered inherently violent acts, within BJJ the intensity with which they are committed determines how a person will interpret and react to them.

At MMAA, newer members learn to negotiate boundaries between acceptable and non-acceptable levels of aggression and intensity through a reflexive feeling-out process as they practice with other members. This process is reflected in my field note entry:

Jen begins to bring up the pressure to a higher level. I get annoyed and respond trying to rev up and match her intensity. However, when I grab her arm, she winces. Jen continues the round, but her reactions seem annoyed, and I physically tensed. “All good?” I ask. She replies “Yeah, fine” and continues rolling. Despite her assurances, I wind down my energy level, self-conscious about being seen as reckless. I worry that not moderating intensity appropriately may not just be an indicator of inexperience but may also lead to being seen as a “bad partner.”

This reflection presents a common pattern of escalation whereby I felt my partner increasing pressure and amped-up my own level of resistance to match hers. I had never been explicitly told what being a responsible partner meant, and yet, I developed an awareness of what was frowned upon and a desire to self-regulate my behavior to not be seen as careless and likely to injure someone. Though Jen verbally assured me she was ok, when I felt her tense, I engaged in a reflexive process of trying to understand her response, attentively unpacking her embodied feedback, and adjusting my behavior based on our interaction. This moment of embodied feeling out, ingrained in me that responsible behavior requires not just appropriate use of technique and intensity, but also careful calibration so that one can apply their weight and force to roll with a smaller partner without injuring them. Engaging in this process of calibration, enabled me to continue training with Jen without stopping or changing the meaning of the rolling session.

In this sense, there is no one acceptable level of training intensity in BJJ. Rather, maintaining a BJJ training frame requires partners to feel out and stay in tune with each other to collaboratively identify, establish, and maintain an intensity level with which they are most comfortable through embodied social calibration and an emphasis on technique over explosive power. As long as partners maintain the BJJ training frame they can continue training through the round, without being taken out of the moment. Even if one partner submits the other, they seamlessly transition to a starting position, bump fists, and continue rolling for the remaining time on the clock. On the other hand, when there's no established shared comfort point and participants are taken out of the moment, the training frame is broken, and the interaction stops or must be reset. There are many

reasons the BJJ training frame can be broken. For example, a partner with a stinky uniform can distract and prevent a smooth feeling out process. Someone who did not trim their nails ahead of time can scratch and injure another. Two pairs might be rolling into each other's paths and a coach might ask them to restart further away from each other to avoid a crash. Throughout my fieldwork, one of the most common causes for BJJ training frames being broken I observed were what I call "intensity breaches."

Intensity Breaches

I classify "intensity breaches" as occurring when social actors fail to engage in successful social calibration of intensity levels: their behavior falls outside socially acceptable intensity levels in a given field, causing the frame to be broken. During training sessions at MMAA, I observed two common forms of intensity breaches: "spazzing out" and not "being mean" enough. I consider these behaviors as breaches because, in the instances I observed, they resulted in failure to maintain normative levels of intensity. This in turn broke the frame, triggering a reaction aimed at restoring normative levels of intensity. In this section, I describe each form of breaching in more detail.

Spazzing-out

The most common intensity breach I encountered was called "spazzing" or "spazzing-out" by more experienced gym members. Talk of "spazzing-out" often came in response to questions about how to manage a training partner exceeding desirable intensity levels. Examples of "spazzing" are categorized into two situations: first when an

inexperienced person does not know appropriate techniques for dealing with a certain position and uses their strength to muscle their way out aggressively. Cole describes this form of “spazzing”:

I used to spaz out all the time. [...] When people would have me in mount, I’d feel really claustrophobic, and I wouldn’t know what to do and I would feel like I was losing. And my coach was like: “Dude, you gotta relax. I see you’re really composed in all the other positions but as soon as someone mounts you, you freak out and you stop thinking about your technique, you’re putting yourself in vulnerable positions and making mistakes, and also potentially injuring your partner.”

The second type of “spazzing” happens when someone is too focused on trying to dominate their partner to prove themselves, loses control of their movements, and relies on power rather than technique. This aggressive “spazzing” was framed in terms of someone’s pride and unwillingness to let themselves be dominated, not their experience level. Members described this as “ego” getting in the way of appropriate restraint or control. Cole explains: “It’s kind of understandable why people freak out. They don’t wanna, well the ego doesn’t want to get hit ... So it’s kind of a natural reaction.” Gym members explained that learning not to “spaz” was as much about learning to apply techniques as it was about learning to humble oneself.

Conceptual distinctions between these types of “spazzing” may be difficult to identify in practice and entail a certain level of interpretive guesswork. For example, after several months, I was paired up for BJJ sparring with a new partner:

My partner is about my height but stockier in frame, probably weighing twenty pounds more. He's wearing a worn-out white gi that's slightly too small for him—the BJJ uniform the gym lends out for beginners exploring the sport. When the coach announced the start of a new round, I stepped forward. Despite having just sparred intensely with another man, my new partner becomes hesitant as he approaches me. He seems to adopt a “gentlemanly” approach, awkwardly letting me decide whether I want to start from the top or bottom position. As he's less experienced, I decide to give him the more advantageous starting position and lie on my back. He sits on my stomach straddling me with his legs. We bump fists to signal the start of the round. Once we start rolling, I notice that he's not properly applying the technique we learnt that class, and I'm able to capitalize on his mistakes to advance into a dominant position. He responds by attempting to use strength to force me down. His movements become wild. Despite the size difference, I manage to use his uncontrolled force and momentum to topple him over and secure top position. As I work to isolate one of his arms for a submission, I can feel the tension and frustration build up in his body. It's clear he's not playing human chess, as the sport of Jiu Jitsu is often described, but rather fighting to win.

I set out to impose my will, working step-by-step to neutralize his strength, my mind forced into competitive mode. Anticipating the danger of my impending *americana*, (a bent arm joint submission pressuring the elbow and shoulder), he desperately tries to escape, yanking his arm back and forth. Amid this struggle, he breaks my grip. The force behind his movement throws his arm forward, his elbow catching the

corner of my eye, hard. Stunned, I snap out of the moment. My body softens, and I sit back away from my partner, now staring at me with an expression of shock and horror on his face. My eye starts tearing up and I can feel a heavy throbbing building behind my brow. Within seconds, a purple line forms from the corner of my eye, like winged eyeliner.

We start the round off well, awkwardly negotiating who begins in a dominant position, feeling out each other's strength and skill, and physically reacting to each move to match levels of intensity. However, when we reach a point where I'm able to use my technique to put him in a vulnerable position, he "spazzes-out" and increases his intensity level to muscle his way out of the position forcefully, breaching BJJ norms that emphasize reliance on technique rather than force. When he elbows me in the eye, the interactional frame is broken. I automatically sit back, tension leaving my body.

Without opportunity for discussion with my partner, I could not definitively categorize his behavior as one form of "spazzing" or the other. His reaction could have been because he was new to the sport, did not know the technique to escape my control, and simply entered panic mode. However, he also may have reacted out of frustration, feeling threatened by a physically weaker, female partner dominating him. Guérandel and Mennesson (2007) characterize this form of "remedial interchange" as men attempting to re-establish the hierarchy between the sexes. During my field work I heard only of men "spazzing-out" or being labeled as "spazzes." BJJ coach, Gina, noted: "women in general

don't tend to spaz as much as men." Jake expands on the ties between status, gender and "spazzing," explaining:

[Losing in BJJ is] especially hard for people who are accomplished in something else in their life. I see it in some of the businessmen who come into the gym who already have a chip on their shoulder because maybe in their own world they're recognized for what they do. I think the problem with guys in Jiu Jitsu or MMA is that every guy, like from an evolutionary standpoint, wants to feel like they can handle their own. But fighting is a science like anything else. I'm not in banking so I'm not going to pretend that I know about that, but every guy likes to pretend they know how to fight. And I think that's the thing that impedes their success in the sport. So, if they can't put that aside and realize that it's just a science—like anything else you just gotta put in the time and you'll be taught the right way to do it, then umm, if you can't do that it's going to be difficult to get too far.

[Do you think it's different for women in the sport?]

I think women tend to be way better students of Jiu Jitsu. I don't mind pairing up with women because sometimes they stick to their drill and are more focused than a lot of the guys. Like, they give you the right reactions that you need. Guys are often more caught up in being hard, you know? Looking good, who's looking, that kind of thing.

Men may be more prone to “spazzing” because (1) concern for conforming to hegemonic masculinity (i.e., status, aggression, dominance) conflicts with the expectation that beginner jiu-jitsu practitioners react using technique not aggression, accept low status, demonstrate humility in training, and learn from and submit to more skilled practitioners), and (2) men’s cultural scripts for restoring precarious gender status includes physical aggression. Because hegemonic masculinity is constructed in opposition to femininity, aggressive responses may be more heightened when threats to a male practitioner’s status/dominance come from a woman.

The conceptual difference between inexperience- and ego-based “spazzing” is made relevant by how others interpret and react to the behavior. Inexperienced members “spazzing-out” often have their behaviors countered to check their intensity, but the emphasis is usually on their behavior, not their person. In cases of ego-based “spazzing,” more experienced fighters often are met with significant negative social judgment of both their practice and character. Regardless of the motivation, those known for freaking out and relying on muscle rather than technique or for reacting to being dominated by rolling at inappropriately high intensity levels, were often labeled by others as “a spaz.”

Men who “spaz-out” to avoid being seen as weak for submitting to women, are likely to experience stronger negative judgment than others who “spaz” due to inexperience. This is because: (1) “spazzing” in general is problematized and countered in BJJ training because it can lead to serious injuries (JJF 2012). (2) Males who “spaz-out” and injure women are breaching taboos against men physically hurting women. These taboos are

based on perceptions of women as weak, disadvantaged, and vulnerable and men as physically strong and powerful. Spazzing-related injuries among men are seen as training “accidents” and “occupational hazards,” while injuring a woman has an unspoken tinge of judgment associated with gender-violence. (3) This form of “spazzing-out” tilts the interactional definition of the encounter from “rolling” into “fighting,” causing a break in the frame. When a male “spazzes-out” on a female practitioner, there is an added layer of breach as, unlike *training*, *BJJ fights* traditionally do not cross gender boundaries. (4) There’s a mismatch with MMAA’s history as a women-only gym and the generally negative stance toward men with “douche” or “meathead” attitudes. While women were not viewed as having the same propensity to “spaz-out” as men, female members were still subject to MMAA’s civilizing forces when it came to adopting appropriate levels of intensity.

Not “Being Mean” Enough

The second type of intensity breach I observed was people being told to “be meaner” and increase their intensity in training. Often training partners consciously attempt to negotiate the intensity of the training sessions among themselves. For example, during a training session with a more advanced female gym member, I lost control during a hip throw and apologized. Instead of telling me to be more careful, my partner responded verbally, encouraging me to be meaner:

As my body turns to control her fall, I notice that the mats are taped in this area, as if there is an opening underneath. I step out widely to avoid the tape. Off balance, I

don't control Kay's fall very well and her body slams into the mats making a hollow slapping noise: "Oh sorry, was that too hard? I'm not very good at controlling the fall." Kay responds that it's fine and adds, "you don't need to worry, you can be meaner."

These findings confirm earlier research showing how women training martial arts are encouraged to "adopt a combative attitude" (Channon and Jennings 2013). This process is described in a fieldnote entry where I'm paired up with an especially gentle female partner, and a female coach intervenes encouraging her to "be meaner:"

I begin to think that my partner is not very experienced. She's somewhat timid and very loose in securing each position. Coach Taylor comes over and tells her "You've got to be much *meaner* with that cross face. Don't be afraid to pressure in with your arm. Really grip tight on that shoulder and take away as much space as you can." My partner adjusts her position a little bit, tightening the crook of her elbow around my neck. "Yes! Better!" Coach Taylor responds. "Don't be afraid to be mean. When you train with the boys, they won't be afraid to put pressure. You can't be afraid to do it either."

Here, my partner's demeanor pulled me out of the moment, forcing me into a gentler training style. I felt required to match my energy level to my partner's and relied on the coach to notice and verbally prompt my partner to "be meaner." While in this instance she's encouraging a female practitioner to transgress gender norms and adopt a more

aggressive masculine response, at times the explanations of why women need to be meaner seem to reinforce the notion of gender differences.

A common explanation for why women should focus more on technique rather than relying on strength is that, as generally smaller/weaker fighters, women relying on force are likely to be overpowered by men. Indeed, Guérandel and Mennesson (2007:174) hold that “fighting with a girl or boy brings out particular fight strategies [and that] research favors technical work with girls and physical work with boys.” This is reflected in technical advice given by Coach Tory during a women-only BJJ class:

I think this is something that’s really important as women. A lot of the time people don’t fully bridge onto their necks. They stop at the shoulder. And that may work sometimes if you’re rolling with someone your size or with someone inexperienced. But as women, or generally smaller people, we’re usually at a strength and size disadvantage. So, if you just bridge to your shoulder, you may not get enough power. I really want you to practice bringing your hips way up and coming right up onto the crown of your head. [...] We are working toward having women’s open mat time where you can roll with each other, and we can drill certain techniques. And, if you give us feedback and let us know what you’re interested in we can also try to use the time to talk about women-specific challenges, whether it’s about not being able to escape certain positions, or always being blocked because of being at a size disadvantage.

For women, “spazzing” in the form of explosive energy is seen as inefficient and risky, since a male partner might respond by escalating their force to a point beyond what women are thought to be able to comfortably match. For example, on one occasion I’m sparring with Jay, a regular training partner with whom I have a high level of comfort. Even though we are roughly the same height, he’s 35 pounds heavier and much stronger than I am. Late in the round, I end up in a vulnerable position. I try to escape the position, but Jay overpowers my attempt, accidentally kneeling on my foot in the process:

“Owww” I complain, shooting him an annoyed look, “you always go too hard!”

“Really? Did I step on you?” He answers “Sorry” and eases up the pressure. We continue, focusing more on technique than force.

In this case, I have a heightened awareness that Jay is stronger and that I will not be able to muscle my way out. Though Jay increases his level of aggression and kneels on my foot, I do not increase my intensity level to match his. Feeling this will put me at risk of further injury, I verbally interject, forcing a resetting of the frame.

Sanchez Garcia’s (2014) research highlights a similar situation in which a female boxer reacts to force by breaking frame, rather than letting intensity escalate. He gives the case of Lucia, who apologizes to her male training partner, Pedro, after hitting him hard, and then stops sparring. Pedro and the male coach both criticize Lucia for backing down, believing that “sparring implies certain intensity to be appropriate” (2014:164). Sanchez Garcia’s interpretation is that Lucia either dislikes hitting people or is uneasy boxing against a physically stronger opponent and tries to maintain low intensity. He asserts that

“when she hits Pedro she asks for pardon and stops the action, avoiding retaliation and freezing the spiral of violence” (2014:164). Although he does not expand on his first explanation for Lucia’s behavior, her apology suggests a second possibility: Lucia may have been raised to believe that women should not engage in aggressive behavior.

Traditionally, women have been socialized to be passive and gentle (Young 1980). This valuation of women’s docility exists even within circles that generally are more tolerant of fighting. For example, Spencer’s (2012: 68) findings show that some mixed martial artists believe women should refrain from fighting, saying for example: “I think women should be feminine, and take care of themselves and be pretty. I don’t think they should be brutalizing themselves and hurting others.” Thus, for female practitioners, coaches’ and partners’ interference in calibrating intensity helps women overcome traditional views of femininity that preclude them from “being mean” enough to reach optimum levels of intensity. The emphasis on women relying on technique rather than force or power to defend/advance their position aligns with the behavioral expectations of a “good” BJJ practitioner. However, repeatedly stressing that women need to compensate for an inherent size/strength difference (weakness) inadvertently contributes to women underestimating their physical capacities and lacking confidence in their ability to use their bodies fully to counter male partners in a physically aggressive way. Indeed, at 5’ 10” and 140 lbs, I often trained with both male and female partners who were smaller and/or weaker than I was, and the repeated emphasis on being at a size/strength disadvantage often felt incongruent with my own training experiences.

Though I more often observed cases of women at MMAA not “being mean enough,” I also saw instances when men were called out for being too docile or not applying enough pressure. Generally, this occurred when men adopted a protectionist attitude, “taking it easy” with female partners. Channon and Jennings (2013) describe a strategy for dealing with this issue that I also saw and participated in while at MMAA. On several occasions I observed women pointedly overpowering to show the futility of their “chivalry.” At MMAA when men were seen as inappropriately holding themselves back, they were much more likely to be told verbally to “be meaner” by their coaches or female partners. In one BJJ class, my male partner was hesitant and extremely uncomfortable to apply a new technique properly. Rather than sitting on my stomach with one leg on either side straddling my body tightly as required, he placed himself in a high kneeling position with a large gap between my stomach and his legs. Seeing this, the coach interjected: “Don’t be afraid to put all your weight on her. She can take it.” In other instances, coaches recognized that male partners held back against me during rolling sessions and prodded them with comments such as “Stop pulling your punches ... Why are you holding back?” or “C’mon, really go for it. Don’t worry, you’re not going to hurt her.” As important moments for countering notions of gender difference and encouraging men to see female practitioners as more capable, equal partners, such interventions offer one pathway for how mixed-sex training can work to “undo gender” (Channon 2014; Channon and Jennings 2013; Maclean 2019; Maor 2019).

Re-Inforcing Gym Norms & Expectations

Because they threaten the interactive equilibrium and projected definition of an encounter, intensity breaches are often met with purposeful interventions aimed at restoring balance and enforcing tacit social norms that make interactions mutually intelligible, sociable, and, in BJJ, safe. More experienced BJJ practitioners identified a precise strategy for dealing with “spazzed-out” training partners. This was characterized as having to “be mean” to “settle out” or “calm down” the offender. This process involved more experienced practitioners or coaches physically grinding accepted norms into “spazzes.” Phil joked about this, explaining how a friend sent him a meme saying, “White belts, I’ll roll really nice and light with you, but if you spaz out, I will show you pressure that will make your nightmares feel like a happy place.” He explained:

You know, you want to be a jerk, I will be a jerk; You want to roll light, I will roll light; You want to be a spaz—well I’m not going to spaz, but I will make you pay. [...] I will just put a lot of pressure on them. Like, you know, just make the whole experience very uncomfortable, and I wouldn’t submit them. I would only submit them right at the very end. You know what I mean? [...] So if you are going to roll for 5 or 6 minutes and you want to be a jerk about it, I am going to make you feel those 5 or 6 minutes, you know what I mean? [...] But never disrespectfully, nothing cheap, just all technique. All above board, but just brutal, right?

Cole and Jake respectively describe how they would deal with a spaz in similar terms:

I might just be more stubborn about things — like lots of shoulder pressure.

[laughing] Even when I’m aggressive, my aggressiveness doesn’t really show. I’m

just crushing your face with my shoulder. So, like things that I know are unpleasant. That I might not do to you if you're like 20 pounds lighter than me and being nice. But then, if you're like really spazzing out then I might put all my weight on you and like, treat you like you're my size.

I'd beat'em down. In a nice way, but I'd definitely, um—there are ways to do it. Like some people need to be settled out, so you get knee on belly on them and ride them out until they realize like—it's never in a malicious way but—it's, you kind of show them their excess energy is futile anyways. That's the way I sort of deal with it.

Without verbally redressing, more advanced gym members physically grind norms about acceptable levels of intensity into partners who “spaz-out.” This is what happened after I got elbowed in the eye by a new member:

My partner eases out of shock, comes over and puts an arm on my shoulder, leaning over me, repeatedly apologizing. I get annoyed with his hovering and brush it off: “Don't worry. It's a risk of the sport.” Coach Cole immediately waves him away and rolls with him for the rest of the round. I can hear my partner grunting as his wild movements are rendered futile under the coach's stubborn, heavy, controlled pressure.

This use of heavy pressure, deemed acceptable to impart a severe lesson in appropriate uses of force, minimizes the risk of injury resulting from unchecked “spazzing.” Not all physical responses to “spazzing” are deemed acceptable. Several popular online BJJ

forums dedicate discussion to when it is acceptable to “smash” or “beat down” a person who “spazzes-out,” and the appropriate means of doing so (JJF 2012; R/bjj 2014; Sherdog 2011; Worthington 2013).

By contrast, overt messages to women to “be meaner” are delivered verbally, not physically. All the interactions I coded as women being taught to “be meaner” were of training partners or coaches verbally encouraging women (rarely men) to apply more pressure. I neither observed or heard of a single coach or training partner physically pushing a woman to be more aggressive. Members told me that if a training partner is not training intensely enough, they would avoid the person or reduce their own intensity to match that of the less intense person. Jake, explained:

I would say that there’s definitely partners at the gym who, I don’t really get anything out of training with them. But that doesn’t mean that I can’t put myself in bad positions and try to work out of them. That’s the time to do it. So, I think it’s just how you—what intention you bring to the roll. I think if you keep your mind open you can always benefit. For getting ready for competition, I might not grab someone who’s a hundred and ten pounds and a blue belt, but that being said, I have a friend I help a lot. She’s a lot smaller and we roll and, certainly I get some practice exploring different spots and I’d say it’s more of a learning experience for her, but I don’t mind doing that and giving back because I know there have been other people who were really generous with their time with me.

The only cases of not “being mean” enough I identified as being met with physical interventions involved male partners in beginner classes who were unfamiliar with certain techniques and did not apply adequate pressure to execute them. In one class demonstrating an arm bar technique and in another demonstrating a choke technique, I observed men gingerly going through the motions but failing to achieve desired outcomes. In both cases, the coaches gave verbal instructions and physically demonstrated the appropriate levels of intensity, so that the beginners could *feel* the expected level of intensity.

While women’s intensity breaches tended to be checked verbally and men’s intensity breaches checked physically, during my fieldwork I found that peer-to-peer interactions involving male-dominant forms of intensity breaches tended to be checked far more often than typically female forms. This was interpreted in terms of a moral economy whereby more experienced gym members “give back” by training with less intense partners. Unwillingness to amplify intensity levels with more docile female practitioners may stem from a protective male restraint. During both technical and sparring sessions, the tendency was for male practitioners to match less intense female partners’ energy levels. Because of this, women were less likely than men to benefit from these embodied processes of socialization: they were *verbally encouraged* to “be meaner” but typically did not have the experience of being pushed to learn what the ideal intensity should *physically feel* like.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

The analytical focus on micro-interactions in this paper highlighted processes of social calibration through which members attuned their intensity levels to those of their partners, demonstrating proper levels of involvement and maintaining the frame and allowing for positive interactions. This involved an intuitive and embodied feeling-out process that evolved over the training session. The results highlighted that social calibration involves important ongoing interpretative interstitial work. People who become skilled at this and can moderate their intensity levels appropriately to maintain the frame become known as “good partners.” Given the gendered patterns of failed intensity alignment, future research should further consider the individual and structural conditions that might make it easier/harder for individuals across different social locations to learn to successfully calibrate their behavior.

Engaging in enactive ethnography is especially important for understanding this process. While not unconscious, social calibration involves real-time interpretation and inner self-reflection that individuals may not recall later or feel comfortable sharing. Having the dual role of gym member and ethnographer increased my engagement with and awareness of this reflexive form of intensity management. Training at the gym, I was able to experience first-hand the inner dialog and emotion that built up as I absorbed subtle physical and verbal cues and adjusted my behavior accordingly. My findings were supported by other gym members’ reports of self-reflection and analysis. Importantly, as the analysis showed, this process requires actors to identify and diagnose these cues

accurately. If a person misses or misinterprets a cue, breaching behavior will likely continue until checked by another.

Findings on the gendered patterns of intensity breaches provide further empirical evidence of how, as described by Guérandel and Mennesson (2007), gender frames can supersede martial arts frames and even reinforce gender hierarchies in training. Men were more likely to “spaz” and let pride get in the way of appropriate BJJ reactions. In many of these cases the desire to save face *as men*, superseded men’s investment in maintaining the BJJ frame and appropriately calibrating their intensity. On the other hand, the problematization of women not “being mean” enough and the verbal encouragement for them to act more aggressively and to stop apologizing for their own strength and force signals a clear desire within the gym to manage female intensity in ways that challenge traditional notions of women as passive and submissive. The framing of attempts to physically “settle out” the egos of men who “spazzed” also seems to point to pathways for not only bringing male practitioners into alignment with the gym’s behavioral norms, but also for challenging aggressive forms of masculinity.

Importantly, despite the dominant discourse around gender equality at the gym and the more overt interventions to dismantle gender stereotypes and hierarchies described above, there were several more subtle processes simultaneously at play which reproduced gender norms. First, women were frequently framed as weaker/smaller partners who risked injury if they relied on muscle rather than technique, which further essentialized notions of sex difference. Second, male-dominant forms of intensity

breaching (“spazzing”) being checked far more often than typically female forms (not being mean enough) resulted in women being far less likely to benefit from the embodied learning and socialization techniques needed to become a good partner capable of maintaining the BJJ training frame.

While the emphasis in this article was on identifying micro-interactional processes of social calibration, the findings add support to understandings of social interaction as fundamentally gendered (West and Zimmerman 1987) through social actors’ embodiment and interpretation of gendered social cues (Garfinkel 1967). The data illustrate that the ways gendered interactions are understood and addressed within a given setting can be multi-layered and contradictory. Thus, research into gender relations in mixed-sex training environments should further explore gendered processes of social calibration as both having the potential to challenge and (re)produce traditional gender norms and hierarchies, and point to embodiment within social calibration processes as a key site for determining these outcomes.

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Chapter 3

Effects of Social Contexts of Violence on Brazilian Jiu Jitsu Practice:

A comparative ethnographic study²

INTRODUCTION

Martial arts and combats sports (MACS) are increasingly being taken up by researchers interested in the nuanced, embodied processes through which people learn social competence (Wacquant 2014) and are socialized to think, believe, move, act, and conduct themselves in specific ways as citizens (Mataruna-Dos-Santos et al. 2020). Inspired by Wacquant's approach in *Body and Soul* (2004), scholars are engaging with habitus, as theory and methodology (Bourdieu 2014), to ground their investigation of MACS as socializing forces. As a mediating construct, habitus, captures the ways in which the sociosymbolic structures of society become deposited inside persons in the form of lasting dispositions (Wacquant 2016: 65).

Yet, despite the careful theoretical attention to habitus as multilayered, dynamic and varying across social structures and environments, within MACS scholarship there has been a tendency to define and focus on the influence of social structures *within* training settings (i.e. the gym, the dojo, the academy) as producing a specific habitus (Downey 2014), without examining these as situated spaces influenced by and influencing their surrounding environments (Trimbur 2011). Parallel to this, there is a growing body of research examining the impact of socio-cultural contexts on the development of MACS,

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and in turn the impact of contextual factors on how MACS training is structured (Channon & Jennings 2014). Of particular relevance here, is the growing scholarship on the transmission and transformation of MACS through processes of globalization (Lawton and Nauright, 2019; Mataruna-Dos-Santos et al. 2020; Ueda, 2017).

