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# EDGEWORK AND MIXED MARTIAL ARTS RISK, REFLEXIVITY AND COLLABORATION IN AN OSTENSIBLY 'VIOLENT' SPORT

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper I outline the ways in which Stephen Lyng's concept of 'edgework' offers a valuable and unique vantage point for making sense of the contemporary practice of full-contact combat sports. With a specific focus on the sport of mixed martial arts (MMA), I propose that theorising this form of fighting as an example of edgework helps clarify the experiences and motivations of its participants within a social-psychological framework that is well-attuned to the extant research literature. In illustrating its potential utility, I focus on how the concept provides a means of addressing the paradoxical problem of 'violence' in MMA; that is, in understanding how and why people might engage in ostensibly 'violent' activities with those whom they simultaneously claim to respect and admire. I contend that edgework adds depth to our understanding in this domain by illuminating the nature of the relationship existing between competitive opponents in full-contact fighting, arguing ultimately that it can be used to reconceptualise the action of MMA as a form of mutually constructed risk, instead of 'violence'. Central to this discussion is the importance of collaboration between competitive opponents in MMA, whose purposeful attempts to beat one another are necessary in order to sustain the activity's appeal in offering opportunities to experience 'authentic' reflexivity, identity construction, and community formation.

## INTRODUCTION

In this paper I advocate the use of Stephen Lyng's concept of 'edgework' as a valuable addition to the theoretical toolkit of martial arts studies scholars. Adapted from its initial use by the journalist Hunter S. Thomson, Lyng [1990] developed the concept as a device for explaining voluntary participation in high-risk endeavours, such as 'extreme' sports, excessive drug use, and criminal behaviour. The first academic articulation of the concept, in Lyng and Snow [1986], discussed the sport of skydiving; it has subsequently been employed in studies of a diverse range of 'extreme' sporting pursuits, ranging from BASE jumping [Laurendeau 2011] to bodybuilding [Worthen and Baker 2016], as well as a host of other, non-sporting activities, including sadomasochism [Newmahr 2011], stock trading [Zwick 2006], and role-playing games [Shay 2017].

Despite a broad uptake in the field of sport sociology, the concept has yet to be fully articulated with respect to martial arts or combat sports. A cursory literature search reveals a small number of instances where Lyng's theory is briefly name-checked, often discussed fleetingly as a peripheral idea in support of authors' main theses, or within the footnotes of works concerning combat sports, risk, and related phenomena [e.g., Brent and Kraska 2013: 371; Chisholm et al. 2018: 281; Spencer 2012: 81]. Meanwhile, in more conceptually-focused publications, martial arts are sometimes named in lists of activities to which the concept might apply [see Lyng 2018 for the most expansive example to date]. At the time of writing, a comprehensive application of the theory has yet to be attempted. As such, in this paper I spell out how the idea can offer fresh perspective in the field of martial arts studies by way of a specific discussion of competitive mixed martial arts (MMA).

To begin with, I detail the specifics of edgework as formulated by Lyng [1990; 2004; 2014], showing how this notion neatly describes many of the characteristics of the sport of MMA. I illustrate the application of this concept by using a number of examples from the existing research literature, as well as data from one of my own current empirical studies concerning this sport<sup>1</sup>. Specifically, I articulate the importance of

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1 Because this paper is not a report of this empirical study per se, I aim to keep this note on methodology brief. To contextualise the few excerpts of primary data discussed below, they are derived from field notes collected as part of a collaborative study (with Christopher R. Matthews and Mathew Hillier) of medical support, safety procedures and risk management at various levels of combat sports in the United Kingdom. This study featured over 200 hours of direct observation at competitive combat sports events (n=27), the majority of which (n=18) featured either solely or mostly MMA bouts. These observations were conducted by shadowing medical staff or event officials (judges and referees) at a range of regional and elite-level 'fight nights'. During these observations, informal discussions with medics, fighters, coaches, and various other stakeholders such as event staff and promoters were also undertaken. Most of the time, shadowing medics or officials included long periods of sitting at cageside and watching matches.

*collaboration* in this form of edgework [see Newmahr 2011], utilising this notion to further advance the proposition that MMA is not, as some would have it, an inherently 'violent' or morally problematic activity. I thus propose that edgework illuminates the lived experience of MMA in a manner that helps explain the difference between sport-based fighting and violence [Channon and Matthews 2018; Matthews and Channon 2017], principally through a close examination of the interactional dynamics of MMA fights and the orientation to the other that such interactions involve.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF EDGEWORK AND THEIR APPLICATION TO MMA

### BOUNDARIES, RISK AND EMOTIONAL INTENSITY

The fundamental aim of the edgework concept is to explain voluntary risk-taking behaviour, where participants contend with 'a clearly observable threat to one's physical or mental well-being or one's sense of an ordered existence' [Lyng 1990: 857]. From the outset, it is crucial to stress that edgework is not simply a synonym for taking extreme risks, but specifically refers to situations where *clear, high-stakes boundaries* – e.g. between life/death, sanity/insanity, functionality/disability – *are voluntarily negotiated for their own sake*. That is to say, participants in edgework practices seek out experiences that bring them as close as possible to a perceived, existential boundary, which threatens the integrity of the physical, mental, or social self. Exploring such boundaries is an acutely and extremely stressful experience, inducing distorted perception and intense emotional highs among edgeworkers [Lyng 1990]. As such, the 'work' of edgework involves deliberately seeking out the limits of human experience, testing one's ability to effectively survive the extraordinary journey up to and back from the danger that lies beyond them.

There are a number of such 'edges' that competitors in MMA voluntarily contend with. Perhaps the most obvious are the physical boundaries between consciousness/unconsciousness and wholeness/brokenness, serving as mimetic approximations of life/death [Lyng 2012], which are typically negotiated in the course of any given fight. The technical rules and norms of the sport [see ABC 2017] ensure that these boundaries are ever-present in MMA fights; the wide array of techniques permitted to push one's opponent across such boundaries multiply the objective physical dangers associated with sport-fighting. Further, the position occupied by MMA in what Wetzler [2015; 2018] refers to as the 'polysystem' of contemporary martial arts is that it is reputedly the most 'real', 'violent' and therefore dangerous form of sports fighting [Downey 2014]. This adds discursively-constructed meaning to participants' understanding of its risks, deepening the

perceived seriousness and consequentiality of ‘stepping into the cage’ [Jensen et al. 2013; Telles et al. 2018]. In this sense, the widely-recognised, high-stakes consequences of MMA fighting are central to the emotional experiences it generates [Lyng 2018].

The subjective dimensions of risk alluded to here illustrate that psychological boundaries in MMA fights must also be actively negotiated as a consequence of facing the physical ones. Experiencing imminent danger to one’s physical safety posed by an attacking opponent induces a heightened emotional state, described by Randall Collins as ‘confrontational tension/fear’ (or CT/F) [2008]. For Collins, CT/F is a physiological response to direct conflict with another human being, which inhibits rational cognition and motor skills, and, accordingly, is the principal reason behind a generalised ‘pervasive incompetence’ associated with (most) human violence [2008: 63]. To effectively perform in an MMA match, fighters must therefore overcome the potentially debilitating psychosomatic effects of CT/F in order to remain competent and composed in a context replete with urgent risks to their physical self. In addition, both Jensen et al. [2013] and Vaccaro et al. [2011] reveal that fighters are beset with cognitive anxieties – typically fear of injury, or of losing fights and being humiliated in front of their friends. In the face of all this, they must navigate the boundary between composure and hysteria, as they risk being ‘scared to death’ [Jensen et al. 2013: 6] and becoming ‘lost in the deluge of emotions’ engendered by combat [Spencer 2014: 242].