MACS research has thus both explored how social environments and structures *outside* of gyms shape training norms and practices, as well as how social contexts and structures *inside* of gyms shape the embodiment of habitus at the individual level. In this study I draw on comparative ethnographic data on Brazilian Jiu Jitsu (BJJ) Practitioners in Toronto, Canada and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil to bring together both approaches and map out the relationships between 1) social contexts outside the gym, 2) social norms and structures inside the gym and 3) how together these structure BJJ practitioners' mental and physical dispositions. In doing so, I aim to contribute to a deeper "contextual understanding of embodiment" (Welton 2011).

This research illustrates that fields of socialization like BJJ gyms are not islands protected from the forces of surrounding social contexts. While BJJ practitioners in Rio and Toronto drill similar or identical techniques and develop the same types of physical abilities, how they take on and agentially engage with BJJ habitus varies based on the respective social contexts of violence and globalized forms, histories, and collective memories of BJJ within each city. This is evidenced in the different levels of anticipated violence across the field sites, which shape how participants understand, embody and choose to hide or show their BJJ practitioner identities, their differing abilities to transfer

BJJ capital to other social fields, how they interpret *realness* in training, and in turn male practitioners' comfort with mixed-sex training.

MARTIAL ARTS & COMBAT SPORTS, HABITUS AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

People engaging in martial arts and combat sports (MACS) are fundamentally “social beings, plural, collectively engaged in embodied activities staged inside circles of shared commitments that make them but extreme instances of what every social agent is and does as she navigates the world” (Wacquant 2014:17). MACS practitioners thus do not only learn the movements, embodied behaviours, philosophical and moral concepts, values and social relations of their individual disciplines, but through these disciplinary practices are also being trained to think, believe, move, act react and conduct themselves in specific ways as citizens in broader society (Mataruna-Dos-Santos et al. 2020). The research and teachings of “fighting scholars” therefore extend beyond insights into MACS practices and norms, providing lessons on how people learn social competence more broadly (Wacquant 2014).

Inspired by Wacquant’s approach in *Body and Soul* (2004), a growing number of scholars are engaging with habitus, as theory and methodology (Wacquant 2014), to ground their investigation of MACS as socializing forces. Sánchez Garcia and Spencer’s (2014) edited volume *Fighting Scholars*, for example, brings together ethnographic works in this tradition spanning different geographical contexts and MACS disciplines. Habitus captures “the ways in which the sociosymbolic structures of society become deposited inside persons in the form of lasting *dispositions*, or trained capacities and patterned

propensities to think, feel and act in determinate ways” (Wacquant 2016: 65). While subject to individuation due to each person’s unique trajectories and layering of structured schemata, we can conceptualize a group-specific habitus among those within institutions sharing social conditions and conditionings (Wacquant 2016: 67). Thus, we might speak of a boxing habitus, a mixed-martial arts habitus or a BJJ habitus.

Yet, despite the careful theoretical attention to habitus as multilayered, dynamic and varying across social structures and environments (Bourdieu 2017), within MACS scholarship there has been a tendency to define and focus on the influence of social structures *within* training settings (i.e. the gym, the dojo, the academy) as producing a specific habitus (Downey 2014), without examining these as situated spaces influenced by and influencing their surrounding environments (Trimbur 2011). In *Body and Soul*, for example, Wacquant argues that “the boys and girls club constitutes an island of stability and order. [...] The gym offers a relatively self-enclosed space for protected sociability where one can find a respite from the pressures of the street and the ghetto, a world into which external events rarely penetrate and onto which they have little impact” (2004: 26).

In response to this Duneier (2006) argues that *Body and Soul* fails to consider the human and ecological context within which the boxing club is situated. Others have echoed this critique, questioning whether, given the structural marginalization facing the low-income Black men and boys in attendance, there may in fact be a level of violence in how boxing gyms engrain neoliberal values and individualize responsibility for life’s pains and struggles (Beauchez 2017, Trimbur 2011). Further, challenging the assertion that

goings-on inside gyms have little impact on the outside world, there have also been calls to study how habitus and capital developed *within* the gym is transferable (or not) across other fields (see for example Paradis 2012).

There is, however, a growing body of research examining the impact of socio-cultural contexts on the development of MACS (Channon & Jennings 2014). Of particular relevance here, is the emerging scholarship on the transmission and transformation of MACS through processes of globalization (Zhu et al., 2020; Lawton and Nauright, 2019; Ueda, 2017). Following the introduction of Eastern martial arts in Western cultures, many of these practices have experienced adaptations to fit Western physical cultural norms. In several cases this has led to a process “modernization” whereby in both the East and West martial arts have become increasingly detached from philosophical education, and instead “sportized” into more athletic forms of competition (Channon 2012). In a few instances, scholars have found that as martial arts evolve in new contexts, they develop hybridized or altogether different glocalised training approaches (Faxneld 2021, Rafiq & Sheridan 2022).

MACS research has thus both explored how social environments and structures *outside* of gyms shape training norms and practices, as well as how social contexts and structures *inside* of gyms shape the embodiment of habitus at the individual level. In this study I draw on comparative ethnographic data to bring together both approaches and map out the relationships between 1) social contexts of violence outside the gym, 2) social norms and structures inside the gym and 3) how these structure BJJ practitioners’

cognitive, conative, and cathectic schemata. In doing so, I compare participants experiences of anticipated violence to developing a deeper “contextual understanding of embodiment” (Welton 2011).

CONTEXTUALIZING VIOLENCE & BJJ IN RIO VS. TORONTO

BJJ Lineage and Tradition

To understand the field sites and corresponding data, we need to take into account the history of BJJ and its globalization. We can trace BJJ’s lineage to Kodokan Judo, developed in the late 1800’s by Jigoro Kano in Japan. Kano’s style blended classical jujutsu styles such as tenjin shinyo-ryo (focused on striking and joint-bending techniques) and kyto-ryo (focused on free fighting) (Mataruna-Dos-Santos et al. 2020). He sought to internationalize this new style of judo by sending his proteges to demonstrate the sport around the world, marketing it as a style that uses “maximum efficiency with minimum effort” (Mataruna-Dos-Santos et al. 2020: 159).

It was with this mission that Eisei Mitsuyo Mayeda, one of Konde’s students who went by the fight name of Conde (Count) Koma, began work as a professional fighter, demonstrating the power of Judo across the Americas before arriving in Brazil in 1914 (ibid). There, Mayeda set up his own dojo in Belém do Pará, where he encountered Gastão Gracie, a Brazilian businessman of Scottish descent who owned a circus and put on professional wrestling and prize-fighting competitions (Cairus 2013). Through this connection, Gastão’s sons Carlos and later Hélio Gracie took up martial arts. Mayeda’s teaching did not, however, follow traditional Kano Judo pedagogy or philosophy. He ignored its belt rankings and, employing the more generic term *jiu jitsu*, taught his students

an innovative mix of judo and wrestling (Cairus 2013) fused with older style ju-jutsu takenouchi-ryo (which focused on floor combat) (Mataruna-Dos-Santos et al. 2020).

The Gracie brothers trained with Mayeda in the Amazon for approximately 3 years before moving to Rio de Janeiro where they modernized jiu jitsu practice (Cairus 2013). Hélio, whose smaller stature limited his ability to adopt some Judo techniques, was especially influential in adapting techniques to emphasize leverage over strength so as benefit smaller practitioners. This led to the birth of what we now know as Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, a martial art without striking, where the emphasis is on ground or “ne waza” techniques in which practitioners use “levers, torsions and pressure in order to take one's opponent to the ground and dominate them” to the point of submission or neutralization (e.g., via joint-locks or chokes) (Gracie Mag 2007).

Following a series of matches with fighters from other styles, the Gracies opened their first school in Rio de Janeiro in 1930, successfully branding it an “academy” so as to attract a respectable upper-class clientele. Practitioners took classes and progressed through a new colored belt-ranking system (starting with white, blue, purple, brown, black and ultimately finishing with coral) to symbolize the skill and experience. Their early clients included traditionally powerful families in Brazilian business and politics, and by 1933 the Gracies were hired to train Brazilian President Getulio Vargas’ new and feared Special Police squadron (Cairus 2013). We can date some of the tensions within BJJ philosophy and practice back to this early period – during which the Gracies simultaneously tried to establish BJJ as a refined, nation-building and civilizing self-defense practice catered towards elites, while all the while getting in street fights, violent confrontations with rivals

and even being arrested for assault in their quest to establish BJJ as the most effective martial art (ibid). The Gracie brothers challenged people from all disciplines to fight them, which led to the development of the “vale tudo” [anything goes] fighting scene in Brazil. The Gracie clan, and Gracie BJJ maintained notoriety in Brazil for their dominance and success over other fighters and fighting styles (Hongxin & Nabors 2020).

In the 1970’s Hélio Gracie’s sons, Rorion, Rickson, Royce and Royler, travelled to the United States to carry forward the legacy of Gracie BJJ (ibid). Following in the footsteps of their father and uncle, they created the Gracie Challenge offering \$100,000 USD to anyone who could defeat them in a no holds barred challenge. Building on this, in 1993 Rorion founded the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) and the modern sport of mixed martial arts (MMA) began to take off. Early UFC fights were incredibly commercially successful on pay-per-view TV, but drew heavy criticism for being violent and barbaric. This ultimately led to UFC being banned by both pay-per-view and state athletic commissions. In 2001, with the UFC nearing bankruptcy the Gracies sold the company. Under new ownership, with rebranding and additional regulations in place, the UFC was able to rebuild and by 2020 UFC was broadcasting MMA fights in 150 countries and 22 different languages (Ibid). As part of this rebranding, there has been a shift in Western portrayal of BJJ re-emphasizing its heritage as “the gentle art” (the Japanese translation of jiu-jitsu) (Mataruna-Dos-Santos et al. 2020: 159). Through this process of globalization BJJ in North America seems to have returned to the early Gracie branding as a “refined” practice, now holding high-brow associations and being dubbed the art of “human chess” (Fischer 2018). The practice has also now gained celebrity notoriety with Hollywood heavy

hitters like Keanu Reeves, Russel Brand, Guy Ritchie, Jason Statham, Vince Vaughan, Ed Oneil, Jonah Hill, Demi Lovato, Wiz Khalifa, Aston Kutcher, Kate Upton, Jason Mamoia, Jim Carrey and Scarlett Johansson (among others) taking up the practice (Let's Roll BJJ 2022).

While the Gracies are no longer UFC owners, their names remain synonymous with the development of both MMA and BJJ. As MMA has increased in global popularity, as a recognized necessary foundational element of the sport, so too has BJJ. By 2021 the International Brazilian Jiu Jitsu Federation counted more than 5600 registered Brazilian Jiu Jitsu academies located in over 90 countries (IBJJF 2021). This is a vast underrepresentation of the total number of BJJ schools globally as many gyms offering BJJ classes (especially MMA schools which have a smaller BJJ focus, or schools in lower-resource settings) may not pay to register with the Federation. Consistent with earlier findings that globalization has led to the sportization of martial arts (Channon 2012), there are also now multiple global and local BJJ sporting competitions and many BJJ academies have adapted their training away from a more traditional self-defense focus towards the more fast-paced athletic style of competitive sport BJJ.

Social Contexts of Urban Violence

My field site in Rio, Team Gracie BJJ, was in a busy downtown Rio neighborhood convenient for people working in nearby office towers or government buildings. During the day street vendors took over nearby roads and one had to be mindful of pick-pocketers while navigating through the crowds of people squishing between them. The norm was to walk with one's backpacks facing frontwards and in sight, and to keep any valuables hidden away inside. People in the neighborhood were also very conscious of where it was

safe to talk on their cellphones, and avoided taking calls in the streets to prevent having these stolen out of their hands. I was there in the lead up to, during and few months after the 2016 Olympics and during this period there was an ostensible police presence and effort to “clean up” the city for arriving athletes and tourists. Roughly 80,000 soldiers and police were deployed to ensure safety during the Olympic period (Prada & Crosby 2017), though these were mostly confined to touristic areas and not as visible around the gym.

This process of pacification and social clean-up resulted in higher rates of police violence and deaths, and coincided with the country experiencing a period of strong economic recession and political upheaval. Unemployment was soaring and both the Municipality and State of Rio de Janeiro were effectively broke, with teachers, medical staff, police officers and public servants experiencing delays in getting paid and public services being closed or reduced. Concerns about security and rising crime rates were generally very high, as murder rates increased over 20% across the city that year (Prada & Crosby 2017). In 2016 Rio had a population of approximately 6.4 million people, and from January to October the Rio Institute of Public Security reported 104 302 street robberies, 4111 homicides, and 5067 deadly assaults (including police-involved killings) (Nascimento 2016). During this period, Brazil was also known for very high levels of machismo and violence against women and girls, and in 2015 ranked 5th in the world for female homicides (Cavendish de Moura & Hollingsworth 2019).

From my apartment in Rio I regularly heard extended shoot outs. News updates shared across social media platforms would usually confirm these were either conflicts between rival gangs, or between gangs and police attempting to pacify nearby favelas. I

witnessed several muggings, street fights, and one attempted carjacking. Once my Uber driver, who I'd learnt was a lawyer that had been laid off in the recession, didn't take my advice on how to reach my apartment, saying he preferred to follow the GPS directions from the Uber app instead. He turned up a winding road leading to my apartment from the opposite side mountain than I recommended, only to turn a corner and immediately encounter a line of teenage boys on motorcycles all holding what appeared to be machine guns. They were blockading the road, facing the opposite direction. The driver swore as he braked, shut off the engine and eased the car into reverse so as not to draw attention. We both held our breath as he slowly crept the car back down the winding road, turning the engine back on and increasing in speed as we got further away. Once we were a few hundred meters from the boys, he stopped the car to compose himself and check in with me, before taking my directions to the apartment. It wasn't unusual for gym members to show up with stories about having their phones snatched, or having witnessed a shooting. People regularly discussed rising insecurity, and advised others to be cautious and take safety precautions. As a woman and a foreigner, I felt gym members regularly checked-in with me about safety in the city with a special sense of concern.

*Comparison of
2016 Crime
Rates in the
Cities of Rio de
Janeiro, Brazil
and Toronto,
Canada*

Toronto (2016)		
Population	2.7 million	
Homicides	76	2.8 / 100,000
Assault Causing Bodily Harm	901	33.4 / 100,000
Police-Involved Killings *2000-2017	52	1.9 / 100,000
Muggings	1209	44.8 / 100,000

Rio (Jan-Oct. 2016)		
Population	6.4 million	
Homicides	4111	64.2 / 100,000
Deadly Assault (including police- involved killings)	5067	79.2 / 100,000
Street Roberries	104 302	1629.7 / 100,000

For comparison, in 2016 the city of Toronto had a population of 2.7 million and there were 1209 muggings, 76 homicides and 901 assaults causing bodily harm reported (Toronto Police Services 2022). While there are no official government data on police-involved killings, a Canadian Broadcasting Services news investigation found there were 52 people killed by Toronto police officers from 2000-2017 (Dunn 2018).

My Toronto field site was in a lively, downtown neighborhood surrounded by trendy shops and restaurants. The gym was within a twenty-minute walk from 2 major universities, the Village (Toronto's LGBTQ+ neighborhood) and Yorkville (Toronto's upscale shopping and dining district where the annual Toronto International Film Festival is held). There were a handful of homeless shelters and food kitchens on smaller streets nearby, and it was not unusual to see drug use in nearby parquets or panhandling on the main streets. Despite this, Toronto participants reported a perception of being relatively immune of urban violence. For example, one participant explained that walking downtown, in the same neighbourhood as the gym, they encountered "mentally disturbed or high people" on a regular basis, but perceived these to be "largely harmless". Another explained: "Downtown you can't leave your bike alone for 5 minutes cus it's not going to be there when you get back. But it's not like anyone is going to attack you or take it from you while you're still there". This perception that attacks or muggings don't happen, is contradicted by the police statistics, and rather reflects a lived sense of immunity from violence.

In fact, during my field work I did witness a street-robbery while I was walking my dog at night a few blocks away from the gym with my partner. We saw a man and woman, both appearing to be in their early 20's, standing in close proximity to each other. The

impression I had was that it was a flirty couple playing keep-away with a phone. They were speaking at a conversational volume we couldn't make out. My partner joked that maybe one of them was trying to hide something on the phone from the other. When we were roughly 5 meters away the man casually walked away, rounding the corner with the phone, while the woman stood quietly watching him go. When we reached her, she said in a matter-of-fact way: "That guy just took my phone". "Wait, you don't know him?", I asked confused. She replied: "No, he just asked to borrow my phone. I assumed he'd give it back. I can't believe he actually took it". My partner ran ahead to see if he could find the man, and then circled back, reporting: "No sign of him. If I had known, I would have tried to stop him". We asked her if she wanted us to call the police, and she declined saying it wasn't worth the hassle and her insurance would replace the phone. We spent the rest of our walk baffled, pondering how the prospect of being robbed could feel so unlikely to someone, that they would not process it was happening, or ask for help from people meters away, while someone calmly walked off with their phone.

The only other first-hand experiences of crime or violence I encountered were from a male interviewee who reported using BJJ to subdue rowdy patrons while working as a bouncer, and 2 female BJJ workshop attendees who disclosed having experienced intimate-partner violence. Throughout my fieldwork in Toronto, I never heard anyone raise significant concerns about safety in the city and was never offered suggestions around, or heard people discuss, measures one might take to stay safe outside of the gym. Several times a week I would go on solo late-night runs around downtown to clear my mind before bed. While as a woman, I did have moments of apprehension and heightened awareness

when encountering men in isolated areas, I was never attacked or felt like the risk was significant enough to justify foregoing the activity. In Toronto, I did regularly encounter gendered street harassment from men, but experienced this as more of a chronic psychological stressor rather than a perceived risk of physically violent attack. Overall, I shared with my fellow gymgoers a relatively privileged sense of embodied safety³.

Throughout this paper I discuss differences in perception and anticipation of violence at the municipal, rather than neighborhood level. This is because while during my fieldwork I did live, work, and socialize mostly within or nearby each gym's respective neighborhood, that wasn't actually the case for many gym members. Both in Toronto and Rio, most practitioners lived in other neighborhoods (some safer, some riskier), and in fact many had quite long commutes on public transit to and from the gyms. A large number of recreational practitioners at each field site highlighted that the gyms' proximity to both their work/school and central subway stations made coming to BJJ class a convenient stop-off along their regular commute. In addition, several more competitive practitioners at each field site were drawn to these specific gyms despite both living and working far away. They understood the long commute (sometimes upwards of 2 hours) to and from practice as worthwhile, because they valued the high quality of instruction and training partners the gyms offered.

³ This perception of safety is a subjective experience of Toronto that I and fellow gym members held, which likely reflects a privileged social location. Further, it's likely that despite overall low crime rates compared to Rio de Janeiro, more marginalized community members living and interacting in the gym's downtown Toronto neighborhood don't experience the same sense of safety. The fact that the perceived risk of violence for more marginalized folks, doesn't translate into a perceived sense of danger among gym-goers points to interactional segregation within this socially-diverse, mixed-income neighborhood.

The comparison of practitioners' experiences across the contexts of violence in Rio and Toronto, thus reflects the fact that both gyms drew their membership from all over their respective cities, and that throughout fieldwork individual participants tended to discuss a generalized sense of violence and safety in each city in relation to sites spanning multiple neighborhoods (e.g. beaches, parks, work, school, residential areas, grocery stores, commercial areas, buses, subways, nightclubs, bars, etc.). I examine how this more generalized subjective anticipation of violence in Toronto and Rio interacts with the specific lineage and culture of each gym, to shape practitioners' understanding and embodiment of BJJ training, capital and identity. However, while my findings offer a comparison *across* cities, I recognize that variation most certainly exists in how these processes play out as practitioners move across higher and lower risk neighborhoods *within* each Rio and Toronto.

FIELD SITES & METHODS

Data in this paper is based on ethnographic research, including participant observation and interviewing. After passing ethics board review at the University of Toronto, I carried out 6 months of field work at Mixed Martial Arts Academy (MMAA) in Toronto, followed by 6 months of field work at Team Gracie BJJ in Rio de Janeiro. Throughout my fieldwork I worked iteratively amongst data collection, coding, and analysis. Data collection followed the guidelines in Emerson et al.'s (1995) *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Fieldnotes were written within a 12-hour period of field visits. I also obtained informed consent from and conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with participants in Toronto (n=10) and Rio de Janeiro (n=15). These consisted of

training partners and coaches selected to cover different training and coaching perspectives (male/female, beginner/mid-level/advanced, kids/white belt/all level coaches, competitive/recreational practitioners). Pseudonyms were used in all research materials to maintain the confidentiality of participants. The familiarity I developed with participants and BJJ life through training and immersion in the social life at each gym, helped inform my interviews and enabled me to collect vignettes of BJJ training, detailed biographical information about practitioners, and rich accounts of how they perceive BJJ training as influencing their lives beyond the gym.

An enactive ethnographic approach was selected as most effective in capturing the nuanced, embodied processes through which gym members learn social norms and BJJ practices. Wacquant argues this type of fieldwork is a “fruitful path toward disclosing the cognitive, conative, and cathectic schemata (that is, habitus) that generate the practices and underlie the cosmos under investigation” (Wacquant 2015). Immersing myself in the field, and training BJJ, gave me a first-person experience, *intus et in cute*, of the social processes and training dynamics within each gym. In turn, the approach mandated that I bring “bodies-in-interaction into the center of [my] theorizing” (Collins 2015:13).

Mixed Martial Arts Academy

MMAA is one of several mixed martial arts gyms in downtown Toronto. I started training at the gym as a white belt with no prior experience. Before starting my research, a few people in my social and academic circles who trained there encouraged me to try it out, and facilitated introductions to gym staff and members. Classes at MMAA were often crowded. In the evening when multiple sessions happen simultaneously, there might be 40

or so people training at once. Adult members included a diverse multicultural and multilingual (White, East-Asian, Black, Latinx, Arab, South Asian) assortment of undergraduate and graduate students (~18 to 28 years old) and working professionals (~25 to 60 years old) with a more recreational approach, alongside more advanced members (~20 to 30 years old) who trained more seriously and competed in BJJ. As a white, female graduate student in my mid-twenties I felt very at home training and bantering with other gym members. Typically, mixed-sex classes were made up of anywhere from 60 to 85% male practitioners depending on the day and timeslot (though Muay Thai classes at the gym tended to have higher female participation). Two of the gym's seven BJJ coaches were women. In addition to mixed classes, the female coaches led popular women's-only classes once a week. Mixed-sex classes immediately before/after these also tended to have higher rates of female participation. On rare occasions I ended up being the only woman in a class, but even in these instances being known as a strong athlete and “BJJ researcher” tended to grant me acceptance and legitimacy among male peers.

The gym offers classes, unstructured “open mat” time, and a variety of recreational and networking events for members, including free monthly women's self-defence seminars. It also runs off-site BJJ training workshops infused with anti-violence messages, encouraging participants to problematize links between violence and masculinity. Professor Jonah, the founder of MMAA, previously owned a women-only gym dedicated to self-defence and empowerment. His personal philosophy of compassion, unity, and positivity is reflected in the gym's atmosphere.

MMAA gym members take a different approach to martial arts than that of the violent warrior culture promoted in street fighting and some commercial MMA cultures. A strong anti-violence sentiment is promoted through formal anti-violence workshops, and informally through coaches' instructions, announcements, and ways of teaching and framing techniques. Instructors make clear differentiations between techniques for training and for fighting. While MMAA is a mixed martial arts gym, not everyone attends official MMA classes. There is an understanding that one can become a mixed martial artist by learning, practicing, and mastering various forms of martial arts. This is reflected in how MMAA members speak about MMA, referring to people training as “players,” “artists,” or “practitioners” rather than “fighters,” and about developing their “game” or “style of play”. This sportified approach to fighting was especially strong among those focused on BJJ. New members were encouraged to consider participating in competitions, and classes were often geared towards preparing students for this. Several advanced BJJ practitioners regularly competed in local and international BJJ competitions, and few also trained and competed in MMA tournaments.

During my 6 months of fieldwork at MMAA I trained side by side with gym members for 2 to 3 hours, 4 to 6 times a week. These regular training interactions were important not just for embodied data collection but also for helping me gain the trust of practitioners. Before training, there was often a period of waiting on the mats for the prior class to end. This was a time when people stretched, and chatted with regular training partners. I took advantage of such informal social moments before/after classes to tell others about my research and obtain verbal informed consent to write about my training interactions with

them. After training with me and learning about my research, often gym members would eagerly volunteer to share their BJJ training journeys, recommend books, or angles of inquiry. They also typically would introduce me to others at the gym by explaining that I was doing research on BJJ. In addition to joining and observing BJJ classes, I participated in community events organized by the gym, including movie nights, fight nights, beach days, and networking socials.

After 6 months of data collection, I was forced to take time off from training due to an unforeseen surgery. During the subsequent 3-month recovery, my partner Jay was presented with an opportunity to travel to Rio de Janeiro to complete a residency with a media collective for 6 months. Having previously taken several Portuguese classes and carried out an ethnographic research project in Brazil (mostly in the state of São Paulo) during my undergraduate studies in anthropology, I saw this as an opportunity to gather rich comparative data on traditional Gracie-style BJJ training. With the support of my dissertation supervisor, I secured a travel grant from the University of Toronto. I was able to recover in time to train at MMAA for a couple of months before Jay and I boarded a flight to Rio in April 2016.

Team Gracie BJJ

Arriving in Rio de Janeiro with the goal of collecting data at a traditional Gracie-style BJJ academy, I mapped out different Gracie Humaitá locations. The Gracie Humaitá academies were founded by Hélio Gracie and trace their lineage to the original Academia Gracie de Jiu-Jitsu set up by Carlos Gracie in Rio in 1930. The gyms continue to be run by Hélio Gracie's sons and follow a traditional Gracie BJJ curriculum. Thanks in large part to

the success of the Gracie clan in BJJ and MMA competitions, the Gracie Humaitá academies continue to hold a strong reputation within the BJJ community. In total I visited 5 different locations around the city. Team Gracie BJJ was the 3rd gym I visited.