The impact of such emotional turmoil is described in ways echoing Lyng’s [1990] discussion of the perceptual shifts experienced during edgework; fighters variously report losing peripheral vision [Brent and Kraska 2013], feeling ‘an incredible freedom’ [Andreasson and Johansson 2018: 10], being ‘sped up and put into slow motion at the same time’ [Abramson and Modzelewski 2011: 160], or having ‘little or no awareness of anyone outside the cage’ [Jensen et al. 2013: 8]. Similar to Collins’ [2008] account of the disorienting impact of CT/F [see also Spencer 2014], some fighters may freeze under such pressure, falling across the boundary separating active aggressor and passive victim [Wetzler 2018]. However, others learn to use the welling up of the ‘emotional energy’ characteristic of CT/F [Collins 2008] to fuel masterful fighting performances [Jensen et al. 2013]. Stenius quotes one fighter thus: ‘It’s like I disappear somewhere else, I’m just in a deep flow. I am not present in my body anymore; I am outside my body, not feeling the blows. They run off my body like water and fade away’ [2015: 86].

## SKILLS TRAINING, SELF-CONTROL, AND OPPORTUNITIES TO EXPERIENCE MASTERY

Such maintenance of emotional stability in the face of urgent danger illustrated here is indicative of a further key feature of edgework: the primary importance edgeworkers place on *maintaining control in situations generally experienced as uncontrollable*. According to Lyng, ‘the chance to exercise this ‘survival skill’ seems to be what [edgeworkers] value most’ [1990: 871]. In order to effectively control evermore uncontrollable situations, edgeworkers must spend a significant amount of time preparing themselves for their journeys to the edge. To facilitate this, edgeworkers do not embrace risk unconditionally, tending to avoid gambling [Lyng 1990] or placing themselves in situations which they definitely cannot control [Bunn 2017]. Knowing exactly what risks they will face means edgeworkers can develop and rehearse the skills needed to engage in their chosen form of edgework, allowing them to control as many known variables as possible when doing so. In this way, risks are instrumentally selected to provide opportunities to *experience feelings of mastery in the face of chaos*; risks that do not provide these (or indeed, diminish them) are avoided. This ultimately ensures that edgeworkers’ psychological ability to remain in control is what is actually being tested when they approach the edge itself [Lyng 2014].

For competitive MMA fighters, engaging in long-term, rigorous physical training is a taken-for-granted norm. As mentioned above, the location of MMA within the contemporary martial arts polysystem presupposes that the ‘test’ it offers is the ‘ultimate’ challenge for martial artists, providing the strongest possible evaluation of one’s ability vis-à-vis alternative formats of competition [Green 2011; Mierzwinski et al. 2014]. The extremeness of its test thus calls for the most rigorous preparation. This features the development of a wide arsenal of offensive and defensive fighting techniques and strategies; an array of interpersonal, perceptual and emotional skills; and a well-conditioned, physically fit and robust body capable of dishing out and absorbing pain [Spencer 2009; 2014]. Indeed, the majority of time competitive MMA fighters spend invested in the sport is in training their bodies and minds for the culminant moment of a fight, wherein they will need to overcome not only a resisting opponent, but also the potentially crippling CT/F engendered within them by this experience [Vaccaro et al. 2011]. For competitive fighters, this training can become an all-consuming preoccupation [Abramson and Modzelewski 2011] and is fundamentally oriented towards preparing them for organised fights [Telles et al. 2018].

Importantly, the parameters of such fights are clearly defined, meaning the nature of the physical risks being taken are always well-known in advance. The existence of ‘unified rules’ of MMA [ABC 2017] – widely

available to view online, and regularly emphasised by referees to fighters in 'rules talk' sessions prior to matches – provides a meaningful framework for training in the skills required to engage in MMA edgework. These rules allow fighters to know what techniques might be deployed against them in combat, and detail strict spatial and temporal limits for the fight. In addition to these stable factors signified by clear rules, fighters also usually know who their opponent will be for some time before any given match and can tailor their training to specific strengths and weaknesses they possess [Spencer 2009]. Collectively, this means fighters have every opportunity to prepare themselves to demonstrate that they have 'the right stuff' [Lyng 1990: 859] to survive in the cage, meaning the fight becomes 'more of a self test than a test of skill' [Abramson and Modzelewski 201: 165]. In MMA therefore, 'bodily risk-taking is seen as the experience of controlled, disciplined, and safe bodies, rather than their exposure to unpredictable harm' [Stenius 2015: 87]; or, as O'Shea puts it, 'the risk that fighters experience, far from being a reckless courting of danger, represents an opportunity to develop control and experience mastery' [2019: 92].

Having thoroughly prepared for a clearly defined challenge, fighters are then able to experience such mastery in several ways. Most obviously, this sensation can arise through the effective execution of one's skills, resulting in the domination of a resisting opponent [Brent and Kraska 2013], or the successful management of one's own tumultuous emotions and/or physical pain [Jensen et al. 2013]. However, a further element of fighters' preparation that bears mention in this respect is the phenomenon of 'weight cutting'.<sup>2</sup> Although the extremely dangerous measures adopted by many MMA fighters engaging in this practice clearly approach the edges of human physical endurance, strictly speaking this cannot be considered 'edgework', inasmuch as weight cutting in this context is not an autotelic practice but is typically viewed as a means towards the end of producing competitive success. However, as reported by Pettersson et al. [2013], successful weight cutting can also be taken as a sign of one's self-mastery, similar in form to the phenomena described by Gailey [2009] in her study of women's narratives of anorexia. Tellingly, fighters in Pettersson et al.'s [2013] study reported increased feelings of self-efficacy, but also enhanced self-identity as a fighter following difficult but successful weight cuts. Fighters who fail weight cuts, meanwhile, are often stigmatised as

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2 Weight cutting involves drastically dropping one's bodyweight in order to qualify to compete in a lighter weight category than one's regular weight, before rapidly increasing it again in the short period of time between the weigh-in and fight, and is a very common practice in contemporary MMA. Successfully doing so is believed to confer a competitive advantage by allowing a fighter to face off against a smaller opponent, although studies cast doubt on its utility as a performance-enhancing technique, as well as raise serious concerns about the health risks associated with certain weight-cutting practices [see Hillier et al. 2019].

lacking discipline and being 'unprofessional' [e.g., McNulty 2018]. This serves to illustrate the fundamental importance of demonstrating (to oneself and others) that one is *in control of oneself* in the MMA milieu, via disciplined bodily performances that push up against the limits of the human organism.

### **AUTHENTICITY, SELF-ACTUALISATION AND EXCLUSIVE COMMUNITY**

Perhaps the most frequently evidenced aspect of edgework within the extant body of research on MMA is its relationship to notions of 'authenticity'. Contextualising this, Lyng argues that edgework provides a route for individuals in late modernity to liberate themselves from the mental constraints of an 'over-socialised' life. Because it 'involves circumstances that simply cannot be negotiated by relying on internalised social routines', the logic of edgework suggests that successfully surviving an encounter with the edge becomes evidence of 'one's innate survival ability' [1990: 875]. As such, edgeworkers 'use their skills [...] as forms of ontological exploration' [2014: 449], *finding out what they are truly made of* in societies which provide few opportunities for such authentic self-examination. In this sense, the process constitutes what Lyng [2012] describes as a form of 'hermeneutic reflexivity': a route to reinterpreting one's self-identity, foregrounding feelings of power and control gained through the experience of mastery in the face of extremely threatening risk. For individuals who otherwise feel lost, bored or powerless in the midst of highly regulated, late-modern social life, this makes edgework a profoundly valuable practice, as it is often understood as the only reliable way to experience an authentic sense of one's own agency.<sup>3</sup>

Such phenomena have been regularly noted within empirical studies of MMA. Commonly, fighters describe the allure of the sport in terms of its potential to test them like no other fighting discipline can [Spencer 2009], and thereby reveal deep, authentic truths about combat – and moreover, about themselves [Abramson and Modzelewski 2011]. For instance, Mierzwinski et al. [2014] draw on the concept of the 'quest for excitement' to illustrate women's experiences of MMA's emotional significance [see also Lyng 2018]. Their participants were drawn to competitive fighting not only because it represented a thrilling departure from their dull, daily routines, but because MMA