Peering into the gym's narrow wooden doors for the first time, I saw 16 or so people in pairs rolling on the mats, while another 8-10 people sat around the periphery watching. Noticing me, the instructor for the class waved me in and walked over. Jay and I entered and introduced ourselves. The instructor, Mestre Rio, looked to be about 40 years old and had a thin, muscular frame under his gi. He was immediately warm and welcoming and from that initial conversation very receptive to me training and conducting research at the gym. He called over a taller, heavier set brown belt who had been assisting him in the class. Introducing Antônio, Mestre Rio explained that he spoke English and sometimes acted as unofficial gym host to foreign visitors. I got the sense the gym regularly received visits from apprenticeship pilgrims (Miller Griffith & Marion 2018), seeking out the cachet of an "authentic" BJJ training experience. We chatted briefly in English but quickly discovered communication in Portuguese was easier and switched back over. Antônio, or Tó as he was known at the gym, asked us where we were staying, walked us through the gym schedule, and explained that it was a little late to train that night but that a bunch of guys would be going out to a local bar after the class, and we were welcome to meet them there. Thanking Mestro Rio and Tó for the welcome, we took down the bar's address, said our goodbyes and headed out.

That night we found a small crowd of 10 or so men ranging from early twenties to early thirties gathered on the sidewalk outside a bar in the Lapa nightlife district, drinking

beer and snacking on small plates of finger foods. They were instantly recognizable as several people were wearing Gracie Humaitá t-shirts and sweatshirts, or BJJ themed graphic t-shirts that I later learnt were designed by one of the gym members. We spotted Tó who welcomed us with Antarctica Beer and introduced us to the crowd. Within minutes they were adding Jay to Facebook, and I had to explain that I'd closed my account several months earlier but did have Instagram. This didn't seem to be the correct answer as I was quickly met with counters from several different people: "That's not a problem, you just log in and it opens again", "Oh it's very easy, and we coordinate a lot through messenger", "Do you have data yet, do you want to use my phone?". Before I knew it, I was handed a phone and was logging back into Facebook, friending everyone present, and spending the next half hour or so discussing old pictures as they scrolled through each of our profiles.

They asked about the gym I'd trained at in Canada and looked MMAA up on Facebook as well. At first there was a general sense of dubiousness about the gym and its caliber of BJJ training. "There don't seem to be very many black and brown belts training. Is there not a Gracie Humaitá gym you could go to in Toronto?" Tó asked? I explained that no and there wasn't. Someone then spotted a picture of renowned Canadian MMA fighter, Georges St-Pierre, who had come to the gym to train with one of the striking coaches at MMAA in advance of a UFC fight. This caused quite a bit of excitement and somewhat appeased concerns about the gym's legitimacy. Jokes were made about needing to make sure we weren't spies coming to steal their training secrets in advance of the upcoming Rio Open BJJ tournament. By the end of the night, and after a thorough, though jovial, social media investigation and inquisition about my proposed research, they seemed satisfied.

We said goodbyes, they insisted on calling us a taxi so we didn't walk home and I promised to attend class the next day. From then on out I spent the next 6 months training with Team Gracie BJJ Monday to Friday from 6-9pm. There were team lunches once or twice a week, practitioners hung out most Friday and often Saturday nights, and were in contact through several different Whatsapp and Facebook messenger groups during the workday and over the weekends.

While I did go to a morning class and a lunch time class at the Team Gracie academy, I quickly learnt that each of these was taught by a different instructor and had a different social group and dynamic. Changing class schedules was like changing teams within the academy and was not generally done unless one had a major scheduling conflict, e.g., after changing jobs. Given my early integration into the night class social group, and the fact that the night classes ran from 6-9pm instead of just one hour, I stuck to that schedule. Officially at night there were 3 hour-long classes back-to-back, however, in practice Mestre Rio would run these as a pretty seamless 3-hour session dedicated primarily to rolling (sparring). People trickled in throughout this period, as a cherished stop-over on way home from school or work.

Most night class attendees at Team Gracie were university students or working professionals. Many of the professionals were from the police, military, government, law, or oil industry and leaned more right-wing politically. Indeed, during a period when Jay was documenting the impeachment of President Dilma and the resulting protests, one gym member pulled me into a quiet corner to warn me that I should tell Jay to be careful about wearing protest stickers at the gym with the implication that left-wing politics would not be

very welcome. I frequently found myself biting my tongue if politics were brought up during social gatherings, and struggled with how to respond in a few instances when classist or homophobic comments were made. Gender policing was quite common, with the most frequent form being teasing around men's choice of clothing.

Adult classes had many people in the 20-30's age range, but there was also a large representation of older members in the 40-70 age range. Most gym members identified as white or pardo (multi-ethnic), though there were a small number of Afro-Brazilians who trained there as well. Besides me, there were 3 women who regularly attended night classes, which meant these tended to be 85-95% male on most nights and all instructors and black/brown belts at the gym were men. Unlike at MMAA where there were large white-belt only classes, all classes at Team Gracie were all-levels, and white belts were only allowed to train with black and brown belts. Training with blue and purple belts was permitted when approval was obtained from the Mestre (instructor leading the class). Usually there were only 1-3 white belts in a class, and a minimum of 4-6 black belts and 5-7 brown belts in attendance so this never presented a problem.

DATA AND ANALYSIS

In the following sections I analyze how the differing social contexts of violence shape Brazilian Jiu Jitsu practice and practitioners in 3 main ways. First, I explore how practitioners in Toronto and Rio embody differing levels of anticipated violence, and the way this seeps into how practitioners physically move and carry themselves as they navigate their respective cities. Second, I examine the way historical development of BJJ interacts with the local contexts of violence to shape the develop of BJJ identities and

attitudes towards training. Lastly, I examine how the level of anticipated violence in each context results in differing perceptions of “realness” in self-defense training, and in turn influences gendered dynamics in mixed-sex training encounter.

Embodied Anticipation of Violence

As noted above, BJJ practitioners at my Rio and Toronto fieldsites had very different perceptions of the risks they faced in their cities. At MMAA practitioners felt rather immune from urban violence, and given the relatively low crime rate in Toronto, weren't likely to pay a heavy price for the assumption. In Rio de Janeiro, risks of violence were an everyday feature of the urban environment, and failure to be aware of, and attentive to this could very likely put one at risk. Thus, while participants in Toronto navigated the city with relative peace of mind, in Rio participants embodied a heightened sense of awareness to possible threats. Take, for example, the following field note which illustrates how the anticipation of violence is not just deposited into general physical dispositions, but also how I and other physically navigate the city, especially as BJJ practitioners.

It's 9pm on a Thursday and the nighttime BJJ class at Team Gracie BJJ just finished. As I step out of the changeroom and walk towards the entrance of the gym to put on my shoes I pass Thiago. We shake hands and hug. He asks “Oi, B, you meeting Jay [my partner] to walk home?”. “Nope, not tonight. I'm on my own”, I answer. Thiago frowns and looks around until he sees Cleiton & Sergio: “Hey, you guys walk towards Lapa right? Would you wait for B to walk with you?”. Cleiton & Sergio agree, and I walk to where they are leaning over the parquet to carefully fold their gis (jiu

jitsu uniforms) on the edge of the mats. When we're all ready, we say goodbye to everyone still there, and make our way out of the gym.

As we step onto the street there's a noticeable change in temperature. I welcome the feeling of the musky downtown breeze hitting my face. "Which way do you normally walk?", Cleiton asks. "When Jay is here we walk through the market, otherwise I just go on the main road", I say, pointing behind me to where the cars and trams are noisily rushing by. "That's good. It isn't safe to go across the market alone this time of night. I'll show you how we normally go", Cleiton says signalling for me to walk with them through the narrow streets. The Haussmannian-style buildings in this area are run down now, and at night they give the empty streets a haunted feeling. We walk 3-across, each with one hand grabbing our BJJ belts so that our gis hang down from them over our shoulders.

There's a cacophony of house beats, baile funk and Brazilian folk music pouring out from the upper floors of the buildings nearby. Partiers spill out from a taxi, almost bumping into us as they make their way to one of the narrow wood-carved doors leading to a bar. The street vendors that take over the roads in the daytime are mostly gone, only a few stragglers are left packing up their wares. One of them has a big speaker set up. He's been playing the same 3-song rotation of Justin Bieber, Drake and Rihanna for the last 2 months. We walk quickly, always aware of our surroundings as we chat excitedly about the recent belt promotion. In front of us a

couple of vendors are packing up the t-shirts they had lying across a tarp on the ground, and 3 guys in their early twenties lean against the building behind them watching.

We look at each other, evaluating the situation, and in silent agreement cross the otherwise empty road so we don't have to squeeze by them on the sidewalk. "Of course, I don't like to make assumptions, but it's better to be cautious. You never know", Cleiton says justifying the unspoken decision. We agree and Sergio jokes: "On the plus side, now with the graduation maybe people will be more hesitant about bothering us". Slinging my gi from one shoulder to the other by my newly minted belt I answer laughing, "Yeah! A blue and two purple belts is definitely much better. I don't think I would have intimidated anyone with my white belt". "I don't know. I think they see the gis and jiu jitsu logos and they think twice, no matter the belt colour" – Cleiton counters. Sergio hums in agreement. "Mmmm that's true no? Why go for someone who might resist when you can wait for a more passive victim. They would probably see the Gracie name and prefer to avoid problems". "Well in that case..." I jokingly puff out my chest while dramatically readjusting my T-shirt so that the "Gracie BJJ Competition Team" lettering across the front lays flat and visible. We laugh and continue walking. (Fieldnote, 2016)

This excerpt is just one example of the everyday ways that I saw and experienced the anticipation of violence being embodied in Rio de Janeiro. The physical alertness to ones'

surroundings, the attentiveness to possible threats and how to avoid them, the strategies used to make oneself a less desirable target, were all things that we trained at Team Gracie BJJ, but took a specific significance given the very real prospect of violence in Rio. The gi within this context is not just a basic uniform, but also a warning to would-be attackers that one represents a tougher victim. It's carried out in the open, hanging over one's shoulder as a warning. As shown in the following field fieldnote written two months later, this physical awareness and caution would be out of place Toronto:

I'm getting ready to leave Mixed Martial Arts Academy after an evening Jiu Jitsu class. Reflecting on how grinding the training felt, I leave the changeroom and head over to the mats to fold my gi. From the corner of my eye, I see someone walking over. They throw their bag, gi and jacket onto the mats next to me in a messy pile. "Aren't you just going to go home and wash that?", they ask? Surprised, I look up to see who's talking to me. Since getting back I'd been struck by how, unless they're regular training partners, people at the gym normally keep to themselves before and after class. Noticing it's one of the guys who was in the class with me I answer, "Oh hi, yeah, habit I guess". "Seems like a lot of unnecessary effort to me" he responds, scrunching his gi into a wrinkled ball and trying to stuff it into his bag.

I watch him struggle as I finish securing my gi with my belt and begin putting on my shoes. The gi is too big to put in his bag all balled up so he gives up and heads out with a quick "Ok, well, see ya". Before I can respond, he's gone out through the gym

doors. I follow behind and we make our way down the carpeted stairs to the building lobby in silence. He opens the main door and steps out onto the busy street. Even though it's after 9pm there's still quite a bit of foot traffic. University students are walking by eating ice cream, couples wander holding hands, joggers dart in and out making their way around people on the sidewalk. Halfway through the door I almost bump into my classmate from behind as he stops abruptly realizing one of the other women from the class had been waiting for him. After an awkward pause they notice they're blocking my path and start walking ahead. I get a strong sense of reverse culture shock as I watch them walk away without a word of acknowledgement. The man's bag is still fully open, his crumpled gi hanging half out, his MacBook and wallet fully visible, precariously lying on top. They walk phones in hand, and I almost crash into them again as they stop to look at a video from the woman's last BJJ competition, oblivious to the world around them.

(Fieldnote 2016)

Before being in Rio I probably wouldn't have blinked an eye at any of that encounter. But returning to Mixed Martial Arts Academy, my home gym, after 6 months of fieldwork I realized just how much I'd gotten used to and internalized the BJJ protocols and formalities around respect (for the gym, for the uniform, for the instructors, for training partners, etc.) that permeated and shaped all actions and interactions at Team Gracie BJJ. I was also hit by an odd sense of embodied paranoia. After having been trained to stay constantly alert and aware while in Rio, I felt an eerie edge in my body and was uneasy joining in the nonchalant way people moved through Toronto. A sense of deep discomfort came over me

seeing their laptop and wallet perched in the open backpack, and it still felt strange to see people walking around not just with their phones out, but so engrossed in them that they didn't have any awareness of the people around them. There was no real anticipation of violence, so no need to stay alert. The gi in this context wasn't anything more than an inconvenient object to lug around. I realized that I hadn't just learnt a different style of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu in Rio, I'd learnt a different embodied way of being in the world.

Identity & Attitudes to Using BJJ Training

The different historical contexts of violence in Rio and Toronto were reflected in the ways people talked about their identity as Jiu Jitsu practitioners, and their experiences (or lack thereof) using BJJ techniques inside and outside of the gyms. Assumptions about how BJJ was perceived played an important role in this. In discussing their training histories, Team Gracie jiu-jiteros frequently made references to the 90's period in Rio, and being inspired to start training by Royce Gracie. But they also described how this period led BJJ to develop a negative reputation:

I started when I was 14 at the Gracie academy in Copacabana. That was in the 90's—the boom of BJJ in Rio. A lot of people were practicing and there were huge rivalries between gyms. So you had a fighting mindset all the time, but *real* fighting. And we also had a rivalry with people who did wrestling in Rio. If we met at the beach there was a fight. If we met on the road there was a fight. At the end of the 90's and beginning of the 2000s it was...complicated. There was a much more aggressive mindset. I hurt my elbow and my mom used that as an excuse to get me

to stop training and focus on education. But I think it was because she was worried about me getting into fights (Eduardo—Brown Belt, Interview 2021).

[B: Does your girlfriend train?] I wish! (laughs) I can't even get her to come to the gym. She thinks jiu jitsu guys are all violent and machista. I tried to explain that's not true. I told her "I'm a jiu jiteiro and I'm not like that. Come try it and I promise you'll love it." But she doesn't believe me. She looks at the guys on the news and thinks we all just want to fight. (José—Blue Belt, Interview 2021)

I'm a psychologist and most of my patients and co-workers are strong, feminist women. A few years ago, colleagues were complimenting me on changes in my body and how I carried myself, and I told them I was training jiu jitsu. They started questioning me: "Why do you train that? Those guys are so backwards and violent" "That's so misogynistic. How can you stand it?". It made me cautious. I don't tell patients I train now, even though I think some of them would actually benefit, clinically speaking, from the training. I don't suggest it to them because they might stop seeing me". (Bruno—Blue Belt, Interview 2021)

As illustrated here, BJJ's reputation in the broader community was shaped by the unique history and development of BJJ in Rio de Janeiro. There is a sense of collective memory about jiu jiteros being machista, brutish men prone to starting violent street fights that can be traced back to the rivalries amongst fighters in the 90's and the practice of challenging others to fight started by the Gracies. This reputation has lasting consequences, as not

only might it still prevent people from training BJJ (as with Eduardo's mom), but it may also cause role conflict and limit the transfer of capital to other fields. Bruno's colleagues, while initially impressed with the physical changes his body went through as he trained, re-signified that physicality after learning where it came from. They didn't see it as evidence of disciplined training and dedication, but rather as evidence of a misogynist propensity for violence. Rather than earning them respect in other fields, practitioners such as José and Bruno were questioned for engaging in the martial art and for associating with presumed violent brutes.

In Toronto on the other hand, there isn't the same collective memory about BJJ-related violence. Most people I spoke to about my research outside of martial arts circles didn't know what BJJ was, or would associate it with other martial arts (e.g. "Is that like Karate?" "Oh my cousin does Judo, that's similar right?"). When people were familiar with BJJ, it was generally because they either trained themselves, or had a sense of what it was from watching UFC fights. For example, early on in my research at MMAA I also competing in rowing. I was away with my team for a weekend regatta and a UFC fight that I wanted to watch was on. I asked some of the other women on the team if they wanted to join me. They agreed and we all gathered in a hotel room to watch the match. A few women mentioned they were curious because they'd heard of the UFC but never seen an MMA fight before. Emily, a teammate who comes from an upper-class family and was usually very socially reserved responded hesitantly saying: "I watch them sometimes with my boyfriend. I don't like all the punching and blood, but the jitsu—whatever—ground stuff is cool. It's very strategic, almost like chess". As noted above, this is a frequently made

comparison in Western BJJ circles and MMA marketing. I wondered at the time whether it was a spontaneous simile on Emily's part or picked up from commentary during her earlier fight watching experiences. Either way, the idea of jiu jitsu being "human chess", points to an emphasis on the more mental aspects of training. BJJ in this context, is not seen as "brutish", but rather as "strategic", "cool" and even intellectual. For example, Jorge, a university professor, told me that he originally joined MMAA because he wanted to lose weight. He had picked up flyers for a bunch of gyms in his neighborhood and chose MMAA because it had a bigger emphasis on the physical *and* mental aspects of training: "And then once I started training, I was hooked. I love that it's so cerebral".

Because there isn't a local association with jiu-jiteiros causing violence, and instead a greater emphasis on BJJ being a refined or intellectual practice, practitioners at MMAA didn't have to be wary about owning or outing their identities as BJJ practitioners. Robert, a blue belt at MMAA explains:

I'm like the skinny gangly IT guy at the law firm, but then I come [to MMAA] at night and people at work think it's awesome. One time this client got a bit aggressive with one of the partners and they had to call security. It took forever for them to show up. People were complaining after, and this one lawyer was like "You shoulda called Rob. He woulda dragged that asshole outta here jiu jitsu style" [acting out doing karate chops]. It was funny because I was still a white belt, but after that I got this whole new level of respect from people at the office.

Rather than being seen as threatening, Rob's physical abilities as a BJJ practitioner earned him respect, and were positively interpreted by his colleagues. This was something I

frequently experienced when telling people about my own research doing jiu jitsu. In Toronto I never one received a negative reaction, and instead people were usually impressed, with iterations of “That’s so cool”, “You’re so badass”, or “Does that mean if someone attacks us you could beat them up?” being the most common responses. While the latter two do point to a more violent framing, as with Rob’s experience, the association here is positive rather negative: using BJJ to stop, or protect people from, “bad” forms of violence. I only encountered one instance when someone at MMAA reported feeling hesitant about outing themselves as a jiu jitsu practitioner at work, but this was short lived. Jorge explained:

In my 6 years or 7 years of being a [university] professor I've had 2 people that have done Jiu Jitsu in my classes. One was a white belt, the other is a blue belt at [MMAA] actually. And they both know, you know, the white belt was like (in a slow drooling, in-awe voice) "You're [at the time] a purple belt"? And then the blue belt, I mean I've beaten him up a million times so he knows what I can do, you know what I mean? He told some of the others and it gave me a bit of a cool factor as a prof. I was still a little hesitant with the faculty, but there’s actually a couple of faculty in martial arts. One’s a black belt in Judo, there’s another Prof who’s a black belt judoka who recently won a silver medal in Sambo in Russia. We were actually going to do what we were calling a departmental “celebrity death match” with the student who’s a BJJ blue belt. Maybe a little charity MMA fight night in department. In the end we didn't do it cause the Dean didn't really like the idea. Insurance concerns and stuff, but it did generate lots of good buzz.

Like Robert, Jorge's training didn't threaten but rather brought him more social capital in the workplace. Being a BJJ black belt not only heightened his reputation with students, but also earned him respect, and a sense of comradery with his colleagues who also trained martial arts.

For Team Gracie practitioners, the history and negative popular opinion about BJJ, added to concern not just about their own reputations, but that of the gym. They were very conscious of how they acted in everyday life. There was a constant sense of representing the team and not wanting to reaffirm that negative reputation. Oso, for example, recounted how he had a neighbour who smoked right outside his living room window. He had asked him nicely to stop several times and the neighbour kept brushing him off:

Then last week I came home and again he was smoking there. I could see my daughter playing inside and all the smoke going in the window. I got angry and yelled at him. He said: "what are you going to do about it?" and stepped up to me aggressively. I know I could have easily fought him. But all I could think about was what the newspaper headline would read: "Gracie BJJ fighter involved in another violent dispute". I'm representing the gym, you know, I just had to breathe and walk away. (Oso—Purple Belt, Interview 2021)

That sense of responsibility in representing the gym was echoed by everyone I talked to at Team Gracie BJJ. In fact, there was a general unwillingness to even talk about anything that might hurt the gym or set back improvement of the martial art's reputation. This was particularly clear when I asked Team Gracie practitioners if they had used BJJ outside of the gym. At MMAA there had been no hesitation in answering. It seemed to be a point of

pride for those that had used it, and there was almost a sense of wishfulness among those who hadn't. Jake for example explained:

Yeah, I use it all the time. I do night club security on weekends so I've used it quite a bit. [...] There are certain positions in BJJ where you can control one person and still be mindful of your surroundings, and others not so much. Like knee on belly is a great position—you can control someone, ride them and you have like a two-hundred-and-seventy-degree scope of vision, you know? A lot of the old Gracie self-defence stuff is what works best. Like, you know, how to actually grab someone from behind, put them in a harness, put the choke on. That's huge!

When I asked Sarah, a purple belt, about using BJJ outside of the gym she got amped up:

Sadly I haven't! (more quickly) I mean, not sadly, because you obviously don't want to be in a situation where you have to use it. But...it would be cool, you know, just to test yourself and know that you can? Like on the news a couple of years ago, there was this segment on a girl who used BJJ to fight off a rapist. That's actually so badass. To feel that power, to know you can take care of yourself. Because now I don't know. Like, I think I'll be able to use what I'm learning, but who knows, what if I freeze?

But, when again I asked the same question with Team Gracie folks, I was met with hesitancy and resistance. Several people asked me what I meant and seemed suddenly skeptical about my intentions. I would reiterate the question to emphasize what I assumed would be a less problematic focus on self-defense. But even then, there was a general

hesitancy. Consider the following exchange with Mestre Rio, the lead instructor for the night classes:

B: Have you ever used your BJJ training outside of the gym?

R: (silence, hesitantly) How so?

B: Well, have you ever been forced to use BJJ in a self-defense situation?

R: Regrettably, yes.

B: (tentative, sensing resistance) Would you feel comfortable telling me about it?

R: (in an unusually clipped tone) There's nothing to tell. It's happened several times. I defended myself and I'm still here.

B: Mmm (unsuccessfully pausing to see if few seconds of silence would encourage the Mestre to elaborate) Ok. I guess you're still here, so it worked.

R: Listen (sighing) It's like I tell all the students. Jiu Jitsu is not about learning to fight. It's about learning to be disciplined and to avoid, or in the worst case de-escalate and exit violent situations. So, I guess to answer your question, yes, I use jiu jitsu in self-defense every day when I walk out of the house. When I meet the guy with road rage on my commute to work, when the crazy fan jostles me at a soccer game, when the drunk people block the sidewalk as I'm walking with my family. I use a defensive jiu jitsu mindset to avoid putting myself in situations of violence. People can sense that mindset and they might be aggressive when they start talking to you, but eventually they calm down.

B: How does that happen?

R: You breathe, you stay in control, you don't take the bait. We drill that every time we step onto the mats. And it's the same. That guy with road rage, he may be yelling when he comes over but if you stay calm, he relaxes. And sometimes that means you apologize even when it's not your fault. I'm always telling the guys [at the gym] that. I've had some of them question me "Mestre, but I'm not wrong. Why is it me who should apologize?" Maybe they think it's weakness or submission, but it's a way to control the situation to achieve the outcome you want. It comes from the inner strength and confidence you learn in jiu jitsu. I know my abilities and I'm confident enough in myself that it doesn't cost me anything to apologize. Could I use jiu jitsu to physically dominate a guy, obviously. There's no doubt. But that's the easy way out, and it's what gives us a bad reputation. It's not what jiu jitsu teaches us, or what I teach at the academy.

B: Mmm, I see. So how would you respond to someone at the gym using physical BJJ techniques in self-defense?

R: It's happened. One time a white belt came in proud because he had used a headlock in a bar fight. I was upset and he tried to justify "But it was self-defense, I only used it to control the situation". But I see that failing in the responsibility to de-escalate or walk away. And sometimes it's unavoidable, you know? – it seems that was the case there – But even when it's a last resort there should not be a sense of pride. It shouldn't be boasted about. This was a white belt, so (holds up hands in a "what can you expect" shrug), but he knows better now.

Indeed, even the white belts I spoke to at the gym were very vocal about feeling a strong sense of responsibility to avoid conflict and not glamourize self-defense or bring dishonor to Team Gracie BJJ. They might give each other nick names like “Destroyer” or commend each other on having “killer” technique inside the gym, but outside the gym there was a strong expectation to be model citizens and leaders in their workplaces and communities, and in doing so to challenge negative perceptions of what being a jiu-jiteiro means.

Unwillingness to use BJJ outside the gym, might also stem from an awareness of the very real dangers in doing so. For example, on August 2nd, 2022 the jiu jitsu world was rocked when World Champion BJJ fighter Leandro Lo got into an altercation with another stranger at a concert in São Paulo, Brazil (Budgen 2022). Lo allegedly used BJJ techniques to pin the person in question, Henrique Velozo, to the ground. Velozo, an off-duty police officer, proceeded to take out his gun and shoot Lo in the head. He later died from his injuries. This case was publicized at the international level because of Lo’s legendary status in the international fighting circuit, but offers a good example of how in the Brazilian context, the anticipation of very real threats of violence may prohibit the same romanticization of using BJJ outside the gym.

Perceptions of Realness in Self-Defense and Gendered Training Interactions

The differences in the social contexts of violence across Toronto and Rio were made particularly salient in instances of self-defense specific training. Over the course of my fieldwork, both MMAA and Team Gracie Academy would hold regular practices that were dedicated to more applied self-defense training. In these classes, rather than just breaking down technical aspects of a technique, instructors at both gyms constructed narratives to

situate when self-defense technique might be used. When leading self-defense classes at Team Gracie BJJ, Tó, would get serious and enter into a more dramatic story time mode:

Everyone staying for self-defense training gather around. (6 people circle up and a hush takes over the room) In everyday classes you learn techniques, but we don't always talk about how this translates into real life situations. What I'm going to show you is not just for competition or rolling. This could save your life. Think about it? How many times have you been in out in Lapa? Everyone is drinking, inhibitions are lowered. That's when people try to take advantage. Right? – how many times have we all seen it—the scoundrels wanting to rob the distracted drunk guy or getting physical with a girl they feel entitled to? (looks around somberly) You're all nodding because that's the reality we live with. So how do we deal with the situation when it inevitably happens to us?