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3 Throughout much of the work cited here, Lyng consistently contextualises edgework as a phenomenon associated with late modernity. As I understand Lyng's intention, this aspect of his theorising is less about absolute historical specificity and more a matter of connecting a psychological construct with a socio-cultural/political economic context that facilitates it – which is not to say that other contexts could not facilitate the same sort of behaviour among the people living within them. My thanks to Kyle Barrowman for raising this critical observation.

represented the best chance to ‘see if [their] training would work’ [2014: 74] – that is, uncover the truth about their evolving fighting abilities. Meanwhile, Green [2011] emphasises the ‘realness’ of MMA as an embodied awareness arising from the painful nature of training; when participants suffer, they become more confident not only in the efficacy of the martial art they are learning, but also in themselves as carriers of that art’s potential. Pain was thus considered a route to gaining authentic self-knowledge: ‘participants commonly state “you don’t know yourself until you’ve been hit”’ [2011: 378]. Further still, Brent and Kraska [2013: 365] note that ‘fighting [...] was a “release” and even a “liberating” experience’ from fighters’ overly regulated lives, supporting their paper’s titular claim that ‘fighting is the most real and honest thing’ they do. As such, participants in their study were able to see fighting as an integral part of their identity: ‘being a fighter is a big part of who I am [...] fighting makes me, me’ [2013: 367-8].

Building on these opportunities for reflexivity and self-actualisation, Lyng argues that edgeworkers develop social bonds with each other on the basis of a shared admiration of their collective edgeworking ability, forming something of an elite social clique. This too is a common observation in studies of MMA; while Andreasson and Johansson [2018], Green [2011], and many others note the construction of an exclusive community among fighters, Abramson and Modzelewski explain further that ‘[competitive] fighters are seen as special, different, and morally superior’ within MMA subcultures based on their sacrifice, suffering, and voluntary commitment to the sport [2011: 167]. Importantly, this phenomenon is not built (only) on competitive success; a typical refrain I have heard numerous times in my own fieldwork is that ‘anyone with the guts to step in the cage’ is deserving of the utmost respect [see Spencer 2009]. This phenomenon indicates that MMA fighters’ social standing is less a function of their combative prowess or competitive success, and more of their ability to *demonstrate character*, in a Goffmanian sense [Lyng 2014], by confronting the emotional onslaught – the CT/F – imposed by engaging in a cage fight. This is what allows their ‘true character’ to surface, becoming the basis for social validation within the subculture of the sport.

There is one important exception to note, however, which helps better illustrate the general rule about ‘stepping into the cage’. A common feature of the regional MMA circuit in the UK at present is the ‘independent fighter’ – typically a paid ‘journeyman’ competitor booked at the last minute to ‘save’ fights following late drop-outs, who deliberately offers very little resistance to the opponent whose fight

they have ‘saved’.<sup>4</sup> These types of journeymen are held in very low regard by insiders in this community (such as the referees, medical staff, and fighters I conversed with) due to their pecuniary motivations, generally poor fighting skills, and lack of evident desire to compete:

During the fourth ‘professional’ bout on tonight’s card, two opponents of strikingly different appearance squared off against each other in the cage. One was taller, looked to be carrying several kilos more bodyweight, and was in excellent fighting shape, his thick muscles flexing under taught skin flushed pink from his warm-up. He hopped up and down on the spot, weight shifting from side to side, eyes intently fixed on the man across from him. His opponent, the ‘independent fighter’ we’d seen earlier, was pale and slim, his small, rounded belly sticking out above Thai boxing shorts that seemed too big for his skinny hips. Flat-footed and shoulders hunched, he glanced around nervously. Then the cage door shut, the bell rang, and the referee waved the men together. The first man charged, throwing a low kick to the thigh; the journeyman dropped, throwing up his hands to cover his head at once, making no effort to counter or evade. Drawing his knees up, he curled into a protective ball, lying on his side. The other fighter lay on top of him and swarmed him with hammer-fist blows, each one bouncing off a forearm or shoulder as the crowd cheered their approval. The referee gave the journeyman the customary warning to ‘fight back’, but barely waited for a response before leaning in to wave off the contest: the fight was over almost as soon as it had begun.