That's what I'm going to focus on today. (Tó—Brown Belt, Fieldnote 2016)

Coach Cole at MMAA, didn't quite get as involved in the storytelling, but did try to contextualize techniques in self-defense classes in a way that was never done during regular training and drew similar distinctions between sport BJJ and self-defense techniques:

Ok guys. So today we are taking a more traditional BJJ approach and focusing on self-defense. These may not be the flashy techniques that are going to earn you gold at Abu Dhabi [a high-level international BJJ competition], but they're important to learn and have practical applications. The first technique I'm going to show is a defensive technique. It may seem basic, but you never know when it could come in handy. So, imagine you're at a bar and a fight breaks out. What do you do if a drunk person comes

at you swinging? (pauses, looking around expectantly) How would you protect yourself?
(no one answers or reacts) Come on, show me, what would you do! (Cole—Purple Belt,
Fieldnote, 2014)

In each case the examples used are quite similar and presumably present possible scenarios that participants in the classes, mostly in their twenties and thirties, might actually encounter when out at a bar. However, the social contexts in Toronto and Rio are sufficiently different that participants' interpretations of how real or probable these situations are, and in turn how meaningful the training is, are strikingly different. In Cole's class, there was a lot of giggling and eyerolling. Some participants who were getting ready for a competition the following week grumbled amongst each other that this was a waste of their time. In Tó's class the mood was somber and serious. There was none of the usual teasing, laughter or talk from the sidelines. The room felt quieter, taken over with a sense of intense focus.

While of course bar fights and sexual assaults do happen in Toronto (as shown in Jake's discussion of working security at a nightclub, or Sarah's account of a woman using BJJ to fight off a would-be attacker), at MMAA there seemed to be a sense of immunity to this possibility. It didn't *feel* like a real threat to gym members, and in turn they didn't take the training seriously. When placed in pairs and asked to have one person act out an attack while the other defended, those in the attacker role either feigned the attack with so little energy and commitment that it became pathetic, or they would over-act as if they were in a slow-motion WWE fight. In both instances the performances were so ridiculous that those

in the defensive roles were either too busy laughing or being unimpressed that they didn't put up meaningful defenses.

In fact, while on a day-to-day basis there was a high level of respect characterizing instructor-student interactions at MMAA, in self-defense classes instructors regularly had to call on participants to “focus”, “get it together” and cajoled them to “take this seriously”. For example, on one occasion Russ, who led the wrestling and MMA classes covered for one of the BJJ instructors. There was a consensus among novice students I trained with that Russ was one of the more intimidating coaches—perhaps because of his Eastern-European accent, stocky muscular frame, gnarly cauliflower ears⁴ and the rumors swirling among white-belts that he had high-level military fighting experience. While it wasn't an official self-defense class, when making technical corrections during the warm-up Russ contextualized the techniques in a similar way to how storytelling was usually deployed in those classes:

After a what feels like a longer-than-usual length of time spent jogging, Russ calls out for students to form lines and do break-falls across the room. We form 3 lines and the people at the front of each line turn around and throw themselves backwards down to the floor in a standard break fall technique. A hollow slapping sound echoes through the room as people slap the mats with their hands. They then stand up, take a few steps backwards and repeat this process. The next people in line wait a few moments

⁴ “Cauliflower ear” is a deformity to the ear caused by repeated trauma, often occurring in the course of wrestling, boxing, BJJ and other MACS: “A hematoma forms in the outer ear, disrupting the cartilage's blood supply and producing necrosis and inflammation. Fibrocartilaginous overgrowth occurs, forming the characteristic cauliflower-like appearance” (Patel et al. 2024). Despite presenting a real medical risk, in MACS having cauliflower ear is often seen as a status symbol, indicating “bad-assness” or significant fighting experience.

until there's sufficient space for them to fall backwards and then follow suit. As the first in line reach the midway point of the room, where Russ is standing, he interrupts the exercise and calls everyone over. "Hussle hustle", he insists, as people look around confused. Breakfalls are a routine part of the warm-ups and while coaches may pull a white belt aside to correct their technique, there aren't usually class-wide interjections. As the class circles around, Russ begins: "Look I know you drill doing your break falls this way for class and competition and so on, but in real life all the hand slapping is dangerous and inefficient. If you're in fight, you need to fall back ready to defend yourself. There may be glass on the floor, or broken bottles. What if you slap the floor and slam your hand down onto a 2x4 with nails sticking out? You're risking unnecessary injury and won't be able to protect yourself". Hearing this, Taylor, a purple belt who helps coach the women-only BJJ classes, snorts saying sarcastically: "Right, because there are definitely random 2x4s laying around all over the place". She's loud enough for those immediately around her to hear and they break out in a semi-muted laughter. Russ, who hasn't heard Taylor's comment asks gruffly "What's so funny? (no answer) Nothing? (looking around) Ok, back to training then!". (Fieldnote, 2014)

While instructors at MMAA attempted to coach participants into taking real-life self-defense situations seriously in their training, their efforts were never quite successful. It seemed that most gym members' lived experiences in Toronto left them generally insensitive to the threat of actual violence, and in turn didn't see these classes as practical. More competitive practitioners often treated the self-defense classes as taking away valuable opportunity for *real* (sport) BJJ training. The only time where I saw people

taking the lessons seriously was during the free self-defense seminar that was put on monthly for women in the community. In the one free seminar I attended there were 2 women who discussed having experienced gender-based violence and were very attentively trying to absorb the self-defense techniques demonstrated throughout the session. At one point, one of these women, who was supposed to be attacking from behind, grabbed her partner's neck hard enough to incite her to cough. The coach intervened "Ok ok, take it easy. You don't need to go all out. We're just practicing here". The women in these seminars, however, weren't gym members, and I never saw official BJJ class participants approach self-defense training with similar levels of focused intention.

Self-defense instructors at Team Gracie took an opposite approach to socially calibrate (Burke 2022) practitioners' intensity levels. Nearing the end of my fieldwork I asked Claudio, a brown belt who assisted Mestre Rio in leading the classes and with whom I trained regularly at the gym, if he could give me a private lesson to help fill in some of the holes in my BJJ game. He agreed, but to my surprise, when the day of the lesson rolled around, he focused entirely on teaching me self-defense, explaining: "You're part of the Gracie family so I want to pass down some of the classic techniques I learnt training directly with Helio". I hadn't once considered that this would be his focus or that self-defense was really even part of my "game". But for Claudio this was the most pressing weakness in my training.

He began by talking me through a pinky finger grab used to escape a front choke and then instructed: "So now you choke me, I'll demonstrate, and then you can try it yourself". I stepped in front of Claudio, made contact placing my two hands around his neck without

applying any pressure and waited for him to demonstrate. There was an awkward pause and he playfully scolded me: “That’s it? No, how are you going to learn this way? You have to really grab me”. I try again with what I think is a good amount of pressure. “No! No! (raising voice in frustration) What is this? Use the same pressure as when you surprised me with that guillotine last week”. I try again, this time using all my strength to choke Claudio. He turns red and is barely audible as he’s explaining the defense’s steps. Seeing this I start to ease up to allow him to talk. He interjects physically pressing my hands back around his neck and waits for me to re-tighten my grip before talking me through the rest of the technique in a strained whisper. When it’s my turn to try he warns me “Ok, get ready I’m going to attack you for real now”. I brace myself in anticipation but am still I’m shocked by Claudio’s pressure around my neck. I take a strained breath, fight the instinct to struggle, and am able to methodically execute the pinky grab. Once I’m free I rub my neck, which is already feeling a little warm and raw from the choke. Claudio eyes me and laughs: “That was good! You will be just a teeeensy bit red there tonight. But if we don’t practice it, you won’t really learn to defend a full force attack and I will have failed my job. Now...let’s do it again, a little harder”. Throughout the lesson Claudio continued to insist on running each self-defense technique several times with full force to ensure that I’m ready to defend when faced with a real attacker.

Not only was there a stark contrast in practitioners’ approaches to the self-defense training across the two gyms, and to the embodied seriousness of training demanded by MMAA and Team Gracie BJJ instructors, but the perceived threat of violence in each city also translated into very different definitions of what *real* training was. At MMAA, people

didn't have a sense that there was any serious threat of violence, and therefore "real" training for them was what they did to prepare for BJJ competitions. At Team Gracie, many gym members talked about having a real and present sense of threat, feeling that in Rio they could be attacked at any given moment. As a result, they saw self-defense training as *real* preparation for the outside world and took it very seriously. An unexpected implication of this, was that these differing perceptions of realness affected the contexts in which male practitioners felt comfortable training BJJ with women.

At Team Gracie Academy, there was a strong-held belief that gender shouldn't be a relevant factor in training. José summed this up saying: "I don't care if they're men, women, black, white, rich, poor, fat or skinny. I'm going to train with my partner based their belt level, experience and energy. Jiu jitsu hierarchies trump all other social hierarchies on the mats" and over and over I heard gym members repeating some iteration of this sentiment. My day-to-day experiences seemed to support this, as even when I was the only woman in the class, I didn't feel my gender to be a factor in how people trained with me. In 6 months of training there were only 2 exceptions to this. Once, when after training a couple of months at the gym, a woman from another Gracie Humaitá academy stopped by the night classes. Mestre Rio called me over to train with her even though I was a still a white belt and she was a blue belt. Several people gathered around and there was a sense of excitement to see which academy's female representative would come out on top. It was a fairly even until 5 minutes into the 6-minute round, when I was able to secure an arm-bar. As I adjusted the angle of my grip and lifted my hips to increase the pressure on her elbow, I heard someone say "So aggressive! All the practice with you monsters is

paying off”. The person seemed to imply that training with tough males on a regular basis better prepared me to secure a submission when training with a woman.

The only other time, I felt my gender to be of any relevance during training was the first time I attended Tó’s self-defense class. He demonstrated how to escape an attack from behind and framed this as a situation women might encounter: “if someone comes up from behind in a nightclub and tries to drag you into a dark corner”. When it came time to practice the techniques the only other 2 women in the class immediately partnered up with their boyfriends, who were also in attendance. There were 4 of us left—me and 3 other men. Two of the men were close friends and automatically turned to each other to pair up. Sergio, a purple belt with whom by that point I’d trained and walked home with on a regular basis without any awkwardness whatsoever, turned to the other guys and asked if they would switch with him. They looked at me awkwardly and whispered amongst themselves. Tó walked over and asked what the problem was. The three men shuffled without answering. Since each of them had asked me to roll with them without any hesitation in the class immediately before, I shrugged, thoroughly confused at this resistance. Claudio, who had been observing the class from the sidelines, called out: “None of them wants to be the rapist dragging her into the corner”. “C’mon guys”, Tó admonished, “stop wasting time and just pick someone”. They huddled negotiating in whispers for a few seconds before Claudio stood up frustrated “Ehhhh, what’s wrong with you guys? I’m just going to do the class with B since, apparently, it’s too difficult a task for any of you”. While I initially found their sudden unwillingness to train with me baffling, Claudio’s explanation highlighted the difference between self-defense training and the regular class that had wrapped up 10

minutes earlier. Then we'd been in gis, it was a "class", and we were "training". Within that context, BJJ hierarchies ruled and rolling with a woman wasn't an issue. We'd since changed into athletic wear, were preparing for the possibility of real attacks, and to do this properly someone would have to *really* attack me. None of them wanted to breach social taboos and be seen as violently assaulting a woman.

In contrast to this, during self-defense classes at MMAA I never sensed men being hesitant to partner up with me. There weren't the same concerns about been seen as *really* getting violent with women because, regardless of who their partner was, no one in the class was *really* attacking anyone. The possibility of facing actual violence seemed distant, and in turn the act of simulating violence was treated as a joke. In day-to-day training, however, I regularly encountered awkwardness from male partners. For example, in one BJJ class, my male partner was obviously hesitant and extremely uncomfortable with applying a technique as it had been taught. Rather than sitting on my stomach with one leg on either side straddling my body tightly, as required, he placed himself in a high kneeling position leaving a large gap between my stomach and his legs. Seeing this, the coach interjected: "Don't be afraid to put all your weight on her. She can take it." In other instances, coaches recognized that male partners held back against me during rolling sessions and prodded them with comments such as "Stop pulling your punches ... Why are you holding back?" or "C'mon, really go for it. Don't worry, you're not going to hurt her." My original analysis of this data (Burke 2022), focused on the role of instructors in encouraging men to see and engage with women as capable, equal partners. However, while this remains important, this comparative analysis highlights an important source of resistance

in mixed-gender training interactions that I'd previously overlooked. At MMAA, everyday practice is seen as *real* training, with BJJ reputations *really* being at stake. Men at MMAA may be ok training self-defense with women because it's not seen as reflecting on their *real* BJJ skills, but hesitations about mixed-gender interactions arise when training more with a more competitive sport mindset.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

As evidenced above, BJJ gyms are not islands protected from the forces of surrounding social contexts. While practitioners at the gyms in Rio and Toronto drilled similar or identical techniques and developed the same types of physical abilities, how they identified with these and chose to hide or show them varied based on their respective social contexts of violence. In Toronto where, despite evidence to the contrary, the threat of violence seemed far off, the ability to use BJJ to hold one's own in a physical encounter seemed "cool" and enabled practitioners to accrue social capital as a "bad ass" across other fields. In this sense, practitioners' perceived social distance and immunity almost allowed for a glamourization of what it hypothetically would mean to "do" violence. This was possible because of intentional efforts to solidify a globalized understanding of BJJ as refined "cerebral" sport, thus separating practitioners from potentially harmful associations with violence. In Rio, where people confront violence in the city on a regular basis and experience its effects first-hand, practitioners are very wary about being labelled as violent. This is compounded by collective memory around BJJ practitioners in Rio causing riots and violently attacking rivals, that hasn't been erased despite BJJ's global

rebranding. Within this context, being labelled jiu jitsu practitioner can imbue a person with negative associations and threaten their social standing in the community.

In addition to being shaped by social structures both inside *and* outside the gym, BJJ habitus is not impervious to consciousness. As with Paradis' (2012) account of how her relationship with her body and embodied capital as boxer changed across fields, practitioners at each gym are conscious of how their embodied training is read in different settings. In turn, they make agentic and strategic decisions around how to disclose or embody their jiu jitsu identities. For example, while Team Gracie practitioners may not brag about using BJJ outside of the gym or even disclose that they practice to their non-BJJ contacts, they will still visibly sport BJJ apparel when walking late at night or when out at a bar. Within contexts where they feel there's a real risk of physical danger, they may lean into that embodied BJJ capital and identity as a deterrent to would-be attackers. Habitus is thus not simply society being deposited into the body, but rather a complex, agentic negotiation repeatedly carried out across social interactions and social contexts.

The comparative ethnographic approach used was instrumental in highlighting how contexts of violence in Toronto and Rio de Janeiro affected these negotiations in different ways. Beyond the theoretical implications around habitus, these findings highlight provided empirical insights in the transformative potential of MACS in challenging gendered norms and behaviors across field sites. Previous research has drawn attention to different factors that may facilitate or impede challenges to traditional sex/gender hierarchies in MACS training (see for example: Channon 2014; Channon et al. 2016; Guérandel & Menneson 2007; Hamilton 2020; Kavoura et al. 2015; Maclean 2016, 2019;

Maor 2019). This study adds to this body of knowledge by highlighting the importance of engaging with perceptions of realness in mixed-sex training interactions. Seemingly transgressive mixed-sex interactions in training contexts not deemed as “real” may not have the same transformative power. Further, which types of training are deemed as “real” or “serious” evolve as martial arts are globalized and sportized. The definitional criteria of what makes a “fight” a “fight” or what constitutes “real” or “serious” violence are socially constructed, ambiguous and open to disagreement and re-definition through spectatorship and coaching (Jackson-Jacobs 2014). While simulations provide people with less risky ways of preparing for future events, what happens in practice doesn’t always translate into “real” situations (Hoffman 2006). The most effective simulations, Hoffman (2006) argues, proximate or nullify the differences between practice and reality. How then might coaches structure or re-define training activities so that BJJ practitioners can bridge the gap between perceived simulation and reality, and increase the likelihood of sex/gender norms and hierarchies being “really” challenged in mixed-sex training?

My findings raise two additional considerations for future research. While this paper focused specifically on social contexts of violence, there are other cultural influences that likely also contribute to the observed variations across field sites. For instance, one might consider how the more collectivist culture in Brazil and more individualist culture in Canada shape training relations, and in turn the salience of BJJ habitus across different fields. The Team Gracie night class, for example, is a very tight knit group that spends significant time with each other both inside and outside the academy and, stays in communication through social media even when not physically together. Within this

context, BJJ norms may seep into different areas of life more easily, because teammates carry over BJJ norms as they socialize in other settings (e.g., a night out at a bar), and are more aware of and can more easily hold each other accountable for what they do across different social fields. At MMAA, many practitioners showed up for classes, but had no contact whatsoever with training partners outside of the gym. This makes the likelihood of anyone finding out about breaches, or enforcing gym norms and structures in other settings, very unlikely.

Lastly, this paper focused on making sense of differences in understandings of BJJ practitioners in Rio and Toronto's embodied identities and training experiences. But, despite the large contextual variation across field sites, there were still significant commonalities. Further research should consider what enables some components of BJJ habitus to stay consistent and hold value, even as the martial art is globalized and evolves as it adapts to different social contexts. More fine-grained analysis within cities would also be useful to explore variation across neighborhoods (i.e. how do these processes occur in BJJ gyms with more local members from neighborhoods with lower/higher rates of violence).

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Chapter 4

Maintaining Emotional Base:

Resilience and embodied emotion work in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu

It's quarter to noon on a sunny Wednesday, and I'm sitting down for lunch in downtown Rio de Janeiro with one of my regular Brazilian Jiu Jitsu training partners, Jair. I make small talk and ask how work is going. Jair works in tech and is heavy into AI and machine learning. It's 2016, before those are really things the general public is talking about, and I'm fascinated, trying to keep up as he's switching between English and Portuguese, explaining how generative adversarial network models are used to create fake images. "There's a lot of experimentation needed for coding and training the models", he explains, "I guess in a way that's also what I like about BJJ. They're both puzzles. You know, I was just telling this to one of my co-workers, but I think puzzle-solving in jiu jitsu makes me a better puzzle-solver at work, or in life really. It's like a magic pill that I take that makes me all around better".

(Jair–Blue Belt, Fieldnote 2016)

INTRODUCTION

To the uninitiated, the connection between training Brazilian Jiu Jitsu (BJJ) and solving coding challenges, or being an all-around better person, may seem baffling. This is, after all, a martial art in which practitioners use ground or “ne waza” techniques as “levers, torsions and pressure in order to take [their opponents] to the ground and dominate them” to the point of submission or neutralization (e.g., via joint-locks or chokes) (Gracie Mag

2007). How can participating in this type of combat sport offer such extensive benefits? And yet, the idea that training BJJ is emotionally transformative and life improving is one I came across in many iterations both over the course of my fieldwork. Emerging empirical research does suggest that training BJJ is linked with the development of positive psychosocial coping resources such as resilience, i.e. the ability to resist and overcome the deleterious effects of stress and hardship. However, we don't yet have a clear understanding of the underlying mechanisms through which BJJ can help practitioners become resilient in the face of adversity. In this paper, I advance the concept of Emotional Base Work (EBM) to elucidate this process.

Establishing and maintaining "base", i.e. a stable and balanced position that maximizes practitioners' leverage to physically absorb and deliver force, is one of the most important foundations of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu (Gracie 2006; Kesting 2016). Drawing on participant-observer and interview data from Team Gracie BJJ, one of the oldest, most traditional BJJ gyms in the world, I explore how Jiu Jitsu practitioners apply this at an emotional level, regulating their emotional reactions to strategically navigate and better cope with challenging situations inside and outside the gym. Combining an enactive ethnography approach, with sociological theory on emotions, I demonstrate how this resilience is not a fixed or innate characteristic, but rather a mental component of the BJJ habitus practitioners at Team Gracie BJJ develop through embodied social interactions.

Adopting a micro-interactional approach, I show how emotional base is developed and maintained by: 1) creating a safe interactional space to confront and re-signify emotional threats; 2) expanding one's sense of control through repeated exposure to

positions that push one's physical and emotional limits, and; 3) peer feedback on visible cues about practitioners' emotional and embodied responses to intense training interactions that remain unconscious to the self (what Katz calls the "visible unconscious" (Bidet & Mêner 2013 & Corrêa Silva, Martins & Prado 2020)). In line with Jack Katz's (1999) conceptualization of people "doing" and "being done by" emotions, I examine how in doing emotional base work, BJJ practitioners engage with the duality of "emotional base" as something they develop through training, but also something that is constitutive of them as resilient subjects both inside and outside the gym.

While in this paper I use BJJ as a case study to theorize how Emotional Base Work (EBW) is developed and deployed, I do so in recognition that EBW is not unique to, or automatically practiced within BJJ training. EBM can be used to withstand the pull of emotionally heightened situations, maintain emotional stability, and in turn develop resilience across a number of settings: e.g. by Quarterbacks in American Football as they drill how to maintain the calm and control needed to accurately deliver a pass while being closed in on at full speed by a 300 pound pass rusher in a rowdy stadium; by emergency room nurses as they learn to maintain the needed composure to accurately assess and treat panicking patients in critical conditions, or; even young Black and Brown drivers as their parents teach them how to safely interact with police if they get pulled over. BJJ, however, presents a unique case study for examining EBW up close as practitioners can spar at full intensity as they practice placing themselves in situations where they are pushed to their physical limits and where their training partners could seriously injure them with an ill-applied submission. The extreme embodied nature of this training thus makes more

visible the processes of EBW that actors engage in, in more subtle ways, across other social fields. In addition, Team Gracie BJJ offers an especially ideal case for exploring these processes given on the one hand, its strong emphasis on self-control, self-defence, and social support among team members, and on the other hand, the high levels of interactional risk that Team Gracie members navigate within the context of insecurity in Rio de Janeiro.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Brazilian Jiu Jitsu & Habitus

Emerging research has found that BJJ training is associated with several psychosocial benefits including: reductions in aggression (Blomqvist Micheklsson 2020, Janowska et al. 2019, Pujszo, Wyzlic & Stepniak 2018, Wojdat & Ossowski 2019), increased self-control and prosocial behaviour (Blomqvist Micheklsson 2020), perseverance, self-confidence and healthy habits (Chinkov & Holt 2016, Costa Ferreira et al. 2018), psychic resilience (Pujszo et al. 2019), as well as overall life-satisfaction (Wojdat et al. 2017). Scholars have also conducted more applied BJJ research exploring how training can be useful as preventative social work (de Oliveira Fernandes 2014) and as part of youth development interventions (Blomqvist Micheklsson 2020, Benetti Bueno et al. 2022) to develop emotional regulation and resilience, as well as to promote de-escalation and reduce use of force among law enforcement officers (Renden et al. 2015, Torres 2020), and to support law-enforcement and military personnel coping with post-traumatic stress disorder (Hanley 2023, Willing et al. 2019, Weinberger & Burraston). Blomqvist Micheklsson (2021), however, cautions that while these studies suggest a causal

relationship between BJJ training and positive psycho-social outcomes such as emotional regulation and resilience, most of the studies are cross-sectional in design, have low-sample sizes, and ultimately do not sufficiently theorize “*how* BJJ functions as an agent of (psychosocial) change” (Blomqvist Micheklsson 2021: 1548, emphasis added).

Wacquant proposes “fighting scholars” take up enactive ethnography (an immersive approach to fieldwork in which one performs the phenomenon being studied) to disclose the habitus underlying the social practices they seek to understand (2015: 2). Inspired by Wacquant’s elaboration of the boxer’s habitus (i.e. cognitive, conative, and cathectic schemata) in his 2004 ethnography “Body and Soul”, sociologists have adopted this approach to examine processes of socialization across a variety of martial arts and combats sports (MACS) (see, for example, Sánchez García & Spencer’s (2014) edited volume “Fighting Scholars”). In this tradition, Spencer’s (2009) research on “body callusing” among mixed martial arts practitioners offers a promising approach to unpacking *how* fighters take action to harden their bodies into weapons resilient to pain and bodily damage. He illustrates how body callusing is developed through the incorporation of an ensemble of reflexive body techniques that are learnt and unlearnt, over time, to form the MMA fighter’s habitus (ibid). Green (2011) finds that fighters understand the development of resilience to pain as symbolic of growth in their training. However, fighting scholars have yet to address how mental, rather than physical resilience, is developed.

Resilience and emotion work

The concept of resilience is at once widely applicable and simultaneously difficult to account for. On the one hand, the underlying concept of what it means to be resilient is quite straightforward and sufficiently malleable to find footing across a variety of fields. Thus, while originally developed in the field of physics to describe the ability of materials to rebound or “bounce back” after bending under the pressure of an outside force (Overland 2011), its reach has quickly expanded and is now prominent across a number of fields: finance, national defense, education, self-help, etc. (Gill & Orgad 2018). Within both psychology and the sociology of mental health, for example, the concept of “resilience” is used to describe the ability to resist or overcome stress and adversity, such that more resilient folks are less vulnerable to the harmful effects of stressors and hardships (Rutter 1987, 2006).

On the other hand, while we can label things or people as “resilient” to stressors (as a descriptor of their ability to withstand or “bounce-back”), resilience is not in fact a static or innate characteristic, but rather a complex and dynamic process that is difficult to measure (Levine 2014; Ijntema, Schaufeli & Burger 2021). As of yet, we don’t fully understand what becoming resilient actually entails. Mental health research has begun to account for this by identifying more directly observable and measurable intermediary processes that might contribute to resilience, such as prior exposure to stressors, engagement of protective resources or the use of various coping strategies/skills, that might explain why some people seem more resilient to stress than others (Aneshensel & Mitchell 2014, Wheaton 1994). Research from the sociology of emotions has also examined how the development of “resilience” is increasingly being pushed on individuals

as a means of creating flexible subjects capable of successfully coping with the risk and uncertainty, emphasizing the intense emotional labour required to “become resilient” (Gill & Orgad 2018).

As humans, we have evolved to feel and express a common set of emotions (e.g. happiness, anger, sadness, fear, surprise, disgust, contempt, etc.)(Sharp & Kidder 2013: 343). Yet, while emotions are foundational to social action, bonding, communication, and interaction (ibid: 342, 358), we aren’t born knowing how to understand and effectively manage the emotions we feel. Children undergo a process of socialization to help them recognize, name and control their emotions. As our embodied experiences are integral to how we experience and act on emotions (Denzin 1984; Katz 1999), strategies to help children learn to manage emotions often focus on the mind/body connection, and use bodily cues to help kids identify what they’re feeling and respond in socially sanctioned ways (e.g. Kerek 2022, Macguire 2020, Willard & O’Leary 2019).

Once we go through this early socialization however, these processes become increasingly second-nature and we are more or less expected to manage our emotions aptly to align with the emotional norms & expectations of a given situation (Hochschild 1979). Yet, as sociological research has shown us, we aren’t all equally skilled at emotion work. The demand to engage in emotional management, to change/control the emotions we feel and display, is socially patterned based on gender, race, occupation, etc. For example, women typically are expected to engage in more emotional labour to regulate and manage their emotional expressions as part of their work & caregiving responsibilities (Hochschild 1983). Marginalized peoples, in particular women of colour, are regularly

forced to suppress or downplay emotions as a strategy to manage racism, micro-aggressions or challenges to social legitimacy based on their social location (Princing 2022).

While often under-compensated and exploited, emotional regulation is a valuable component of (re)productive labour (Hochschild 1983). Significant social value is also derived from similar forms of situational emotional responsiveness. Collins (2019), for example, outlines how the ability to become “emotionally entrained” (i.e. to match one’s emotional energy with that of other participants in a social interaction) is an important determinant of whether one is able to achieve and maintain group membership and solidarity, and can influence the power one is accorded within a given interaction. This is being conceptualized in pop psychology as “emotional elasticity” and is touted as a valuable soft skill in business contexts (Allen 2023, Dietz 2021). However, stretching oneself to respond to emotionally intense situations over prolonged periods of time can lead one to breakdown as workers push past their “elastic limit” (Wheaton et al. 2013). Further, as Collins (2004) highlights, emotional entrainment can add fuel to the fire and lead to escalation of emotional energy as people in situations of conflict get caught up in spirals of violence.

While in the examples of emotional regulation or entrainment, individuals “do” emotions (e.g. produce, show, match), Katz (1999) argues that individuals can also be “done by” emotions. In his examination of laughter at fun house mirrors, for example, Katz illustrates that emotions don’t just communicate our inner feelings to our conscious and allow these to be read externally by others, but that, when intense emotions arise, they can

break through our embodied attempts to guard our social presentation, reveal hidden aspects of the self, and in doing so function to construct new individual and group identities (ibid: 93). In this sense, being overtaken by intense emotions creates an interactional challenge, as it can threaten one's ability to maintain a collective interactional perspective with other participants, and also challenges control over the identity one seeks to present of themselves (Ibid: 128-30).

This is made all the more difficult, as individuals by necessity cannot remain conscious of all the embodied, sensual, aesthetic and emotional dimensions of their actions. For example, Katz explains that when driving, we can't maintain simultaneous attention to our feet on the pedals, hands on the steering wheel, our projections of ourselves as drivers heading on a trajectory, our projections of drivers moving along intersecting trajectories, etc. (Silva Corrêa, Martins & Prado 2020). These different dynamics may be felt at an embodied/sensuous level, but don't typically bubble up and become known in a self-reflective way until challenged (such as by getting cut off by another driver). Even then, they are more reflected in action (flipping off the offending driver in anger), rather than conscious awareness (of, for example, the feeling that one's projected sense of self was injured by being cut off) (ibid). Katz argues that feedback from witnesses or 3rd party observers are therefore particularly valuable as they can shed light on the "visible unconscious" aspects of interaction, i.e. visible cues of the emotional and embodied dynamics of action that remain unconscious to the self (Bidet, Gayet-Viaud & Le Méner 2013).

Developing and maintaining emotional base is thus a form of emotional management in that one is working to control and/or produce specific emotional responses. However, rather than trying to conform to, or match, the emotional energy or register of a particular situation, in doing EBW individuals must control their emotions to withstand or bounce back from the pull of an emotionally intense situation. In this sense, EBW can be understood as a form of emotional regulation that leverages interactional resistance to emotional entrainment to produce emotional stability and in turn, resilience. As I will demonstrate below, given the interactional challenges presented by intense emotions, the value of developing a resilient BJJ habitus and maintaining emotional base lies in how this enables a person to produce stable and desired interactional dynamics as well as group/individual identities. I show how, given the blind spots inherent to social (inter)action, this socialization is, in large part, dependent on receiving and acting on embodied feedback that trusted others can give us about the “visible unconscious” dynamics of our responses when exposed to emotionally intense and challenging situations.

FIELD SITE AND METHODS

Data Collection & Research Ethics

Data in this paper were collected through 2 rounds of ethnographic fieldwork in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. I carried out the first round from June to December 2016. During this period I wrote near-daily fieldnotes, following the guidelines in Emerson et al.'s (1995) *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. These were written within a 12-hour period of field visits. I subsequently experienced a significant research setback after sustaining a

spinal cord injury, undergoing 2 major back surgeries within the span of 3 years, and in turn having to adjust to living with chronic pain. This, paired with Covid-related restrictions, delayed my return to Rio to complete the second round of data collection. I was finally able to travel to Rio and spend a month collecting additional data from October to November 2021.

Due to ongoing physical limitations, I shifted my approach to observation and open-ended interviewing for the second round of data collection . Because of the intensity of data collection during this compressed time frame, and my physical limitations with computer-work, I also had to adapt my approach to recording fieldnotes. I kept my phone in hand and typed out detailed jottings/fieldnotes while doing observations at the gym. I prioritized capturing exact quotes, and exchanges in the moment, and relied on jottings for contextual descriptions, fleshing out jottings immediately after leaving the gym. In instances when typing out exchanges was not possible or felt cumbersome, I would save audio-notes usually within 10 minutes, repeating what was said and outlining what happened with as much precision as possible. During this second round of data collection, I conducted 15 semi-structured qualitative interviews, following the interviewing principles and practices outlined in “Lives and Legacies: A guide for qualitative research” (Hsiung 2010).

During the first round of fieldwork, I worked iteratively amongst data collection, coding, and analysis. I adapted my approach during the second round of data collection because I was not able to transcribe interviews or write out fieldnotes immediately. To document my immediate feelings and reactions, I would record more analytical voice

notes while walking home at the end of the day, talking through my impressions, unpacking different interactions and responses, and making connections between interviews and field observations. Upon returning to Canada, I began to transcribe the interviews and voice notes I had recorded. As this proved to be excessively slow and painful, I took advantage of transcription services. A grant I was awarded from the University of Toronto Sociology Department, helped to cover these additional costs. Although interviews were conducted primarily in Portuguese, some participants preferred to use English, and others went back and forth between the two languages. Ultimately, I was able to hire an anthropology PhD student fluent in Portuguese and English to help translate and transcribe the remaining data.

I obtained clearance from the University of Toronto Research Ethics Board before commencing research activities in each round of data collection. For each round, I obtained institutional consent from Mestre Rio, the head instructor for the BJJ class fieldwork and research activities. I also made sure to introduce myself, explain my research and obtain verbal informed consent from individual gym members with whom I engaged and wrote about as part of my participant observation. This was especially important as after the initial announcements about my research were made, new members continued to sign up to the gym over the course of my fieldwork. In the second round of research, Mestre Rio and other senior gym members greatly facilitated this process by introducing me and my research to new gym members. This made it easier to gain their trust and secure their informed consent to write about my observations.

When conducting interviews during the second round of research, I began by providing an overview of the project and carefully reviewing participants' rights and the ethical considerations and procedures for the project, before obtaining informed consent. I was given permission by each interviewee to collect audio-recordings of their interviews. These were encrypted using VeraCrypt software and stored in a password-protected file along with all my other research data. All identifying information was removed from my data. In all my research materials and writing, participants are identified by pseudonym (which they were given the option to select) and belt rank to protect their confidentiality. All the practitioners who participated in both rounds of data collection had received belt promotions between the first and second rounds of research. To preserve an understanding of the level of BJJ experience they had at the time of data collection, fieldnote and interview data are identified in this article based on the belt rank of the individual in question at the time of data collection (e.g. a fieldnote from 2016 might identify someone as a blue or purple belt; but, in referencing 2021 data that same person might be referred to as brown or black belt, if they had been promoted in the interim).

Team Gracie BJJ

After completing data collection on BJJ training at a Mixed Martial Arts Gym in Toronto, Canada, at the end of May 2016 I travelled to Rio Janeiro, the birthplace of modern Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, with the goal of better understanding how norms around violence are understood and negotiated in traditional BJJ training. I am fluent in English, French and Spanish, and had previously begun learning Portuguese through my undergraduate coursework. As part of my Anthropology major, I completed an independent research

course conducting 6 months of ethnographic research with an NGO providing sexual and reproductive health services in vulnerable communities in Brazil. I was required to complete undergraduate Portuguese language classes at the University of Toronto prior to beginning that research. Being immersed in Brazilian Portuguese work and social circles throughout the course of my fieldwork enabled me to achieve a moderate to high level of fluency.

My field site in Rio, Team Gracie BJJ, was in a busy downtown neighborhood convenient for people working in nearby office towers or government buildings. While I had visited other gyms, I ultimately selected this one because of its traditional curriculum, direct lineage to the founding family of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, and friendly, welcoming vibe. Throughout my fieldwork I attended night classes Monday-Friday from 6-9pm, which were run by Mestre Rio, a 6-degree black belt under BJJ founder, Helio Gracie.

Night classes were quite busy, often with 20-30 people in attendance. The majority of attendees were in their 20s or 30s, though there was also a significant representation of older members in the 40-70s range. Most gym members identified as white and pardo (tan/multi-ethnic), though there were a small number of Afro-Brazilians who trained as well. Besides me, there were 3 other women who attended night classes regularly. This meant that classes tended to be 85-95% male on most nights and all instructors and black/brown belts at the gym were men. I was quickly welcomed into a social group of mostly blue and purple belt practitioners in their early to late twenties, who became my regular training partners. Most were young professionals working in IT, business, law, public service or in the military.

In addition to rolling together on a nightly basis, we regularly hung out, having team or one-on-one lunches a couple times a week, went out together to bars most Friday or Saturday nights, and were in contact through different Whatsapp and Facebook messenger groups during the workday and over the weekends. The familiarity I developed with participants and BJJ life through training and immersion in the social life at the gym, helped inform my data collection and enabled me to collect vignettes of BJJ training, detailed biographical information about practitioners, and rich accounts of how they perceive BJJ training as influencing their lives beyond the gym.

When I arrived at the gym, I was a white belt with about 8 months of previous training experience. I completed an intro lesson with Tó, a brown belt who assisted Mestre Rio in leading classes. After his assessment I was welcomed into the regular, all-levels class. White belts at Team Gracie usually were not allowed to train with other white belts. I therefore began training primarily with black and brown belts, and within a few training sessions got approval from Mestre Rio also to train with blue and purple belts at the gym. Usually there were only 1-3 white belts in a class, and a minimum of 8-10 black belts and at least 10-12 brown belts in attendance, so this never presented a problem. In fact, regularly training with more advanced practitioners, and having them pull me aside between rounds to break down techniques, show me new approaches and explain what was going on at times when I'd get stuck, was instrumental in helping me develop my BJJ game. My progress over the course of the 6-months of fieldwork was recognized by Tó and Mestre Rio, who at the annual December graduation ceremony shortly before my return to Toronto, surprised me by awarding me a blue belt.

During the years between the two rounds of data collection, I stayed connected with Mestre Rio and others at the gym through social media. By 2021, several of my regular training partners had migrated to Australia, Europe, or the UK. Despite being spread out geographically, gym members would check-in with me through voice notes and Whatsapp messages, asking for updates on my health and family, and keeping me up to date on their social lives and BJJ training/competitions. We regularly liked and commented on each other's online posts and sent messages of support. I was even invited (though ultimately unable to attend) the wedding of a training partner who had since moved to the United States.

Before returning to Team Gracie, I had spoken to Mestre Rio and a couple of my regular training partners who were still at the gym about wanting to come and continue my research. They were supportive and knew roughly when I was coming, but because of uncertainties around covid restrictions, I had not confirmed my exact arrival date. When I finally showed up and popped my head in the door of the gym during the regular evening classes, Mestre Rio paused the class, and smiling widely called out, "Look who finally decided to rejoin the family!". People who knew me from 2016 came over to hug and welcome me back, while new members I didn't recognize, looked around confused at the fuss. I was immediately surprised by how few people were showing up to classes. I later learnt that, aside from those who had left the country, several people who were training pre-covid, decided not to return when the gym re-opened. Some didn't feel safe being in such close contact, and were concerned about getting older-family members sick. Others were still working from home and decided to join gyms closer to where they lived, as

opposed to commuting to Team Gracie, which was closer to their work. My old training partners who remained were now all Black and Brown belts. I was struck at how our connections on the mat felt unchanged, despite life moving on and everyone seeming so much more grown up. Seamlessly, we picked up our old banter and they teased me about perpetuating the stereotype of a disappearing blue belt⁵. The one major difference I noted was that growing work and family responsibilities had made it more challenging for the remaining core group to spend as much time together outside of the gym.

Aware that I was not physically up to training, Mestre Rio and my old training partners nonetheless encouraged me to put on my gi and join them on the mats. Over the next 4 weeks I spent Monday-Friday 6-9pm observing classes. On my second day at the gym, I also learnt that Mestre Rio had now taken over all the classes, not just the evening classes. I therefore also started observing the noon classes, from 12-1:30pm. Mestre Rio had requested I interview him, before he would encourage others to participate in interviews. It wasn't until the end of my second week that Mestre Rio had time to chat between the lunch and evening classes. We spoke for nearly 3 hours, sitting down in our gis on the mats of the smaller warm-up room, where one-on-one lessons usually took place. This conversation increased his confidence in the direction of my research. Following our interview he made announcements in both the lunch and evening classes, encouraging any gym member who was interested, to sit down with me for an interview.

⁵ Earning one's blue belt is the first major belt promotion adult practitioners achieve under the BJJ grading system. Many practitioners, however, end up quitting after reaching this initial goal and thus it marks a key transition point that separates short-term from long-term practitioners. When my health challenges forced me to stop training shortly after earning my blue belt, I was left open to teasing about fulfilling the stereotype of blue belts who "disappear" or quit, rather than continue on with their training.

While I met in nearby cafés with a few of the gym members I already knew, Mestre Rio generously allowed me to take over the smaller warm-up room for interviews whenever it was unoccupied.

For my remaining 2 weeks there, I would attend and observe classes. Those interested in being interviewed would signal me before, during and after classes, and we would step into the warm-up room to speak privately. After obtaining informed consent, I would cover basic demographic questions (age, gender, race, profession, and current belt rank) before diving into the more substantive topics by asking participants to tell me how they first heard about and started training jiu jitsu. In total I interviewed 13 men and 2 women, ranging from white belt to 6th degree black belt. The majority (11) identified as white. One man identified as Black or Afro-Brazilian, and 3 others (2 men and 1 women) identified as “pardo” (mixed). In the last week, I also surprised myself by being also to complete some very light training with handful of advanced practitioners hand-picked by Mestre Rio.

DATA & ANALYSIS

Practitioners at Team Gracie frequently discussed ways that training BJJ changed their lives and made them better people, better romantic partners, workers, friends, parents, etc. They spoke about getting their daily “hit” or “dose” of BJJ as having a sort of mystical effect, being a form of therapy that helped them manage symptoms of depression, anxiety or ADHD, cope with the death of loved ones and get through layoffs and bad break-ups. While a few participants did recount situations in which BJJ self-

defense training enabled them to survive violent encounters, many were actually quite resistant to discussing physical applications of BJJ techniques.

Instead, my research participants enthusiastically emphasized the ways that the more mental and social aspects of training BJJ “saved their lives” by helping them better cope with the turmoil, stress and adversity they encountered in their private, professional and social lives. They explained that being tested on the mats at the gym helped them develop resilience when tested or challenged off the mats. In the sections that follow, I develop the concept of “emotional base work” to unpack the embodied and emotional processes through which the practice of putting on a BJJ gi, and rolling around trying to choke out or physically submit their training partners helps practitioners develop the resilience to get by and be better in their day-to-day lives.

Base Position

Base is one of the most important foundations of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu. It is a stable and balanced position that maximizes practitioners’ leverage to physically absorb and deliver force whether standing up or in a grounded position on the mats (e.g. kneeling, sitting or, on all fours). Helio Gracie, the founding father of BJJ, writes about the base position in his BJJ manual (2006: 39), explaining: “the base consists of, when standing, open the legs leaving between them a distance a little greater than the distance between the shoulders. The knees should be slightly flexed, and the feet in the “ten to two” position. Be always aware of your base”. The instruction to remain balanced and slightly flexed holds true for all variations of base. Throughout training, practitioners establish, maintain and, if destabilized, seek to return to base as a dynamic position that allows them to respond

strategically to attacks from opponents or training partners, while also having the needed stability and agility to carry out attacks of their own effectively .

As a foundational position, establishing base was the unspoken default starting position for all technical training. Because I first arrived at Team Gracie with several months of training experience, I didn't receive specific instruction on getting into base position as part of everyday classes. However, near the end of my fieldwork I asked Claudio, a brown belt who assisted Mestre Rio in leading the classes and with whom I trained regularly at the gym, if he could give me a private lesson to help fill in some of the holes in my BJJ game. He agreed, and to my surprise, when the day of the lesson rolled around, he focused entirely on teaching me self-defense BJJ. While we spent the bulk of the lesson going over techniques for escaping chokes, the first 20 minutes of "warm-up" was in fact focused on establishing dynamic base positions in anticipation of potential attacks.

Claudio would start with a prompt to set the scene, e.g. "You're standing listening to music at a concert, a drunk person turns around to confront you for accidentally bumping into them" or "You're sitting down on your towel at the beach, and you notice some kids circling around looking like they want to steal your bag". After introducing a new hypothetical scene Claudio would ask "So, what's the first thing you do?". I would hedge answers like "De-escalate? Walk away?" But invariably, Claudio's answer was "Establish base!" In drilling the appropriate base position for the scenarios, it became clear that establishing base wasn't just about getting into a physical position, but rather involved a

more holistic embodied, mental and emotional process. In drilling the beach scenario, for example, Claudio instructed:

“Let’s say you’re sitting like you are now [cross-legged]. Look: (leans over and easily pushes me off balance) It’s not ideal. You might start feeling stressed and scared because you can’t effectively assess the situation. Should you stay and confront? How many are there? Is it safe to walk away? Who is around to help? You need to strategically assess your options. The first thing we want to do is establish a solid base. Bring your top leg up and place your foot on the ground in front of you. [I do this, bending my left knee into a raised position with my foot on the ground in front of me, while my right leg stays in a half butterfly position] Yes, good. Now, bring your left elbow up to your raised knee and casually rest it there. Your other hand should come to the ground, slightly bent behind you. Good! Now you have two solid points of contact with your [left] leg and [right] arm. That’s the first part of the position. The next part is staying calm and agile. Maybe to the casual observer you look like you’re sitting relaxed: “oh look at the water, what a beautiful day” (pretends to be casually gesturing with his raised hand towards the water). Relaxed is good, but we’re also staying alert: observing the surroundings, breathing and controlling your heart rate. You may only have seconds to decide what to do. Staying calm and balanced, you can assess the different options more effectively. Here for example, you can use the left arm to protect your face or head, use the right leg to kick and create distance if they approach, use your 2 points of contact to pivot and face them, or do a technical stand up to safely get up and back away. The key is staying physically and mentally

balanced so you can effectively assess and react to the situation. Ok, let's practice these options.” (Claudio–Brown Belt, Fieldnote 2016)

As we practiced establishing a dynamic base for Claudio's suggested self-defence scenarios, he would point out physical adjustments I could make to improve my position. However, he'd also consistently challenge me to remain calm, even as he'd role play an angry, aggressive attacker. Base position, in this sense, involved considerable emotion work not just to remain calm, but also to resist the pull of other's heightened emotional state. Succumbing to emotional entrainment, was especially frowned upon, as it was understood as undermining one's ability to respond strategically and effectively to situations of stress or threat.

This was something Tó, another Brown belt who had assisted in Mestre Rio's classes, explicitly discussed with me over lunch one day. As we were talking about our weekend plans, Tó asked me if by chance I had any old gi's I wanted to donate as he was going to bring a donation box to one of their partner gyms. He explained that Team Gracie supported several smaller gyms located in nearby favelas. These were typically run by former students who had earned their black belts at Team Gracie, and then opened gyms in their home neighborhoods. Periodically advanced gym members from Team Gracie would run seminars at these gyms, and collect gis or financial donations to sponsor memberships and uniforms for local kids who couldn't otherwise afford classes. Tó explained: “These kids don't have a lot of supervision. If they aren't in school, they're on the streets and getting into trouble with gangs and robbery and violence. Training gets them doing something productive. And then of course their environment is very dangerous and

unstable, so jiu jitsu also gives them tools to deal with that”. I responded enthusiastically: “Oh yes! I’ve heard a lot about “BJJ for Development” programs! I know [a local MMA gym that also has a famous BJJ program] runs anti-violence seminars in favelas, but I didn’t know Team Gracie also did that sort of thing!”. At the mention of the other gym, Tó scrunched his face into a disapproving expression:

Yes, well, not all jiu jitsu programs are the same. I personally don’t think *their* program is that great. Even at their [headquarter] location, it’s very violent. They’re always playing aggressive Baile Funk music during class. People are getting caught up in the emotion of the music. They can’t hear their own breathing or focus on what they or their partner is doing. They’re constantly working each other up and losing control. Ask Enoc, he used to train there and switched gyms because he was tired of getting injured. You know? They don’t stay centered so even if it starts out fine, by the end of the round the training is very aggressive. Imagine taking that, and applying it with already angry, aggressive kids in the favela. They will feed off each other’s energy and become even more violent. (Tó–Brown Belt, Fieldnote 2016)

Maintaining emotional base, from this perspective, is a way of resisting entrainment, whether from the emotional pull of music⁶, the environment, or others around you. While not a universal focus of BJJ training, at Team Gracie this was emphasized as a way for practitioners to stay centered on the mats, and in turn react more strategically to de-

⁶ Paul & Steinlodge (2014) similarly find that music played at MMA gyms can lead practitioners to zone out in training and that both coaches and practitioners will strategically use the lyrics, rhythm or beat of music to push the intensity or pace of training. Tó shares an understanding that music “may interact with the listener to influence his/her psychophysical state and stimulate and help guide body movement” (ibid: 23), but sees resulting increases in energy and physical output as indicators that practitioners are being thrown “off base” and not sufficiently calibrating with their training partners.

escalate situations of violence and avoid risk of injury. Practitioners also engaged in this emotional base work outside the gym to better cope with stressful or threatening situations they encountered in their day-to-day lives. The following section illustrates the processes through which BJJ practitioners learn to develop and maintain emotional base as part of their regular training.

Establishing and Maintaining Emotional Base

1. Fostering a safe space to experience and re-signify emotional stress

In BJJ, practitioners learn and apply techniques to control and try to submit or neutralize their partners either through chokes or joint lock submissions (Gracie mag 2007). While in a fight or competition scenario, a match/fight ends when one person submits the other, BJJ training has evolved so that practitioners “tap out” (physically tap the mats or some part of their opponent) when they feel submission is inevitable. They in turn immediately reset, so that training can continue seamlessly. This allows practitioners to “roll” (spar/grapple) at high intensity for extended periods of time without major injury.

The intensity (speed, force, pressure) of training is often experienced as emotionally overwhelming, especially for beginners. While, as will be explained in the section below, exposure to this emotional intensity is understood as necessary for strengthening one’s emotional base, the emotional threat it presents, also risks driving practitioners away. At Team Gracie there were officially 3 hour-long night classes, however in practice Mestre Rio would run these as a pretty seamless 3-hour session, dedicated primarily to rolling in 6, 9, or 11-minute increments. While more experienced and evenly matched practitioners might go entire rounds without tapping out, people new to the sport or training with a more

experienced partner might tap out several times per round. As reflected in the excerpts below, repeatedly having to tap out was often understood as a painful indicator of defeat or loss, and could be discouraging for beginners.