The paramedic I was shadowing (who was also herself a boxer), complained to me that she felt sorry for the fighter who’d quickly defeated this hapless opponent. His ten-second win meant the man had been ‘robbed’ of the test of his ability that a ‘real’ opponent would have given him. She claimed that such journeymen were ‘ruining this sport, making an absolute mockery of it’ by undermining the ‘honest’ challenge of the cage fight. Indeed, the victor’s body language suggested he had

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4 This term typically refers to a type of ‘journeyman’ – a paid fighter who doesn’t hold serious aspirations of becoming a championship contender – often booked by promoters of lower-level shows in order to avoid having to issue refunds for tickets sold by fighters whose opponents withdraw from competition shortly before their fight. Although relatively rare, at one event I observed in 2018, almost all of the bouts featured these poorly skilled independent fighters, much to the consternation of several groups of fans. It is worth noting that not all fighters described as journeymen fit this model; some are highly skilled and well-respected in the MMA community.

experienced his easy win as hollow and anti-climactic, as he waved gingerly to his friends in the crowd and shrugged, lips pursed in a vexed expression, receiving mute applause for his efforts.

[Field notes, May 2018]

Evacuating any semblance of risk from the fight by offering no resistance, the 'independent fighter' profaned a space otherwise reserved for authentic tests of character. Thus, despite 'stepping into the cage', such fighters are not considered to share in the glory of the arena and cannot lay claim to being a true part of its exclusive community. Further, when the role they play effectively deprives others of the chance to experience the intense emotional struggle associated with the edgework of MMA, and thus the opportunity to engage in reflexive self-actualisation, they are cast by many as *personae-non-gratae* in the field.

## CHARTING PARTNERED EDGEWORK EXPERIENCES IN MMA

To summarise the discussion so far, the typical features of edgework as described by Lyng [1990] can be seen to apply reasonably well to MMA. The open-endedness, intensity, and unpredictability of the sport typically involves the voluntary navigation of several high-stakes boundaries, potentially generating powerful emotional states that provide participants opportunities to demonstrate mastery in the face of chaos. This gives MMA fighters the sense that they are developing 'unique experiential knowledge that only [they] can comprehend' [Spencer 2009: 136], revealing deep truths about themselves that become powerful sources of self-identity, as well as the basis for constructing exclusive, elite communities within and around the sport. For many fighters, these dynamics confer a great deal of value on their participation in MMA; Brent and Kraska summarise this well in noting that 'a central theme, shared by all those we worked with, [was that] fighting enriched these participants' lives' [2013: 364].

## COLLABORATIVE CO-ACTION AND COMMITMENT TO THE TEST

Despite these conceptual synergies, MMA is a somewhat unique practice when compared to other forms of edgework. As illustrated by the case of the 'independent fighter', where MMA differs is that it is *fundamentally dependent upon collaborative co-action* to bring about edgework's typical outcomes. That is, although the logic of competitive sport casts them as opponents, fighters facing each other in an MMA bout simultaneously facilitate one-another's edgework at the same time as they oppose each other in the match. When fighting, they

are collaborating to produce in each other the emotional experiences conducive to the pursuit of highly valued self-knowledge that lies at the heart of MMA's unique and powerful appeal. In this sense, edgework in MMA requires a partner to 'actually *construct* the edge' that is to be worked [Newmahr 2011: 692, original emphasis]; the emotional experience it offers is impossible for individuals to realise alone and, indeed, its achievement in the sport is entirely conditional upon the effectiveness of these partnerships.<sup>5</sup>