When someone is a beginner, they can come to class all week and be getting tapped out constantly. Time after time all week. That can leave you feeling like, well you know, with your head down. So, I can understand trying to resist that. But losing is a part of life. People are going to face losses in other areas of their life. And if they're not used to that, they might not handle it well. (José–Blue Belt, Interview 2021)

When I first started training, it felt like the only thing I did was tap out. Round after round, it was: (physically taps the mats twice, loudly). That was hard, you know? Because in society, either Eastern or Western, we glorify winners and the losers tend to get pushed out. So people don't want to lose. Losing or being defeated, it doesn't feel good. [B: Doesn't feel good in what way?] It feels... (pauses) I think growing up we're socialized to internalize it. If you fail at something, it doesn't just mean you're not good at that one thing, but it feels like you, as a person, aren't good. In jiu jitsu we see a lot of that when guys first come to the gym. I felt that too as a white belt. Every tap was a hit to the ego, and it was just constant. But with jiu jitsu, that's pretty much inevitable. (Bruno–Blue Belt, Interview 2021)

This initial equation of success with self-worth, and loss or tapping out as an emotional threat to the ego was echoed by every person with whom I spoke. Indeed, the inability to

deal with this emotional threat was one of the main reasons people gave to explain why white belts might not persist in training. It's not surprising then that Mestre Rio felt that addressing ego and fear of losing was a central component of his job. He explains:

For me, one of the primary jobs of the mestre is to curate the environment. You're managing people and relationships. It's hard, you know? You have to control egos and vanities. But that's why I set the tone right away. Let's say a new white belt student comes in, and they see me wearing my black belt filled with degrees, the first thing I say to them is "This belt absolutely doesn't make me better than anyone else. The only thing this shows is that I've been training jiu jitsu for a long time, and that I've been dedicated to this". And I can see in their eyes they're still dazzled. So I ask them "what's your profession?" They'll say, "I'm a lawyer" or whatever. And I respond "In your profession, I'm a no-one. I'm a white belt. But that doesn't make you any better than me. We are equals as humans. I'm here to teach because I've been doing this longer than you. But I'm no more worthy of respect than you are". And I think that makes people feel comfortable, feel at home. And it sets the expectation that people should put their egos aside and that it's ok not to be good at this. (Mestre Rio–6th Degree Black Belt, Interview 2021)

Mestre Rio thus made a concerted effort to create a safe environment in which practitioners could experience "not being good". Over time, the embodied emotional experience of being put in tough positions and repeatedly experiencing loss, allowed practitioners to re-signify the meaning of that loss. Practitioners stopped focusing on "not

being good” or “losing”. Rather than being experienced as an overwhelming emotional threat, getting pressured or tapped out in training began to feel like opportunities for growth and development. Consider the following fieldnote describing a training round with black belt, Destroyer. When I first started training, I often tried to struggle and fight my way out of submissions. But in this interaction, with 9 months of training under my belt, I have a different response:

Destroyer is sitting on top of my belly in full mount, with his legs straddled around me. “OK you got this. Be active. Get your hips out”, I think to myself as I work to angle onto my side. I buck up a bit to create room and struggle to shrimp my hips back away from him. Destroyer lets me turn and immediately begins pushing my top arm forward, and pressing my body up onto my side so more of my back is exposed. “It’s fine. You’ve been here before. You know what to do”. This position used to feel threatening, but now it’s a manageable threat. I breathe and work to tuck my top arm in close to try and keep Destroyer from catching me with an arm bar. He starts to bring his chest behind me. “Oh shit, watch your back!” I adjust trying to flatten myself out against the ground. Before I can turn back he slips his bottom hand in below my head and edges it around to grab my collar. I try to break his grip but it’s too late. His grip on my collar is tight and deep. I feel his other hand grab the pant leg of my top leg. “Wait, what?” Rather than go for a rear naked choke as I’d anticipated, Destroyer sits back and easily pulls me in a bow and arrow choke. “How did that happen?!” Right away I tap and turn to Destroyer excited “Can you

show me how you did that from side control!?” (Destroyer–Black belt, Fieldnote 2016)

There’s an awareness here that positions where I previously felt more vulnerable, stopped eliciting the same emotional response the more time I spent in them. Without realizing it, I started to see tapping out not as losing, but as an inevitable part of the roll. This allowed me to focus more on applying what I was learning. Even though throughout this excerpt I’m working on avoiding possible submissions, my concern remains focused on executing technique. Unlike when I first started training, when Destroyer ultimately catches me in the submission I don’t think twice about tapping. It doesn’t feel like losing. I was far too excited about getting Destroyer to teach me a new submission to care that I had to tap out. This shift in understanding is also reflected in different ways people described tapping out. When asked to explain the practice, new members tended to define tapping out as a way of signaling loss or defeat. More experienced members, on the other hand, expressed a different understanding:

When you’re rolling, at some point, everyone is going to tap. You get caught? Tap. It doesn’t have to be something bad. In fact, usually it’s when someone doesn’t want to tap that the training experience is bad. And the opposite is true too: tapping someone out doesn’t make you any better of a person. Over time people learn those lessons. When I was a white belt I competed, I was doing well and then I lost a match and ended up second. I was upset. With time I realized, so what? I’m learning, I’m being a good partner. You can’t do either of those if you’re too wrapped up in your ego to tap. (Lucas–Purple Belt, Interview 2021)

Jiu jitsu teaches you to pick yourself up after a loss and keep going. Because, you might get tapped out 5 times in the first minute of rolling, but there's 5 more minutes on the clock and you need to persevere. And maybe in those last five minutes you catch someone else in a submission. But if you give up, or get mad or frustrated, that's not going to happen. So jiu jitsu teaches you to persevere, and to stay calm even when you feel like you're in a threatening or uncomfortable situation. That's the main thing. You can't see tapping out as a loss. You have to see it as an opportunity to keep going and do better. (Eduardo–Brown Belt, Interview 2021)

Reframing the meaning of “loss” to “opportunity” wasn't just something practitioners brought to their training, but also something they discussed applying when they encountered difficult challenges in day-to-day life. By creating a safe space for practitioners to experience and re-signify the emotional threat of “not being good enough” on the mats, the mestre was also helping to expand the range of environments in which practitioners could apply their new understandings of “loss” and to feel emotionally secure enough to experience loss or admit defeat off the mats as well. David, a black belt spoke about applying this mindset after he missed landing his dream job after graduation:

I was devastated at first. I had been in school training for so long. I went into the interview very confident, and then in the moment, it really didn't feel good. As soon as I got out, I knew I wasn't going to get the job. I started to get very upset. But I thought to myself: “This moment is just like any other time when you're rolling”. You

know? It's like you're challenged, and you get to decide how to respond to that challenge. You can see it as a failure and get depressed or you can see it as an opportunity to learn and keep going. If you keep getting tapped out in a specific position, maybe you ask yourself: "What was I thinking in this situation? What was I able to do, or not do? What could I do differently?" My objective is to learn about myself so I can grow. It's the same with the interview. I told myself: "this isn't a failure" and decided to use it as a learning opportunity to do better next time.

(David-Black Belt, Interview 2021)

By reframing the meaning of the interview from a failure to an opportunity, David no longer experiences it as being so threatening. He's able to move past his initial reaction, re-establish emotional base, and focus on unpacking what happened so that he can use that knowledge to do better in future interviews. Jiu jitsu training similarly helped Augusto re-evaluate the meaning of stressful encounters, by giving him a different embodied perspective of what a true threat to his ego or physical integrity actually entails:

When you're rolling, you're constantly getting tested. You get used to being pushed to your physical and emotional limits. Every time you train, you experience what it feels like to be seconds away from having your joint snapped or passing out from a choke. The more you train, the more you learn you don't need to (raises hands to do bunny ears quotes) "win" every test. There's nothing wrong with tapping, and to be honest you quickly learn there are many times when actually it's better to tap out...to be responsible and recognize your limits. And that's something that applies off the mats too. [B: Can you think of an example?] It's constant, you know? Friday I

was at a bar. Things got a bit messy and this guy stepped up to me pretty heated. Before jiu jitsu, I might have felt my ego was at play and engaged the guy. But now it's like, first, I test my skills every day on the mats. I know what a real test is. This isn't it. I don't need to worry about my ego here. Second, if I can tap out to guys I actually respect and care about everyday on the mats, then why should I care to do basically the same here for this guy I don't even know. Even if I didn't do anything, what does it cost me to apologize and stop the interaction? So this mindset helps you see that in that situation, you don't lose anything from walking away, and in actuality it's the better choice. (Augusto–Brown Belt, Interview 2021)

Here again, we see an emphasis on learning. By regularly training himself to be ok tapping out on the mats when his bodily integrity is on the line (like with a choke or joint lock), Augusto is learning it's ok to metaphorically tap out of a heated verbal exchange. There are two components to this. One the one hand, someone speaking aggressively to Augusto no longer feels as triggering because he's used to being pushed to his physical and emotional limits on the mats. On the other hand, there's a shift in understanding around what it means to win or lose. Winning and losing in this context is no longer about his interaction with the guy at the bar, it's about his own ability to analyze the situation and accurately determine if it's a "test" worth winning. Through his training Augusto stopped seeing walking away from a fight as a loss or a "real" threat to the ego, but rather as a way to demonstrate humility and responsibility. There is in fact a mental battle at play, but the real loss Augusto is protecting against, is being pushed off emotional base and getting pulled into conflict.

2. Being pushed to, and practicing control when at one's physical and emotional limits

As noted above, the high intensity of BJJ training allows practitioners to be pushed regularly to their physical and emotional limits. This is hypothesized to act as a type of exposure therapy desensitizing people to situations of stress or emotional threat (Willing et al. (2019). Sudgen (2021) argues that BJJ helps practitioners learn to stay calm in the face of stressors, but how? My findings suggest this is primarily through socialization and the use of embodied cues that help practitioners increase control over their own emotions, and maintain emotional base.

Chico, for example, talks about how socialization from the mestre and fellow gym members helps him maintain a sense of control and stay safe when navigating the dangers and uncertainties of urban life in Rio de Janeiro.

Rio is a city that has a lot of agitated people. There's a lot of stress and risk in our social environment. So, any disagreement or misunderstanding you have in the street, you have to try not to enter into the same vibration of the other person. You can't respond with violence because you don't know how it will end up. That can make you really on edge all the time. I had something happen, for example, and I was upset and started arguing. My first reaction was "I'm going to beat this motherfucker up". This was when I was much younger and a lower belt rank. But I had had the benefit of learning from guys at the gym who were upstanding, correct, and they demonstrated that ethic of self-control and I had that ingrained in me. And every time I'm challenged, I hear [Mestre Rio's] voice in my head, telling me to breathe and stay in control. It's because of that that I could stay calm and not

engage. But before training I definitely would have. So training and taking on that BJJ philosophy, it's something that changed me as a person and changed how I live in the city. I'm not as worried when I'm out now, because I know that whatever situation I'm in, I'm in control. (Chico–Black Belt, Interview 2021)

We see here how learning to resist the emotional pull of others and maintain emotional base in moments of stress or threat, contributes to Chico developing a more generalized sense of control over his interactions in a risky social environment. He attributes this to the sense of control engrained through BJJ training, and specifically being able to recall Mestre Rio's coaching inside the gym to “breathe and stay in control” , and draw upon it when challenged outside of the gym. The repeated instruction to “breathe”, indeed, was one of the first things that struck me when I first started training at Team Gracie. As reflected in my field note from the first day that I was given the green light to roll in the regular night classes at the gym, I actually found being told to breathe frustrating:

I don't know if it's just a different style, but I feel like I'm being forced to go in slow motion. Every single person I train with keeps telling me “Breathe, Breathe”. Trying to pass guard “breathe”, fighting grips “breathe”, trying to escape mount “breathe”. I'm not breathing hard, I'm not going all out, I don't feel like I'm rushing or being impatient. But apparently, I'm doing something wrong. Maybe it's like yoga? I can't just make a move, I have to breathe as I execute the move? Or maybe I'm breathing wrong? (Fieldnote, 2016)

When I asked Tó about this at the next practice, he tried to reassure me: “They just want to help you relax because you’re tense. You’re doing the right things, but your muscles are contracted, you’re preoccupied with what’s coming next. Try to...(brings hands up and down as he takes two deep breaths through his nose) calm down and be in the moment”. Tó’s explanation allowed me to understand that the emphasis on breath wasn’t actually about breath at all. Rather, it was a return to embodied emotional cues, like those in the children’s books described above. The instruction to “breathe” was a way for training partners to help each other recognize emotional reactions they might not be aware of, and start to control these. For beginners, it was also a way for more advanced training partners to slow down the interaction, and get you to feel out the situation, so you can act strategically and methodically. Annie tells us:

“Breathe”, that’s something people would tell me all the time when I first started training. I think it’s fundamental. Breathing is about self-control. It’s a way for people to learn control when they’re in difficult circumstances. Not to panic or act out of preservation instinct, but to stay calm and collected. The direction to “breathe” is a cue to do that. To maintain your rhythm and cadence... to be more conscious of what is happening in those more complicated moments. To stay aware so you can actually analyze and feel out the best way to proceed. (Annie– Blue Belt, Interview 2021)

Like Chico, both Tó and Annie understand breathing as a tool for slowing down a heated moment so that you can stay composed and react strategically. Maintaining emotional base in this way fosters resilience by allowing practitioners to maintain a greater sense of

control. Rather than spiraling into an emotional panic, they can slow down to process and strategically assess the options available to them in moments of stress, and in turn make smart, technical choices. Mestre Rio explains:

Some students have asked me, “Mestre Rio do you do a special kind of breathing for your training?” I don’t. Sometimes if I’m training hard, you might even catch me breathing with my mouth open (grins, as if brazenly fessing up to a terrible sin). No, when I talk to students about the importance of breathing, what I’m talking about is the importance of maintaining calm, and to maintain self-control even in the most complicated situations. Breath is a way we cue that. It’s not about how you breathe. It’s about how you’re able to conserve energy and stay calm. And that’s by remembering to breathe. It allows you to keep a reserve of gas in the tank, you know, not get to that point when you’re - (loudly takes a few deep, quick gasps of air) – you know? When you know you’ve run out of gas and you can’t do anything, that’s when panic sets in: “What am I going to do? I’m facing this threat and I have nothing left to deal with it”. That moment of desperation...That’s what breathing helps you avoid, and why it is so important. When you learn to breathe and stay calm you know that whatever the situation, you can stay in control. That’s a huge advantage, for any aspect of your life. (Mestre Rio–6th degree Black Belt, Interview 2021)

The cue of using breath to ensure you always have gas in the tank, speaks to the emphasis on efficiency that is so integral to BJJ philosophy: by being efficient in one’s technique and movements, a much smaller or weaker jiu jitsu practitioner can defeat a larger or stronger

opponent. In this context though, BJJ isn't a physical practice, it's a mindset. Prioritizing efficiency means that not only are practitioners able to process different options available to them, but also to maintain the emotional base needed to execute the best strategy to deal with whatever challenge they encounter. Hector discusses how this helps him in his job as public servant:

When there's a high stress period at work, sometimes I just feel saturated with too many demands, too many people coming to ask for things, deadlines piling up. It starts to feel impossible. That's when the mental jiu jitsu comes in. Breathing and being able to stay calm, and deal with things strategically. Not getting overwhelmed. During those periods you see some people running around, and missing things that are right in front of them. They're moving faster but doing less. Jiu jitsu is calm, technical efficiency. I don't need to run around all flustered. I know from jiu jitsu it's more productive to breathe, have foresight and be strategic. And that gives me the confidence to know I can handle whatever my job needs from me.

(Hector, Black Belt, Interview 2021)

By regularly putting themselves in training experiences where they're challenged, and cued to breathe through their emotions, practitioners develop a type of embodied muscle memory and confidence. The knowledge that they can maintain control and emotional base when under pressure at the gym, allows them to resist emotional entrainment and maintain base when navigating challenges in other contexts.

3. Peer engagement and feedback on the "visible unconscious"

Brazilian Jiu Jitsu is not a team sport. You train to develop your individual skills, abilities, and mindset. But, it's also not an individual practice. There's essentially no individual drilling. Every technique, every lesson must be practiced and applied in interaction with another person. As Mestre Rio explains:

You can never learn jiu jitsu on your own. For me to become a black belt, I had a lot of help. And that's true for everyone. For every black belt, there are countless people who have spent hours on the mat sweating and bleeding with that person, to make them the black belt that they are. The person who understands that, understands everything. (Mestre Rio, 6th Degree Black Belt, Interview 2021)

So, while practitioners may experience individual growth and have personal achievements throughout their BJJ journeys, these ultimately stem from training interactions with fellow gym members. Thinking this through, challenged me to reconsider one of the key mental and emotional benefits practitioners attributed to training BJJ. Consider the following example:

I had gone through a separation. It was a long-term relationship and had ended very badly. I was quite traumatized - panic attacks, anxiety, feeling depressed. All that. It felt all consuming. I was going to therapy twice a week to try to figure out how to get through it. But nothing was helping. It was affecting every part of my life and I just wanted something to do that would get me up and active. From the first jiu jitsu class I tried, I was addicted. Stepping on the mat was the first time I was able to spend even an hour without thinking about my problems. Burying myself in work hadn't helped. Going to the gym to lift weights hadn't helped. Staying home hadn't

helped. Going out with friends hadn't helped. It was like no matter where I was, I felt overwhelmed and couldn't escape those negative emotions. Except on the mats! So being able to leave that mindset, learn to control my emotions and have a moment of serenity, it was a priceless escape valve! I honestly don't know how I would have gotten through that time period without jiu jitsu. And even now, if I have a stressful day at work and I'm worrying about my clients and court or whatever, I know I can come, and leave all that behind and completely disconnect here. And that makes a huge difference for me, psychologically (Natasha–White Belt, Interview 2021).

When coding my data, I identified a number of similar references to jiu jitsu as an escape or physical outlet. Practitioners described the time they carved out to train as a means: “to clear my mind”, “blow off steam” and “leave negative emotions behind”. It was often in this context that practitioners would describe jiu jitsu as “therapy” or “self-care”. The time they spent on the mats was a reprieve from daily life and provided them with a sense of catharsis or emotional release. In sport and exercise research, catharsis is typically understood to occur when an individual is able to relax by expressing and releasing strong, pent-up emotions through activity (Sachs 2019). An example of this would be an angry or aggressive person using more violent or heavy contact sports as a way to channel those feelings in a socially sanctioned setting. But, research doesn't tend to support this theory, finding instead that “engaging in or viewing aggressive actions often leads to increased levels of aggressive feelings and actions” (ibid: 2).

So, why is it that jiu jitsu does seem to lower aggression and that so many practitioners, like Natasha, do experience a sense of emotional relief? A closer

examination of my data points to jiu jitsu as teaching practitioners to *control* not *release* emotion, made possible primarily through supportive social interactions. Getting on the mats doesn't magically clear your mind, and practitioners aren't typically channeling their stress into their training. Rather, these benefits stem from interacting with training partners who are engaging them physically and mentally with sufficient intensity to force them to focus on the task at hand. Their partners' feedback on their behaviour enables practitioners to further strengthen their emotional base. As shown in the following excerpts, this physical and emotional engagement with training partners is understood as foundational to being a good training partner.

Look, in rolling, your number one concern should be your training partner. You have to pay attention to them, and their needs, and respond accordingly. When you're both in that moment, you're being challenged physically and mentally. You can't think about your day, the fight with your wife, what's going on in your life...To begin with, there's no time to think about that when you have to try to anticipate your partner and defend against their attacks. How are you going to be worried about "Oh I forgot to buy eggs" when there's someone trying to choke you or take your arm off? And then, if you're distracted and unfocused, you're not able to process your partner's reactions and you can end up hurting them or getting hurt. But when you each control your emotions and prioritize the other person, you start to sync up. The roll starts to flow, and you're absorbed in the moment. That's the best feeling. I imagine it's like how my neurotransmitters would be if I took drugs. Just: "Ahhhhhhh". That feeling stays with you even after training. You go home happy.

But, it's completely dependent on your training partners. If your training partner is resisting too much, being selfish in the roll, shutting you down... you're not going to have that. You just leave frustrated. (Bruno, Blue Belt, Interview 2021)

If I'm going to get a submission and tap my partner out, I'm going to want to do it without hurting them. If I pay attention, I might realize "ok this person has no flexibility in their shoulders". Then, I need to take care not to stress them in any way that will injure them, even if that means giving up the submission. You need to have the right priorities, you know? Valuing your training partners and putting their wellbeing above everything else. And (mischievous smile), of course, being a good gossip. You need to be aware of what's going on with everyone and pass that information on. Not just because it's fun, which it is, but because then you know how to do right by people. [B: What do you mean by "do right by people"?] Well, if you had a bad day and seem to be less patient than usual, I'm going to notice that and approach rolling with you differently. And I'll joke and tease a bit, maybe bring the others into the banter. It's for your benefit, but it's also for their benefit and will impact how they train with you too. You know? That banter gives the others a heads up, so they don't get sucked into that energy. And it gives you feedback, in a non-threatening way, to let it go and focus. That's not limited to mood. I'd do that for injuries or people with an aggressive style, so many things. The roll is only good if it's good for the lower ranked belt. So as a black belt, every time we train, I need to feel out how you're acting and adjust my approach accordingly. And you can't do that if

you're just focused on your own concerns or being competitive. The ego gets between you and your training partner, and both end up worse off. (Hector–Black Belt, Interview 2021)

There are a few things to tease out here. First, the nature of jiu jitsu as highly technical and strategy-based while simultaneously being close-contact and high impact, makes it very difficult to be anything other than present in the moment. Round after round, you have to anticipate and defend your partner's submissions, while trying to set up and execute your own attacks. As Bruno says, you can't really be thinking of other things "when there's someone trying to choke you or take your arm off". In that sense, having a training partner who observes you and is able to assess and apply the right amount of force to challenge you, immediately takes your mind off any other worries you have and forces you to focus on the present.

At the same time, because Jiu Jitsu is an intense and technical contact sport, there is a very real and ever-present risk of injury. When you're rolling, you're virtually always physically connected to your partner. You need to be cautious of how your weight is distributed, how your own movements may contort or strain your partner. A choke held for too long can cause a person to black out. A badly applied joint lock can easily lead to dislocation, cause a soft tissue tear or fracture a bone. Because of this, at Team Gracie there's a shared understanding and social expectation that you always need to pay attention to, maintain focus on, and care for your training partner's wellbeing. This isn't limited to their physical wellness, but also their emotional wellbeing. Training partners focus on being attuned to their partner's physical, emotional and social needs, so as to

engage in social calibration (for more on this see Burke 2022) and accommodate these needs in training. To put their training partners first, practitioners need to control their own emotions and let their own egos and agendas take a backseat. This allows them to disconnect from their daily stressors and focus on creating a safe, challenging, and enjoyable training experience for their partner.

Further, as described by Bruno, when two partners are putting each other first and giving each other what they need in an interaction, they're able to enter a state of flow. Flow involves being "immersed in absolute focus on an activity which is just performing, detached from ego and oneself, [...]"(Kohoutkova, Masaryuk & Reguli 2018:1). It is experienced as a highly rewarding state that "can bring feelings of happiness, pleasure and satisfaction" (ibid). Similar to Bruno's descriptions of this making him feel like his neurotransmitters are on drugs, others at the gym talked about getting a "a BJJ high" or "jiu jitsu glow" after flow-rolling, or as having "a rush of endorphins that wipes away any stress you walked into the gym with". But this is contingent on there being a successful interaction with a supportive training partner who doesn't pull you out of the moment.

Lastly, as highlighted by Hector's playful discussion about "being a good gossip", to be able to engage in effective social calibration and maintain a safe and enjoyable state of flow, practitioners are observing and learning about each other's physical and emotional reactions and tendencies. They develop a familiarity with each other's "typical" ways of being and training, and quickly pick up on and use friendly banter and teasing to communicate to their training partners and others around when someone is upset, tired, injured, etc. A person may walk into the gym after battling heavy evening traffic, and not

even realize how tense, wound up or impatient they are. Instead, they might just process this as eagerness to get on the mats and start training. At Team Gracie, however, training partners are socialized to pick on the “visible unconscious” (Bidet & Mêner 2013 & Corrêa Silva, Martins & Prado 2020) as they interact with the person, and begin to playfully tease or call them out on their impatience and tension.

Joking with others about a person’s mood or disposition, doesn’t only communicate how to better engage their training partner. It’s also a way of warning others to be aware of, and resist entrainment into that person’s energy, and to informally call on the group to participate in helping this person re-establish emotional base, by perhaps, coaching them to breathe and regulate their emotions, or creating opportunities for them to practice patience throughout their training encounters. Practitioners don’t arrive at the gym knowing how to pick up on or communicate or learn from these cues. As Zeerubavel (2006) emphasizes, how we direct our attention, what we choose to notice or ignore is socialized. The interactional socialization practitioners undergo to pay attention to and learn from subtle physical and emotional cues from others, that might indicate someone is in a heightened, negative or unproductive emotional state, are foundational to practitioners’ ability to resist emotional entrainment, and to maintain a solid enough base to support and help their training partners grow.

The close physical contact and care work that partners engage in during training, create strong social bonds amongst gym members. As noted above, the core group of 10-12 people I hung out and trained with during my first round of fieldwork, rolled together 2-3 hours a night after work, were also in regular contact throughout the day chatting in

different gym whatsapp or facebook messenger groups, ate lunch together 1-2 times a week, went out together socially weekend nights, and would regularly spend a day together on the weekends to support each other at competitions. When I returned for the second round of fieldwork, everyone was busier with work responsibilities and family obligations, so they weren't hanging out as often at night or on the weekend. But, even so, when you consider that most people were at school or work all day, spent evenings at the gym, and had long commutes to and from home, it's not an exaggeration to say that in many cases, people were spending more time with their Team Gracie family than their actual family. This led practitioners to develop a sense that, through training, your BJJ family comes to know and understand you at a deeper level than other people in your life:

Your boss, your friends, and even your spouse or parents—they all see this fabrication of who you want them to see. It's like a mask that you put on to be liked or respected...or to be loved. Maybe the people you're closest with you have seen you in moments where you've dropped the mask. But at the same time, those are also the people who we're most afraid of being judged and abandoned by, so I don't know if we ever drop that mask completely. It's very particular, but when you're on the mats rolling with someone, even someone you've never met, that mask can slide away and reveal core aspects of who you are. If you're insecure, if you're vain, proud, have a temper, whatever it is...that all gets revealed in training. Your response when you're being pressured by a training partner has a way of revealing your true nature. Because when you're flowing or reaching your limit, you don't have the time or mental capacity to think about how others are judging you...you just

react off instinct, and your partners will see whatever that instinct is. (Claudio–
Black Belt, Interview 2021)

That possibility Claudio describes, when you're training at high intensity, pushed to your emotional limit and your "mask can slide away and reveal core aspects of who you are", highlights the interactional risk of "being done by emotion" (Katz 1999). The focus and presence of mind required to defend and advance your position when rolling at high intensity makes it nearly impossible to engage in front stage emotion work to maintain the identity one seeks to present of themselves. The interactional challenge of doing jiu jitsu opens up the possibility for the social mask to drop, and a hidden aspect of the self to be revealed. The person, their identity, is thus "done by" emotion. Fellow gym members learn to recognize this and will interpret how a person reacts in these instinctual moments as indicators of deep, hidden identity traits. Consider, for example, the following fieldnote unpacking a rolling experience with a fellow blue belt, Silvio. As part of his training for an upcoming competition, Silvio was heavily pushing the pace throughout the round. When, 7 minutes in, I sneak his jacket lapel around his neck and begin to choke him with it, he resists tapping out:

We lock eyes and I catch the flash of recognition when he realizes what's happened. He unsuccessfully tries to break my choke, and his face starts to flush. I know the choke is deep, but I tighten a bit more looking for signs that he's going to tap. Instead, his eyes harden into a steely gaze and I know, in that instant, that he's going to be stubborn and fight this all the way. "Really?!?" I think to myself as his whole head starts turning a deep shade of red. Worried he's going to pass out, I use

the choke as a fulcrum and wrap my spare hand under his far leg to leverage him over me and onto his back so we can keep rolling. When the round ends, Chico, who had been observing the round, sits down on the mats beside me and asks why I let go of the choke. I respond that I could just tell Silvio wasn't going to tap, and Chico responds, "Typical of Silvio! You'd never know talking to him, but he's a mule! He really needs to get that under control". (Fieldnote, 2016)

Chico isn't just criticizing Silvio for being stubborn in that one interaction. He's diagnosing a deeper stubborn essence (of a mule), that isn't revealed in day-to-day interactions. That type of assessment "she gives up too easily", "he's too proud to tap to anyone less than a black belt", "she gets flustered when surprised", adds an extra layer of vulnerability to jiu jitsu training. As Nelson explains: "Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu will expose everything inside an individual; metaphorically, on the mat an individual is fully naked" (2018: 38). People at Team Gracie spoke about this vulnerability with training partners saying: "your training partners are your mirror – they reflect your vulnerabilities back at you", "they've seen me at my best and my worst" and "I've never felt as seen and exposed as I have on the mats". The fact that training BJJ creates these interactional challenges where practitioners can be "done by emotions" and have their deep emotional essence and instincts revealed to others could easily be experienced as threatening. It is ultimately a loss of control over how one identifies themselves and is seen by others at the gym. However, the fact that this vulnerability is met with care and support creates a deep sense of connection and trust:

The people in these 4 walls know my every instinct. They see all my weaknesses when we train. But instead of judging me for it or pushing me out, they push me to

work on myself and be someone the team can be proud of. I don't know of anywhere else where that happens on this level. (Annie–Blue Belt, Interview 2021)

You look out for each other, even outside of the gym. These are the deepest bonds. And that's why I trust them. If they say I can keep going, I know I can find more to give. Because these are the people that really know me. Know what I'm made of. They won't push you to do something you couldn't manage. Your training partners know you and want the best for you, and if you trust that and listen, you will grow in jiu jitsu and in life. (Enoc–Black Belt, Interview 2021)

There's a shared understanding here that by picking up on the "visible unconscious" aspects of your behaviour, and witnessing how you respond when "done by" emotion, training partners come to know you, perhaps even better than you know yourself. This opens up an interactional possibility for them to coach each other through these moments, so that they can learn to control their deep, hidden instincts and develop and maintain a stronger emotional base. The deep sense of acceptance and trust they develop with each other, makes training partners more receptive to advice and support, and willing to follow fellow gym members guidance to not just reach and maintain control at, but also start to push past and expand their own emotional limits. We can see this in how Nelson (brown belt) describes how trusted training partners pushed him to keep going, even after he tapped out, thinking he'd reached his limit:

When I first began training, as soon as someone started choking me, I just tapped out. I didn't have the self-control to process and work through those hard moments.

I let my emotions get the better of me. I spent a long time like that, not just on the mats but in life. But rolling, and being put in those situations over and over, and having training partners who would challenge you if you tap, you know, they would be looking at me training and be able to say “no, don’t stop” that’s not the answer”. When you tap, it’s because you think you’re done, it’s over, there’s nothing more you can do. But they’d start to see me getting overwhelmed and push me: “try this, try that”, “BREATHE”... they’d keep enough pressure that I needed to fight those panic instincts, and clear my mind enough to be able to process what people around me are saying. Telling me how I could react with technique and breathe through my emotions. That’s one of the great things here, because your training partners are brothers, they’re family. They know you and they want you to grow, you know? In most circumstances if you were to tap, the only right thing would be to stop. But if someone is watching your round, or even the person rolling with you, and they know that you have a tendency to get in your head and get overwhelmed, they can challenge that instinct. At first that’s not nice. You know? You’re panicking, want to tap and someone is saying keep going? But your mestre, your brothers, when they’re coaching you through that moment, you focus in on one step at a time, like tunnel vision fighting for survival. You’re breathing, and listening, and being methodical. And then, when it works, when you actually defend the choke, you feel relief and pride and you know what to do next time. You breathe, you focus on one step at a time. You listen to the voices of your mestre and training partners, and you keep going. It’s addicting! Things you thought were impossible become do-able. So

with time you walk around the world with the knowledge that no matter what you come up against – with work, with family, with friends—if you stay calm you know you can figure out a solution. You don't just give up. (Nelson–Brown Belt, Interview 2021)

In most circumstances, if you tap out in BJJ, the only acceptable response from a training partner is to immediately stop and reset. While this is the standard practice at Team Gracie, as beginners almost exclusively roll with black and brown belts, it means that as trust starts to develop and training partners learn about each other, more advanced practitioners might start to see, for example, that getting emotionally overwhelmed and “tapping out” or giving up in tough situations is a patterned behaviour holding a person back. In rare cases, they may make a judgment call and, maintaining careful control to ensure no one gets injured, push the individual to keep going even after they tapped. With time, as they repeatedly experience being able to push through and succeed even after they thought they'd reached their limit, a person's own assessment of what that limit is might expand: “the impossible becomes do-able”. This is something higher belts at Team Gracie describe as part of their responsibility:

Every time you roll, you have to adapt yourself to the person. White belt, the way I understand it, the training interaction is for them. It's for me too, but it's primarily for them. I have to make sure that they are learning and growing. If I just dominate and tap them out, they aren't learning. Or if they're trying to execute a technique and I'm a wall of resistance then they aren't learning. With a higher belt, and even more so with another black belt you push more. There's a give and take. But with a

white belt, especially a beginner white belt, I have to challenge them enough, you know not giving submissions away, but also make them work for it...where they're challenged to push just beyond what they think they can handle. So that they continue to grow. (Chico–Black Belt, Interview 2021)

The idea that “training is only good, if it’s good for the lower belt” was emphasized by Mestre Rio in our interview, and I frequently heard this echoed by other gym members throughout my fieldwork. To implement this, practitioners go through a learning process as they get promoted and take on the responsibility of a higher belt, to be able to recognize what the “right” amount of challenge is for each of their training partners and be able to provide it.

As illustrated in this section, this entails 1) understanding what a “good” or “successful” training interaction and training partner are, 2) learning to receive and take on feedback about one’s own behaviour to establish and maintain a strong emotional base, and then 3) relying on that emotional base to resist entrainment and begin to provide feedback to others around them to also help them grow. In learning to do jiu jitsu, practitioners become part of a moral community that is constantly observing, giving feedback on each other’s jiu jitsu techniques, and also each other’s emotional base. Through participation in this community, they learn to control their own emotions, and to pick up and communicate embodied and emotional cues from others to resist emotional entrainment and maintain their own base. This in turn allows them to support fellow training partners learning to strengthen their own emotional base, and develop greater emotional resilience inside and outside of the gym.

In learning to develop and maintain their emotional base, BJJ practitioners at Team Gracie strengthen their ability to engage in EBM to help cope with emotionally overwhelming situations they encounter in their day-to-day lives. While many practitioners did see training as a reprieve from the stress and precarity of everyday life, the gym acted as a moral community. Participants in this community were willing to be pushed to, and even past, their physical and emotional limits, to grow in jiu jitsu and life, because they have a deep sense of trust that their training partners know what they need to be “a better, more upstanding person”. Discussions around what being a “good person” entailed tended to reflect specific class and cultural values: e.g. “you have to be responsible and be someone that people at work and at home can depend on”, “the goal is to be someone respectful, someone balanced, who has their life under control”, or “when I see someone who works hard, who takes care of themselves, nurtures their body and their family, who is outgoing and surrounded by friends – that’s someone I want to be around and someone I can respect and look up to”. Maintaining emotional base, within this context, can thus be understood as a means of developing the resilience to persevere through stress and precarity and strive towards fulfilling these cultural values and ideals.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper answers the call to study the processes through which sports, and BJJ training in particular, can help foster positive mental and emotional changes (Baker et al. 2010, Holt & Sehn 2008). Engaging in enactive ethnography enabled me to identify emotional base work as a key technique through which a resilient BJJ habitus is developed. I showed how this happened by 1) creating a safe space to experience and re-signify

emotional threats, 2) pushing practitioners to practicing control when at, or beyond, their physical and emotional limits and 3) providing peer feedback on the visible unconscious responses practitioners have to emotionally intense interactions. My data illustrate how practitioners draw on their resilient BJJ habitus to maintain emotional base at the gym, and also to withstand and cope with precarity and threats in their day-to-day lives with calm, strategic efficiency.

From a methodological standpoint, enactive ethnography was key in allowing me to unpack the nuanced micro-interactional processes at play. By combining participant observation with qualitative interviewing, I was able to experience and document the embodied processes of socialization through which practitioners learn to develop and maintain emotional base, and bring these into conversation with my own and other practitioners' reflexive interpretations of these training interactions. This was particularly important for elucidating the role of peer feedback on the "visible unconscious", and enabled me to attend to the interactional, embodied and transcendent phenomena at play (Weenink et al. 2020).

This research deepens our understanding of habitus, and of the development of a BJJ habitus in particular, by unpacking how practitioners acquire physically and mentally resilient dispositions. Spencer's (2009) study of how fighters become physically resilient to pain and bodily damage through "body callusing" argues for a phenomenological, rather than Bourdieusian understanding of habitus, to better account for the fluid, dynamic and agentic processes through which a fighter's habitus is made and remade. My analysis supports this perspective, showing that habitus is not just an unconscious process of

society being deposited in the body, but rather involves a social and reflexive process of engagement and (inter)action, which is both both physical and emotional. In addition to body callusing, I show how BJJ practitioners engaged in EBW as a technique to develop emotional resilience.

I found that Emotional base work, in particular, had important implications for practitioners' sense of identity. Spencer (2009) argues that the MMA fighter identity is not centered around an intimidating body, but rather what their bodies can do to an opponent in a fight. He holds that when competing “the MMA fighter ‘brackets’ off or suspends who they are in their day-to-day lives; but when they enter the ring they reveal a chaotic self and their body’s manifold technical potentialities”(Ibid 2009: 138). As such, for male fighters the failure to embody masculine ideals and physically perform as fighters, (e.g. in the event a debilitating injury forces practitioners to stop training) can in turn lead to emotions of despair and depression (Spencer 2012). Paying attention to the emotional dynamics at play, my research shows that BJJ practitioners' identities are not just centered on their physical skills, but also on their mental skills. Emotions didn’t just arise from how practitioners embodied a fighter’s habitus, but rather were essential to its very production. This supports Collins’ arguments that to understand violence we can’t just focus on embodied interactions, but rather have “to grasp the bodily-emotional-interactional process” (2015: 14), paying attention to “bodily-emotional attunement and disattunement” (ibid: 17).

At Team Gracie, winning a fight and taking on a BJJ identity was not just about demonstrating physical skill and ability (what you can do to others), but also maintaining

emotional base (how you can control yourself). Indeed, having one's "chaotic" self pulled-out in a fighting context was taken as a sign of being pushed off base. *Not fighting* (e.g. when challenged or egged on in a social conflict) could be just as important for establishing BJJ identity as being able to physically control and successfully submit an opponent. Intense physical training was used to push practitioners to the point where they were "done by" emotions and a deep instinctual self was revealed⁷. However, this revelation was treated as a means to an end, opening up opportunities for practitioners to restore base, regain emotional control and develop a more resilient, controlled self. Rather than being separate from everyday life, developing a resilient BJJ habitus functioned as a form of personal capital, enabling practitioners to maintain better control over their presentation of self, and navigate interactional risks inside and outside of the gym with cool, technical efficiency. This points to a mutual interrelation in the production of physical and mental dispositions.

Further, this research highlights the importance of understanding habitus as co-constructed through social interaction. Because individuals cannot remain simultaneously conscious of all the embodied, sensual, aesthetic and emotional dimensions of their actions, peer feedback is necessary to engage effectively in emotional base work. It's precisely the pressure peers generate in training interactions and the feedback they provide on the "visible unconscious" that enables practitioners to identify and control their

⁷ Spencer (2009) argues that habitus is often understood as stable and automatic in MACS research because it tends to embrace Bourdieu's (1977, 1990) understanding of habitus and subjectivities as affirming each other in a type of closed feedback loop. Moments when people are "done by" emotion may therefore be especially fruitful for understanding/creating change to the habitus, as being "done by" emotions can force a disconnect between objective reality and subjective self (Katz 1999) which may break down/reset this feedback loop.

emotional reactions to maintain base while under pressure. Bringing unconscious reactions to the forefront allows for a more efficient re-working of practitioners' mental and physical dispositions into a resilient BJJ habitus.

Moving forward it would be beneficial to explore these processes from a gendered perspective. Indeed, Hoang (2019) argues that enactive/carnal ethnographies are articulated mostly in masculinist terms, with a hyper-attention to violence, and don't tend to engage with feminist theories on embodiment, or address the gender norms that inform embodied transformations. Masculine and feminine-centered enactive ethnographies, Hoang asserts, require the ethnographer to inhabit space differently, such that male scholars will typically gain strength, power and recognition as they develop a masculine habitus (e.g. of a fighter, drug robber or firefighter), whereas women developing female habitus (e.g. of a bar hostess, stripper or fashion model) lose power and respect as they make themselves smaller, take up less space, and be less assertive. What about women entering into masculine spaces?

Research on women in MACS does indicate that developing a fighting habitus may be more challenging for women as this can conflict with, and require female practitioners to "un-do" the embodiment of gender norms. However, despite presumed size and strength disadvantages, during my fieldwork I frequently came across the belief that women were better students of BJJ. This was often framed in terms of women being more technical, and less concerned about their egos. I benefited from this perception in conducting enactive ethnography on BJJ. Based on my research, however, I would posit that this benefit may in part stem from gendered socialization that leads women to engage,

and therefore develop more skill in doing emotion work and regulating their emotional reactions (Hochschild 1983)⁸. This in turn may give women an advantage in doing emotional base work. Further, while men at Team Gracie may undergo physical transformations that enable them to better embody masculine ideals, maintaining emotional base, and helping their partners do the same requires them to perform care work and emotional labour in ways that transgress masculine gender expectations. Drawing on feminist sociological theory of emotions to explore the development of both physical and mental dispositions in training, allows us to paint a more nuanced picture of how gender shapes the development of BJJ habitus.

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⁸ Given research on emotional labour tells us that expectations for emotional regulation are different for marginalized peoples, and in particular women of colour (Princing 2022), future research should explore how social location influences different BJJ practitioners' ability to maintain emotional base successfully, and develop resilience to interactional risk and conflict inside and outside of the gym.

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Chapter 5

Conclusion

This dissertation draws on ethnographic data on Brazilian Jiu Jitsu to refine and expand sociological understanding of embodied and emotional processes of socialization. The three studies presented here contribute to the sociology of sports, and BJJ in particular, but also build sociological theory *through* sports, using BJJ as a vehicle to understand: 1) The embodied micro-interactional processes through which people learn to adapt to different social norms and expectations; 2) How these processes of socialization are shaped by social contexts, and; 3) The emotional and embodied strategies people use to manage interactionally risky situations that call into question their social competence. Collectively, these studies leverage enactive ethnography to offer a more comprehensive and micro-sociological understanding of how habitus is developed and deployed through social interaction, and also contribute to the sociology of gender and sport by extending empirical understanding of mixed-sex training dynamics as important sites for negotiating gender norms.

SUMMARY AND CONTRIBUTIONS

My first study ([Chapter 2](#)) extends existing understandings of embodied socialization by elucidating the process of *social calibration* through which members attune their intensity levels to those of their partners, demonstrating proper levels of involvement so as to maintain frame and allow for positive social interaction. Employing an enactive ethnography approach, I show that habitus is not “deposited into the body” in an automatic or unconscious way, but rather involves an ongoing and reflexive feeling out

process. My findings emphasize the important role of others (in this case advanced practitioners) as socializing agents who can reinforce social norms in the event of *intensity breaches*, i.e. behaviours falling above or below normative levels of intensity. The results demonstrate that this plays out in a gendered fashion (with typically-male intensity breaches being checked more physically and frequently) and extend sociological understanding of the potential of mixed-sex training for challenging gender norms.

The second study ([Chapter 3](#)) provides new understanding of how habitus is shaped by interacting social forces both *inside* and *outside* the social field. Contrary to common framing in the work of Fighting Scholars, I show that gyms are not islands protected from the forces of surrounding social contexts. While practitioners at Team Gracie (Rio de Janeiro) and MMAA (Toronto) drilled similar or identical techniques and developed comparable physical abilities, how they identified with these and chose to hide or show them varied based on their respective social contexts of violence. These insights were made possible through a novel combination of comparative and enactive ethnography, which enabled me to gain a first-hand, *intus et in cute*, understanding of how habitus was shaped by differences in anticipation of violence, collective memories of BJJ, and gym norms across each field site. My findings further reveal that habitus is not impervious to consciousness, but rather that practitioners engage with habitus in a reflexive and agentic way, making strategic decisions as they negotiate with habitus to maximize their safety and social standing while moving across social fields. Lastly, this study adds to the body of literature on gender and sport, by revealing how the potential to challenge gender norms and hierarchies may vary in tandem with perceptions of *realness* in mixed-sex training.

Finally, the third study ([Chapter 4](#)) advances the concept of Emotional Base Work (EBW) to elucidate how BJJ practitioners learn to resist the emotional pull of stressful and difficult interactions through the adoption of a resilient BJJ habitus. These findings contribute to a growing body of literature finding positive quantitative associations between BJJ training and psycho-social resources, such as resilience, by identifying and unpacking the underlying processes through which this is developed. Leveraging enactive ethnography, I showed how at Team Gracie this happened by 1) creating a safe space to experience and re-signify emotional threats, 2) pushing practitioners to practice control when at, or beyond, their physical and emotional limits and 3) providing peer feedback on practitioners' visible unconscious responses during emotionally intense interactions. My findings complement the work of Fighting Scholars who examine how martial arts and combat sports practitioners develop physical resilience, by elucidating the development of emotional resilience, and also emphasizing the interconnection between the physical *and* mental dispositions of the BJJ habitus developed through EBW. These data strengthen the call for greater consideration of how embodied interactions are shaped by emotion.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Across these papers, I use BJJ as a case study to develop sociological theory on embodied and emotional socialization. My research provides new insight into processes of social calibration, intensity breach & EBW, as well as the inter-scalar interactions of social forces in the production of habitus, that can be useful for understanding social interaction, group membership, stratification, and the development of resilience across a variety of settings. These findings go beyond the field of martial arts and combat sport, to refine

broader sociological understanding of habitus as reflexive, developed through ongoing embodied interaction, and strategically deployed as individuals travel across different social fields. However, the empirical findings on how each of these processes specifically played out in my fieldsites may not be generalizable to other settings either within, or outside of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu.

Practitioners at both MMAA and Team Gracie BJJ frequently emphasized the uniqueness of their gym's vibe and training style. Indeed, I specifically selected these two gyms because they represented more extreme cases of Western sport (MMAA) and traditional self-defense (Team Gracie) styles of BJJ. The head instructors at MMAA and Team Gracie BJJ were also very intentional about cultivating unique gym cultures that reflected their personal understandings of what makes a good BJJ training community. Thus, not all self-defense focused BJJ gyms ban music or cultivate a strong ethic of care among training partners like I saw at Team Gracie. Each of these factors facilitated EBW for Team Gracie practitioners, and likely also influence how EBW is experienced in other settings. But, that doesn't mean they are necessary for EBW to occur. Advanced practitioners at other gyms might not feel as comfortable taking on, or talking about, the moral responsibility of socializing less advanced practitioners. For example, a number of the other BJJ academies I've trained at have explicit rules, written out on posters around the gym, reminding practitioners that only instructors should make corrections or give training advice. In these contexts, we might not see the same ways of checking intensity breaches (like practitioners at MMAA did), or ability to receive feedback on the "visible unconscious" aspects of training (like at Team Gracie). Alternatively, BJJ self-defence

classes catering to marginalized communities in Toronto who do experience violence as a more regular part of their lives, might actually have dynamics that more closely resemble the classes at Team Gracie, rather than MMAA.

Caution is therefore needed in applying specific empirical findings to other contexts as my field sites represent unique, and even extreme cases. But, this does not take away from the wider-applicability of the theoretical findings. Indeed, in the same way that the extreme, embodied nature of BJJ makes general socialization processes more visible, my fieldsites were selected as extreme cases enabling us to better understand embodied socialization processes that people experience elsewhere in more subtle ways. Further, given the high level of both similarity and difference I observed across each field site, future research should investigate what enables some, but not other, components of BJJ habitus to stay consistent and hold value, even as the martial art is globalized and evolves through adaptation to different social contexts.

In addition to advancing social theory on habitus and embodied socialization, my research makes important contributions to the sociological study of gender and sport, and in particular research examining the potential of mixed-sex training for challenging gender norms and power relations. My research highlights how moments of role conflict, when gender norms clash with sport-specific norms, can create valuable opportunities for coaches and practitioners to challenge traditional understandings of masculinity and femininity. However, it also illuminates how overt messaging and interventions to advance gender justice can be undermined by subtle processes simultaneously reproducing gender norms and inequalities. In particular, findings pointed to discourses reinforcing biological

sex difference, pedagogical inequities, and perceived realness of training as important factors shaping the transformative potential of mixed-sex training. Lastly, while BJJ is recognized as a male-dominated practice, my research also raised important questions about how gendered socialization outside of the gym might in fact create training advantages for women, specifically when it comes to carrying out EBW. This opens up interesting research possibilities for considering how the embodied and emotional dynamics of training both shape *and* are shaped by practitioners' understandings and experiences of masculinity and femininity inside and outside the gym.

A shared limitation of these studies' ability to address gender is that data collection at both sites, but especially at Team Gracie BJJ, captured more male and mixed sex training interactions, than female-only interactions. This stemmed from a number of different factors: there were many fewer women than men at each gym; training partners were often selected by size/weight, which resulted in me being paired up with men more often than women; at Team Gracie white/blue belts started by training exclusively with black/brown belts, which again meant I trained mostly with men as (at the time of my fieldwork) there were no female black/brown belts at the gym; at Team Gracie the women's change room only comfortably fit one person, so I couldn't engage in locker room talk with female practitioners in the same way that I did at MMAA, and; at Team Gracie especially, women's greater involvement in unpaid social reproduction, in addition to paid work outside the home, meant that female practitioners didn't have as much leisure time for socializing, typically spent less time training, and were in and out of the gym faster compared to the men.

Thus, as discussed in Chapter 2, at MMAA I was able to establish that there were gendered patterns in terms of how practitioners engaged in, and responded to intensity breaches, and found that women were typically *verbally* but not *physically* pushed to adopt more intense training styles. However, in examining EBW at Team Gracie, I wasn't able to capture enough women's experiences to be able to confidently determine whether there were any differences in how male and female practitioners were physically pushed to, or past, their limits so as to expand sense of control when under pressure.

In recognition of this limitation, across these studies I have highlighted only gendered patterns that I was able to triangulate and cross-check through my own reflexive and embodied training experiences, my research participants' reflexive observations in interviews and my own third-party observations during training interactions. I discussed more tentative findings in each paper as open questions that should be addressed through additional research. In addition to the questions raised within the papers, this overall consideration of gender raises further avenues for exploration, specifically around how gendered factors (such as the divisions of paid/unpaid labour) interact with other axes of oppression (e.g. race, sex, relationship and parenthood status, age, etc.) to shape practitioners' training journeys and BJJ habitus of over time.

Lastly, collectively these papers document how through BJJ training, practitioners undergo changes to their mental and physical dispositions, i.e. habitus, in ways that are sometimes experienced as life changing or transformative. I report these findings in as much as they allow us to understand broader processes of socialization. However, a critical lens is needed in interpreting the data, so as to avoid reproducing the "Great Sport

Myth” that sports are inherently good and pure, that this purity and goodness is transmitted to those who participate in sport, and that sport inevitably leads to individual and community development (Coakley 2015). My research findings indicate that BJJ *may* in some instances promote non-violence, gender justice and the development of positive psycho-social coping resources, but I sought to highlight the social and structural contingency, complexity and at times outright contradictory nature of these processes.

For example, at both MMAA and Team Gracie, practitioners frequently discussed how training BJJ “calms the ego” and can specifically help male practitioners develop a sense of embodied confidence that decreases engagement in compensatory violence (i.e. using violence to reestablish masculinity when their ego is threatened). However, while the pressure and accountability structures around upholding the gym’s reputation pushed practitioners at Team Gracie to embody a more controlled (less violent/aggressive) masculinity both inside and outside the gym, at MMAA, I really only saw compensatory-male aggression checked in training contexts where it increased the risk of injury. It’s unclear from my data how, if at all, training BJJ led male practitioners at MMAA to adopt new or different, let alone less-violent or aggressive, masculinities in their day-to-day lives.

Similarly, I document how practitioners at Team Gracie mobilized EBW to cope with adversity outside of the gym, and how simultaneously using EBW to get ahead in life (i.e. at work, school, relationships, etc.) allowed Team Gracie members to better embody specific cultural and class understandings of what a “good” person and BJJ practitioner is. However, in recognizing that BJJ functions as a vehicle for social reproduction and stratification, we should also consider how discourse about the transformative power of

BJJ could be deployed against practitioners from marginalized and lower status backgrounds by framing negative outcomes resulting from structural disadvantages as stemming from individual failures to successfully deploy EBW. Further research should therefore consider the individual and structural conditions that might make it easier/harder for individuals across different social locations to learn to successfully calibrate their behavior, practice and benefit from EBW and embody the BJJ habitus.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Despite the prominence, reach and influence of sports as a social institution, the subfield of sport sociology has historically occupied a marginal position within mainstream sociology (Frey & Stanley Eitzen 1991; Washington & Karen 2001; Carrington 2013). Bourdieu describes sport sociology as being in a difficult double bind: “scorned by sociologists, it is despised by sportspersons” (1988: 153). This is something I encountered throughout my doctorate, as fellow sociologists questioned whether I might not want to reframe my research, or switch to a more “serious” or “marketable” field. Indeed, there is a recognized professional risk that those who take sport as a serious topic of sociological inquiry may have their work dismissed as trivial or mundane (Bourdieu 1988; Carrington 2013). As Simmel notes, however, the seemingly mundane can be incredibly socially significant (Simmel 1978). It is precisely because of its everyday ordinariness, that sport is so significant and so deeply intertwined with the workings of society (Maguire 2017). In line with this, this enactive ethnography provides evidence of the power of everyday BJJ training interactions in revealing valuable and transferable insights into sociological processes of group and identity formation, emotion work, and embodied social interaction.

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Methodological Appendix: A Statement on Positionality & Enactive Ethnography

INTRODUCTION

A grounded theory approach rejects claims of objectivity, and instead challenges the researcher to confront their prior knowledge, positionality, and standpoint to consciously manage, and take into account the impact of these in an ongoing way throughout the research process (Charmaz 2017). In line with this, in this appendix I discuss my positionality and address the reflexive “gossamer walls” (Doucet 2008) through which I constructed knowledge as I wrote this dissertation. I explore how my positionality shaped access and acceptance at each field site, my relationship with research participants, as well as my understanding and interpretation of the data. I also consider how my standpoint and positionality evolved overtime, in relation to my embodied experience of disability. I draw on reflection about my identity and relationship with fellow scholars to examine the embodied costs (Hoang 2015) of doing enactive ethnography as a disabled scholar.

ENTERING THE FIELD

When I entered the field, I was faced with questions from fellow sociologists around the impact of gender on my research. Sports and combat sports are male-dominated fields. The ways that sports are typically practiced correspond to the actions, traditional social roles and cultural values of men, and important characteristics of sport are baked into the embodied socialization of men, in ways that aren’t typically true for women (Weiss, Norden & Tobisch 2021). Further, enactive ethnographic approaches to studying combat sports are predominantly articulated in masculinist terms (Collins 2015), and male

scholars doing enactive ethnography typically engage in hypermasculine activities that require them to “draw out their masculinity to demonstrate access, prowess, and legitimacy in their respective field sites” (Hoang 2018: 230). In conducting enactive ethnography of and through Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, it then makes sense that I was pushed to consider what methodological challenges and opportunities my gender presented.