Importantly, while training in MMA requires overtly collaborative, often passive, only partially competitive partners to help develop one's skills, the edgework represented by MMA competition requires full, adversarial commitment from one's partner-opponent in order to be realised. Although the staging of a cage fight [Stenius 2011] and the dangerous reputation of the sport [Downey 2014] might be enough to stimulate the kind of pre-fight nerves reported by Jensen et al. [2013], Vaccaro et al. [2011] and others, the sustained, back-and-forth, painful struggle of experiencing a 'real' fight is what constitutes the stuff of MMA's potential for deep reflexivity and self-actualisation. As Green describes it, 'pain makes the experience real' [2011: 384] – so in the absence of such 'real', physical danger, as most readily signified by pain, the opportunity to engage in edgework is diminished.<sup>6</sup>

In this light, the disparagement of 'independent fighters' noted above makes more sense. Interestingly, I noted a different manifestation of this phenomenon at another low-level, professional MMA show:

**Following a finish in the first round of the evening's heavyweight main event, the losing fighter – who, over the course of three slow, gruelling minutes had been pinned down and repeatedly punched in the body and head before the referee intervened to end the fight – effortlessly shrugged off the medic who was attending him. He strode across the cage with a beaming smile on his reddened, bloodied face, arms outstretched to his opponent revealing ugly welts on**

5 Newmahr's [2011] conceptualisation of sadomasochism as edgework highlights a very similar phenomenon. Although a comparison of the features of sadomasochism and MMA is beyond the scope of this article, Weinberg [2016] provides a thorough discussion of the two, principally with respect to the contested legality of what she calls 'consensual violence', which is well worth the reader's time.

6 As an interesting aside, Brett's [2017] analysis of the aesthetic judgement of fights by MMA commentators provides further clues as to the value of well-matched, hard-fought, painful bouts within the sport, for their ability to reveal fighters' true character (among other things).

his battered torso. He embraced the man and they exchanged back slaps, then held each other by the shoulders to talk. From my seat at cageside, I clearly heard the loser apologise to the winner for not having put up a better fight. He complemented the man's technique and power, and repeated his apology, as the victor smiled, graciously telling him not to worry, attributing his dominant win to 'just a good bit of luck' for landing an early takedown.

[Field Notes, April 2018]

Here, the losing fighter's primary concern, after taking a severe beating and while a frustrated medic was trying to check him for signs of brain damage, was in letting the man who had just beaten him up know that he was sorry for failing to effectively provide the challenge that was expected of him. In addition to hinting at a concern for the missed opportunities for edgework that a more even bout could have provided, this fighter openly demonstrates an affinity with the needs and desires of his opponent, providing important clues as to the orientation to the other that MMA competition often involves.

## RESPECTING, CARING AND PROVIDING FOR THE OTHER

Although apologising for taking a beating might be somewhat rare, other overt displays of affection and respect between fighters are not. At every event I have attended, a good proportion of the competitors (if not the clear majority) would embrace, kiss, high-five or bow to their opponent, praising each other's abilities and expressly thanking each other for their fight upon its conclusion – both in the cage, and/or backstage afterwards. This is often the case for both winning and losing competitors, and although it does not happen after every fight,<sup>7</sup> it is common enough to describe as a norm in MMA. Further, fighters will very often check on their opponents in the cage after fights end via stoppages (i.e., knockouts, submissions, or referee interventions), with some fighters remaining in contact with former opponents after fights [Andreasson and Johansson 2018], or checking on their welfare by visiting them (in hospital, for instance) following injuries [Doyle 2015].