I entered the field as a white, able-bodied, feminine-presenting person in my mid-twenties with no prior experience training Brazilian Jiu Jitsu. My gender identity doesn't fit comfortably within the confines of “woman”: I experience and engage with femininity as intentional, political and non-binary. However, as a pan-femme in a long-term relationship with a man, my femininity is often read as conforming to cis-hetero-patriarchal gender norms, and this held true throughout my field work. When I first visited MMAA and Team Gracie BJJ, I was offered tours of the gyms and invited to check out the women's change room. Without prompting, at MMAA the gym manager hyped up that it was a very “women-friendly” environment, that there were several advanced female practitioners at the gym, and that they had a women's only class I could join. At Team Gracie BJJ, my male partner and I were quoted different prices for the monthly memberships, and when I asked about this, Tô explained: “Right now we only have 1 or 2 women in each class, so we offer discounted memberships to try and encourage more women to join. But don't worry, all the guys here are very respectful!”. At each field site, my assumed identity as “woman” revealed implicit understandings of BJJ gyms as male-dominant spaces in which female practitioners need extra incentivization and support to join and feel comfortable.

Throughout my fieldwork, I didn't experience my femininity as a significant deterrent to establishing credibility, i.e being seen as a researcher worthy of my participants' time and investment (Mayorga-Gallo & Hordge-Freeman 2017). At MMAA, my perceived credibility was bolstered by having existing gym members vouch for me and my research, and facilitate introductions. But symbolically, I also benefited from field-specific symbolic and embodied capital. Not only was I a graduate student at an elite university studying, and therefore thought to have some intellectual standing to discuss BJJ, but I also entered the field at the height of my fall competitive season as a varsity rower. As a "female athlete", I wasn't seen as a typical female white belt. My tall, muscular, lean and conventionally attractive feminine body gave me an added level of respect and appreciation in the field, as a "tough" and "technical" practitioner.

Indeed, I wasn't socialized to fully embody the inhibited bodily comportment, modality and self-image typical of traditional feminine existence (Young 1980). My father coached throws (shot put, discus, and hammer) at a leading Track and Field club in Canada. Growing up, he would often bring me to practice on Saturday mornings and in the afternoons after school. I would shadow him as he coached, listening attentively as he gave cues and corrections in the weight room and on the field. I imitated the athletes as they twirled and grunted, lifted and threw. When I was 9 or 10 I convinced my dad to get me my own "baby" hammer, and began pestering him to coach me as I threw it across the grass behind the metal cages where his "serious" athletes trained. On the days I'd get bored of throwing, my dad would send me off to join the youth development team at the track, as they completed drills focused on speed, strength, and motor skill development

that were designed to enhance performance potentials for all sports. I also grew up with a feminist mother with advanced sociological training who role-modelled how to challenge gender hierarchies, and whose work co-developing the *BIAS FREE* Framework (Burke & Eichler 2006) equipped me with a powerful tool that I used from an early age to push back against the ways in which gender intersected with other axes of oppression to impose limitations on my existence in the world.

Thus, while I didn't live outside of the patriarchal context where female bodies are objectified and experienced as existing for a male other, this background enabled me to develop a less limited understanding of my embodied potential. As I took up rowing and competed in high school and university, I built on the embodied skills I developed at the track to hone my technique and push myself to get stronger and faster on the water. At MMAA, this didn't just translate into a symbolic embodied capital of looking like an "athlete", but rather afforded me a combination of mind-body coordination and control, ease of movement, ability to pick up technique, and taste for grinding physical work that few of the other white belts I started training with had. This wasn't something I ever thought about or was conscious of. My body just "did", reacting and responding at one with my mind. I was frequently praised for my toughness and athleticism, encouraged to try competing in BJJ, and was invited to move up from the beginner to all-levels classes relatively quickly. In Brazil, my training partners recognized this physical capital by giving me the title of "casca-grossa". Translating literally to "thick shell", in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu this is an accolade given to someone who's known as a tough training partner.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

While my BJJ performance earned me respect among my male peers and more advanced practitioners and coaches, I sometimes struggled to relate to some of the shared experiences other novice women from MMAA would discuss at the gym. For example, female practitioners would talk about being outsized by male practitioners and female coaches would frame some of the lessons in the women's classes around "how to deal with a larger or stronger male opponent". At 5'10" and 140-150 lbs, I felt like I embodied the "male opponent" that I knew some women would prefer not to train with. While there were strong and advanced female practitioners at the gym, at MMAA white belts typically only trained with other white or blue belts. On average, I found novice women to be more inhibited than male novices, and I often had to remind myself to be patient with female practitioners who were tentative and reserved in their movements.

I forced myself to attend women's classes for research purposes, but for training purposes preferred to attend the mixed-sex classes where I was more likely to be paired up to train with a white or blue belt around my size, who trained with similar intensity. At MMAA, I found that not all the men felt the same about training with a female practitioner. There were a couple who were awkward about rolling with me, which led to coaches intervening and encouraging these male training partners to treat me like they would anyone else and not to hold back on the basis of my gender. At Team Gracie BJJ, the expectation for novices to train with more advanced (black and brown) belts typically

meant that I was usually training only with men. In day-to-day training there, I never experienced the same awkwardness around mixed sex-training.

The physical closeness required in BJJ training enabled me to develop a friendship and intimacy with my training partners at each field site that contributed to my approachability as a researcher, i.e. being seen as someone that is non-threatening to talk to (Mayorga-Gallo & Hordge-Freeman 2017). However, this was structured by the gendered experiences outlined above. My regular training partners were all male, and I didn't train as often with or get as close to female practitioners outside of classes. While at MMAA I was able to make up for this a bit by participating in locker room talk with female practitioners before and after class, at Team Gracie the few female practitioners typically arrived at the gym after me and left before me. And, unlike the men's space, the women's change room really only comfortably fit one person, so locker room chat wasn't possible. I really noticed the impact of this midway through my first field trip to Brazil.

My male training partners had invited me to join them on regular team lunches throughout my fieldwork. Every week, or every second week, several of the gym members who worked in the downtown core would meet for a 60-90 minutes lunch, to get in some mid-day socialization. Each time I went, it was only male gym members in attendance. One day when I was meeting up for lunch one-on-one with another gym member, we ran into 3 female practitioners from Team Gracie. I was disappointed to discover they also had regular lunches amongst themselves, but I was never invited. I doubled-down my efforts and was able to connect more closely with Shaima, a blue belt practitioner around my age,

by the end of my field work. But, I found it harder to connect with the other two ladies outside the gym as they both worked, had kids and usually left training right away. Overall, the women at the gym seemed to balance a greater volume of reproductive labor in the home with paid work responsibilities outside the home, compared to their male counterparts. As a result they had less leisure time to socialize and were in and out of the gym much more quickly. Also, since we didn't train together as often due to gym norms around novices training with more experienced members, I didn't have as much opportunity to develop the same type of relationship with female practitioners at Team Gracie.

Lastly, I noticed throughout my field work in Toronto and Rio that the combination of being feminine and having a white belt contributed to fellow gym members generally being very tolerant and open to me asking lots of questions. As a white belt, people were eager to explain basic things to me. The expectation that white belts would indeed have lots of questions, made it easier for me to ask questions as a researcher, and get people to unpack taken-for-granted knowledge. Across both field sites, I found a high level of openness and eagerness among participants to discuss their training experiences, and understandings of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu and gym going-ons. In Brazil in particular, I was also able to capitalize on my status as a Portuguese-as-an-additional language learner, to ask for additional clarifications that might have otherwise seemed annoying or excessive. At times, I played this up jokingly, but even when fellow gym members recognized I was doing this, their explanations still allowed me to deepen my understanding.

For example, one day during my second round of fieldwork I was sitting around the mats chatting after class with a few of my regular training partners, Eduardo (Brown Belt) and Destroyer (Black Belt). Mestre Rio saw us and called over “Destroyer, why don’t you go over some positions with B that wouldn’t put too much stress on her back?”. Eduardo immediately called out to the remaining people in the class, joking: “Do we really want her learning from Destroyer, she’s going to pick up all his sneaky habits and be even more dangerous on the mats”. I turn and give Eduardo a look of mock disbelief and innocence “Me? I’m not dangerous at all. What is this “sneaky” you speak of, I don’t even know what that means”. Eduardo smiled knowingly: “Sneaky? You know, like being stealthy, setting up sinister strategies and submissions? You’re saying you don’t know anything about that?”. I double down, shaking my head emphatically to insist on my innocence and we all laugh, before I follow up to ask “ No but seriously, what’s “sneaky” in jiu jitsu? What do you mean?”.

I had understood the term for “sneaky” in Portuguese, and had an implicit understanding of what Eduardo meant. I’d trained with Destroyer many a time and, as with the excerpt in Chapter 4 where he catches me in a bow-and-arrow choke, I was frequently caught off guard by the way he could set up submissions seemingly out of nowhere. While my inexperience as a white/blue belt made me an easy target, even brown and black belts at the gym fell victim to his “sneakiness”. Indeed, this ability was one of the reasons Destroyer earned his nick-name and reputation as one of the toughest black belts at Team Gracie. I playfully leaned into the role of foreigner not fully understanding Portuguese not just to defend myself against claims that I might be a dangerous or sneaky opponent, but

also as leverage to be able to unpack taken-for-granted understandings of what “sneaky” within the context of BJJ entailed, and learn more about how to “be sneaky” from one of the best at the gym.

In this case, the strategy paid off. My implicit understanding was that “being sneaky” in this context, was about not foreshadowing your approach so that you could catch your opponents with unexpected techniques and submissions, and this seems to match Eduardo’s initial explanation as well. But, by repeatedly probing, I was able to get a more multi-layered understanding of “being sneaky”. The conversation with Destroyer and Eduardo revealed how this included physical masking techniques (e.g. doing in 2 steps what normally might take 10) and catching opponents off guard (e.g. by adding a personalized twist to apply a technique in an unexpected way, or letting practitioners advance into positions when you’re setting up a trap), but I also learnt about how sneakiness could involve more mental and emotional strategies and mind games (e.g. strategically deploying one’s “power of suggestion”, “scary face” or “poker face” to intimidate your opponent into giving up a strong attack or voluntarily entering into a more vulnerable defensive position). Overall, this combination of being a young, white belt, friendly feminine white foreigner, with earnest curiosity and a willingness to playfully banter, helped make it easy for gym members to open up to me, and seemed to have a disarming effect that allowed me to ask repetitive and sensitive questions (e.g. around politics and social inequalities) in a way that elicited more matter of fact explanations rather than defensiveness.

At times this required me to use critical accommodation to maintain my approachability, i.e. the strategy of staying silent to get along when participants made offensive comments (Mayorga-Gallo & Hordge-Freeman 2017). For example, I didn't correct people's assumptions about my gender identity, and uncharacteristically bit my tongue when I heard classist, sexist or homophobic comments, because I wanted to understand how class, gender and sexuality shaped training dynamics. Holding back judgement and instead asking non-confrontational questions allowed me to maintain approachability and better unpack the understandings of gender and sexuality at play. But, this required a level of performativity that was emotionally difficult, and also at times felt like it challenged my commitment to building authentic relationships with my research participants.

INTERPRETING THE DATA

For the most part, this privileged position as white foreigner was advantageous and contributed to my approachability. But there were times when it did complicate my interpretation of the data and dynamics at Team Gracie. While I had a pretty solid understanding of Portuguese and had gained a strong level of familiarity with Brazilian culture and politics through my previous ethnographic fieldwork in Brazil, there were still moments where my language skills or Canadian worldview complicated understanding. For example, the understandings of race in Canada and Brazil are quite different, and frequently became a topic of conversation in interviews. After obtaining informed consent, I typically began my interviews by asking basic demographic questions (age, gender, race,

profession, and current belt rank). These often led to awkward moments, especially with people I knew, because they seemed to believe that the answers were self-evident. However, as a white foreigner, my assumptions did not in fact always match how people self-identified, and so I felt it was important to ask.

Based on self-reported demographics, for example, my interview sample in Brazil included 13 men and 2 women, ranging from white belt to 6th degree black belt. The majority (11) identified as white. One man identified as Black or Afro-Brazilian, and 3 others (2 men and 1 woman) identified as “pardo” (mixed). But, three of those who identified as white qualified their answers. For example, saying “Obviously I’m not white like you. But here, in Brasil, I’m white. Maybe in Canada I’d be seen as Latino or pardo”, “White, or well...here I’m white. But I know when I was in University in Europe I wasn’t white, to them. So, I don’t know, do I answer based on race here or what race is for the people that are going to read your work?” or “Race? What do you mean? [Yeah, like what race or ethnicity do you identify as?] Well, I would say white. What do you think? Would I be white for you? (holding up arm to mine to compare our skin tones)”. Some folks seemed to define race as something based on perceived appearance that could vary based on context (what race do others see me as), whereas for others it had more to do with family/community (what race are my ancestors). It was not uncommon for two very phenotypically similar people to identify with different races, making it harder for me to interpret the way race operated in the gym. In my Toronto sample however, all my interviewees self-identified their race/ethnicity in the same way I would have classified them based on phenotype.

In Toronto, I didn't see significant racialized patterns in the data I was collecting. It's also not something that came up in interviews at either fieldsite. However, because of the cultural difference around how race is understood, I didn't feel comfortable making assumptions about whether there were significant racial dynamics at play at Team Gracie, unless these were specifically addressed. Thus, at MMAA I felt comfortable concluding based on my observations that race didn't seem to be a major factor in partner selection when rolling, even though I did observe gender playing a role. This seemed to align with what people were telling me at Team Gracie. For example, in his interview Chico explained: "Whether they're white, tan, rich, poor, Brazilian, foreign, you just train. Belt comes first. Now I have to say with women it's maybe a bit different [...]". However, while I didn't observe obvious racial patterns in partner selection, I didn't feel like I had the cultural knowledge to confidently triangulate interview responses with my observations to assess whether in practice, belt (i.e. status in the BJJ hierarchy based on belt level) actually always "comes first" above racial hierarchies.

There were also instances where my initial interpretations of the data were limited by taking a more literal interpretation of what was said, because I didn't understand specific expressions. For example, during the first round of field work I heard from multiple people that being a black belt was about more than technique, and that in deciding whether to promote someone to black belt Mestre Rio was also judging gym members' character, and whether they would be a good representative of the gym. There were several factors that played into this, but a term that came up a couple of times to describe the characteristics of a black belt was "pessoa de bêm". In my head I initially translated this

literally to mean “a good person” and uncritically carried over and applied my own assumptions about what makes a person “good ” (e.g. being fair, respectful, honest). However, right before I returned to Brazil to conduct interviews, I was in my partner’s home country, Colombia, and kept hearing a similar expression “gente de bien” being mobilized in a very political way within the context of a national strike. A journalist for *El Colombiano*, a major newspaper in Colombia ,called out rising use of the term explaining that it encapsulates the profound inequalities between Colombians:

Often the “gente de bien” believe that everyone else is disposable, an inconvenience, and even approve of the violence being used against them. They’re the first to draw out a line that separates themselves from the Others. They’ll give nasty looks when a person with brown skin visits an establishment they frequent and prefer to stick to places where only those of their “kind”, or equal privilege, gather. (Velasquez Gómez N.D.)

In this sense, “gente de bien”, in the Colombian context weren’t just morally “good” people. The term was imbued with very strong right-wing, racist, and classist ideas of what it meant to be a good citizen or contributing member of society, and typically was deployed such that only a small group of “people of means” (i.e. white Colombians from respected families, with trust funds or high paying jobs, living in segregated privileged neighborhoods), could qualify as “good people”.

When I returned to Brazil and heard the term being used again, I had a newfound appreciation for this potentially being a culturally-specific expression that I needed to

unpack, and began asking people for clarification whenever they used the term. Sergio obliged my curiosity, explaining:

“For me, “*peessoas de bêm*” are settled, happy people. They get along with their families and don’t have drama. They’re financially stable and successful at their jobs. They... I think in English you’d say they “have their shit together”. You know? They’re just healthy, happy people who help others, who have a good reputation in their community, others look up to them...overall good productive members of society. Then of course, there’s “*peessoas de mal*”, who are the opposite. [laughs] They’re weak people. Their personal lives are messy. You know? Like maybe they have kids they don’t provide for? Women on the side? They don’t want to work or pay taxes. Or, if they work, who knows how honest they are. They can also just be lazy people with no will to better themselves. You know? The type who likes to critique and complain about society, but not do anything about it? People like that”.

The explanations from others at the gym echoed Sergio’s and closely aligned with how I’d come to understand how the expression was used in the Colombian context. This new interpretation had important implications for my findings, strengthening my understanding that socialization of gym members at Team Gracie to become “good” and responsible BJJ practitioners, was very much based on an understanding of a “good” that is informed by and reflective of colonialist, capitalist, and patriarchal values and ideals. It allowed me to see continuities I’d previously missed, with how the Gracies framed BJJ in the 1930’s as a refined, nation-building and civilizing practice and had catered their teaching towards largely white business and political elites, as well special police squadrons known for their

violence against poor, Afro-Brazilian communities. While throughout my fieldwork I consciously tried not to make assumptions, asked people to explain and unpack the meaning of what they were telling me, and used interviews to triangulate and cross-check my understandings with that of my participants, it is of course possible that there are other instances like this where my positionality as a foreigner limited my understanding of the data in Brazil, in ways that weren't as likely in the Canadian context.

CHANGING EMBODIED POSITIONALITY & ENACTIVE ETHNOGRAPHY

One of the most significant factors shaping my research has been my changing positionality, in relation to my embodied experience of disability. I began my research and completed the first rounds of data collection in Toronto and Rio as an able-bodied person. I then experienced a spinal cord injury and had to delay further data collection as I went through 2 major surgeries, spent 18+ months on bedrest and struggled through hours of physical rehabilitation. Completing my second rounds of field work as a disabled person with chronic pain and physical impairments fundamentally altered my ability to do, and experience of doing enactive ethnography training BJJ, and also shaped my positionality as a researcher.

While this is something I plan to expand on in future research, I think it's worthwhile highlighting here two specific implications of this changing positionality. First, the differences I experienced across my first and second round of fieldwork revealed to me how much of my embodied experience of learning I took for granted entering the field during round 1 as an able-bodied competitive athlete. Enactive ethnography is about

learning through and from the body, but despite my concerted effort to document my embodied training experience, there was so much I missed. In the same way that white people tend to invisibilize their race and remain unconscious of the way that their lives are privileged by racist social structures (Frankenberg 1993), as a fit, able-bodied person I unconsciously invisibilized many of my embodied experiences as “normal” or not “noteworthy”.

Thus, for example, I write at the beginning of this appendix of experiencing a type of mind-body unity, where if I wanted to move in a certain way I could just do it, and generally experienced the desire/intention to move and physical movement as one. I knew I was athletic and “caught on” to technique more quickly than some of my peers in the white belt class at MMAA, but never thought to consider that they might not just be learning at different speeds, but have fundamentally different embodied experiences of learning technique. Getting back on the mats as a disabled-person, I had incredibly high level of fear that I would re-injure myself or cause symptom flare ups that would cause excruciating pain, potentially land me back on bed rest, and further delay my research.

I became acutely aware of the high-level of trust I had put, and would need to continue putting in my training partners. I had previously commented on, and transcribed quotes from participants about the importance of trust, and how in BJJ you’re “literally putting your life in the hands of your training partners”. I had documented getting bruises and black eyes, blisters and ripped calluses, aches and pains, and minor training injuries, but I’d had an embodied confidence and blind trust that really did not allow me to deeply

process what it meant to be putting my life in the hands of another person, or consider how this informed the embodied processes of socialization I was observing. This was especially true when it came to the process of social calibration.

By the time I recovered from my second back surgery and returned to Brazil, I was 40 pounds heavier and even with hundreds of hours of grueling physio, I'd barely begun to regain the muscle tone I'd lost over the nearly 2 years of bedrest. Prolonged compression of my spinal cord had left me with permanent numbness and weakness in my left leg. I'd gotten the OK from my medical team to resume physical activity as long as I was cautious and listened to my body's needs, but I was afraid to get back on the mats. For the first three weeks back in Rio I'd put on my gi and sit on the edge of the mat to observe training and chat with practitioners between rounds, but I turned down every invitation to train myself. I spoke about my fears and apprehensions with Mestre Rio and some of my more trusted training partners from the first round of field work, and finally the third Friday I was there, I accepted an invitation from Claudio to try some *very* light rolling.

Over the following week I continued to try a little bit of training each day with advanced practitioners that Mestre Rio hand-picked as being responsible enough to keep the training safe for me. He gave a strong disclaimer each time he partnered me with someone, reiterating that I was in recovery and listing positions my partners should avoid so as not to stress my back. Even though this gave me a sufficient level of comfort to start training, I noticed immediately that the process of social calibration was strained. On the one hand, I had a lot of difficulty trying to get my body to do what I wanted it to do, which

made it harder for me to respond to cues from my partners. On the other hand, I noticed the level of strain varied considerably depending on the level of trust I had in my training partner. Rolling with people I knew and trusted, everything flowed a bit more smoothly. With 2 of the black belts who I had just met that week, and with whom I hadn't trained before, the process of "reading and responding" to their bodily cues took longer. I noticed myself taking extra time to assess their embodied cues to determine whether they signaled a threat of injury, before I figured out my response. I also found myself second-guessing their movements more often and tapping out prematurely if there was any interactional ambiguity. Thinking through the implications of this, I began to wonder what other aspects of my embodied experience I'd taken for granted that might have an impact on my understanding of the data. The idea of using the body as a tool for knowledge-building became more complex as I came to appreciate how much of my embodied experience I'd ignored as background "normal" functioning for an able-bodied person.

My evolving positionality also made me rethink Hoang's feminist critique of enactive ethnography. She writes: "carnal *ethnographies* associated with femininity often involve making oneself smaller, taking up less space, and becoming deferential, while masculine ethnographies involve bodily expansion as men learn to take up more space and become stronger in the field. Men get rewarded for their dedication in going out "on the line," while women's dedication makes them sexually suspect—the opposite of the dedicated researcher" (2018: 241). What are the implications for being both a feminine enactive ethnographer and disabled scholar? How in my case, were these gendered processes further shaped by disability?

In Birrell & Donnelly's (2004) chapter on the relevance of Goffman's theoretical approach to the sociology of sports, they explain that Goffman was a consummate sociologist, always working, observing and making fieldnotes, even as he went about his day-to-day or participated social functions. They explain that his justification for this was that: "sociology is something you do, not something you read about" (ibid: 49). In the same way that sports champions accrue status and prestige by embodying valued characteristics such as dedication, hard work, discipline, and competitiveness, the "fighting scholar" accrues capital and prestige by putting their bodies on the line as they embody academic values as they "do" sociology. In this sense my experience of disability challenged my identities as athlete, as scholar and more specifically as fighting scholar. Was I still a "good" jiu jitsu practitioner as an out-of-shape perpetual blue belt who had to continuously stop and start training due to recurrent symptom flare ups? Was I still a "good" academic, when my productivity slowed down, and I could no longer keep up with the expected timeline for the doctoral program or publish at a steady pace? And given both of these questions, was I still a "fighting scholar" at all?

In 2022, I attended the annual International Martial Arts Studies Conference in Lausanne to present my research. As part of the conference, there was a gym session, where fighting scholars led demos on their respective martial arts, followed by open-mat time for sparring and sharing research insights in an embodied way. It was one of the highlights of the conference, and in the panels leading up to the event, I was repeatedly asked: "Did you bring your gi? Do you want to spar?". I had seen the event invitation in the conference registration materials, but didn't feel safe training with people I didn't know. My

body also hadn't responded well to the long flight over, and the extended periods of time sitting to listen to presentations. I watched from the sidelines, visualizing how the "me" from a couple of years earlier would have been bonding with fellow scholars in my field on the mats.

One of the male fighting scholars who'd garnered attention at the conference as a "legit" martial artist, approached to invite me to train. I thanked him and said I was just going to watch. He seemed to think I was intimidated or inexperienced, and tried to coax me off the sidelines. I held firm, explaining it wasn't that I didn't want to train but that my back was acting up and I didn't want to risk further injury. I got the impression he thought it was an excuse, but he accepted he wasn't going to convince me and moved on. Hoang (2018) argues that for male scholars, the bodily discipline, physical strength, and confidence they gain from doing enactive ethnography tend to benefit them in their academic settings. What standing did I lose in that moment, when as a disabled scholar I wasn't able to "do martial arts" or engage in the communal embodied learning that was happening?

In writing this dissertation, I use the data I collected through enactive ethnography to build social theory *from* the body (Wacquant 2015). But, working through and presenting data on my embodied training experiences required me to also confront and work through complicated and painful feelings of grief and internalized ableism on an ongoing basis. Further, like Hoang (ibid) being a "vulnerable observer" (Wacquant 2015: 5) in my research, made me vulnerable to academic voyeurism. On multiple occasions fellow scholars asked

invasive questions about my experience as a disabled scholar and athlete, and reproduced “super-crip” and “inspiration porn” narratives around my “incredible resilience and perseverance” both in my research and ongoing journey in adjusting to being a disabled person, and “astounding bravery” as an athlete coming back to jiu jitsu. In theorizing disability within the sociology of sport, Brighton et al. highlight how when applied to athletes these narratives reproduce: “common medico-tragedy understandings of disability by promoting the human interest story (i.e., pity) over athletic achievement, which is belittled and trivialized and feeds the “illusion that disabled people’s lives can be controlled by human agency” (Silva & Howe, 2012, p. 190)” (2021: 338). The intermingling of my identities as “athlete”, “scholar” and “disabled” compounded the weight of confronting ableist assumptions and attitudes in a uniquely intimate way. Indeed, the methodological commitment to taking into account and writing about the significance of my positionality throughout the research process, took on a new meaning as I came to appreciate how these statements of my positionality risked undermining my social standing as a “fighting scholar” within the ableist contexts of both sports and academia.

Doucet uses the metaphor of “gossamer walls” to encourage researchers to consider the ambiguous solidity and fluidity of reflexivity, as something that can: “shift constantly depending on who is on the other side [of the wall], represent varied degrees of transparency and obscurity, connection and separation, proximity and distance, and moments of closure and openness in the relations that constitute research and knowing” (2008: 84). She argues that autobiographical work as a means of increasing transparency and exposing our readers to our biases is best focused on what motivates our research,

and what appears to matter for the research process. Thus, I consider how my positionality both opened and limited my relationship with respondents, and highlight how being a white foreigner and Portuguese-as-an-additional-language learner at times complicated my interpretation of the data. In thinking about the gossamer wall between the researcher and their audiences, I call attention to how reflection on positionality can raise methodological questions around the intersectional and embodied costs of doing enactive ethnography as a disabled scholar.

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