Such behaviour resonates neatly with Lyng's [1990] observation regarding the respect that is fostered among communities of edgeworkers, comprising social bonds reflective of a shared understanding of a unique human experience, and mutual admiration

7 Other reactions that are fairly common are for fighters to be overcome with emotion, crying in the cage or hurrying backstage, away from public view; or to simply take the result in their stride, expressing limited overt gratitude to their opponent. Only very rarely have I seen fighters express any kind of mockery or hostility towards their opponents in the aftermath of an MMA match.

for the courage and skills required to live these out. Fighters' accounts of how they think about their opponents add depth to these observations. To aid in the psychologically difficult task of fighting intently with a person they respect, some fighters adopt a neutral, business-like mentality to the fight itself, casting the instance of the match as an impersonal meeting: 'there's no bad blood, [it's] just business [...] When it's over, it's over' [Jensen et al. 2013: 8]. A typical sentiment among fighters is that they 'don't look upon their opponent as an enemy or an idiot [...] most of my relationships with my opponents have been good' [Andreasson and Johansson 2018: 12]. Perhaps most tellingly though, the mutuality and co-dependent nature of fighting is often foregrounded: 'we are in it together, him and me, it's our game, we do this together' [quoted in Stenius 2011: 91].

Within such a context of harbouring no ill-will, generally enjoying positive relationships, and recognising the importance of the mutuality of their craft, causing serious harm, injury, or lasting damage to opponents is generally understood as undesirable [Abramson and Modzelewski 2011]. Setting out with the intention to cause lasting damage to the other is framed as incompatible with the collaborative nature of partnered edgework in the sport. This makes for an interesting paradox: fighters must intentionally use techniques which inflict pain and possibly injury if they are to provide an 'ultimate' test of fighting ability constitutive of a genuine MMA fight, with its associated onrush of CT/F, painful physical consequences, and assurances of 'realness'. But fighters generally do not do this with the intention of causing serious harm; as one of Stenius' interviewees argued, 'we don't try to injure each other, that's not what MMA is about' [2015: 86]. What MMA is about, rather, is the joint pursuit of the intense emotional experience and profound self-knowledge that contesting an 'ultimate' fight can generate [O'Shea 2019]. The chance to face down the risks posed by a resisting opponent in such a contest thereby becomes a high-value service that fighters can and must provide for each other if fighting is to make sense.

By drawing on the concept of edgework, we can therefore see that MMA fighters are helping each other, *becoming the ultimate challenge* by embodying the risks that their partner desires to face. A particularly acute illustration of this, which invites direct parallels with the edgework of mountaineering [Bunn 2017], is when a fighter explained to me backstage at a professional event in mid-2018 that the opponent he would face that night was 'going to be my Everest'. He lost that fight to a judges' decision, but gaily walked away from the cage shoulder-to-shoulder with his vanquisher, evidently pleased with his journey up and down the mountain.

## COLLABORATIVE EDGEWORK: SHIFTING FROM 'VIOLENCE' TO 'MUTUALLY CONSTRUCTED RISK'

So far, I have argued that the concept of edgework offers valuable insight by foregrounding the essentially collaborative nature of the production of 'authentic' experiences in full-contact fighting, which empirical research shows to be highly valued by fighters. I propose that embracing this concept offers martial arts studies scholars opportunities to deepen our theoretical understanding of combat sports, mostly because it helps us understand what O'Shea [2019: 55] describes as 'one of the central paradoxes of sport fighting': how fighters can simultaneously try to cause harm to each other while also caring about each other's welfare, feelings and desires. Indeed, it allows us to see how the former becomes a logical extension of the latter. While this notion might illuminate a number of debates and open pathways for several research trajectories, I contend that it is particularly informative with respect to the contentious ethical and theoretical problem of the 'violence' of combat sports. It is to this problem that I now turn.

### MMA AS 'INHERENTLY VIOLENT'

Since its inception in the early 1990s, modern MMA has been dogged by public criticism of its apparent barbarity, necessitating image management strategies to facilitate the sport's development and commercial growth [Downey 2014]. Often, scholarly research on MMA has taken a fairly critical view of the simplistic and stigmatising construction of the sport as an unrestrained celebration of violence, principally by foregrounding nuanced socio-historical narratives of sport and violence more widely, and/or by attending to the lived realities of MMA fighters themselves to complicate such straightforward moral condemnation. However, others have been more sceptical about the sport. In perhaps the most scathing example of scholarly criticism to date, Dixon [2015: 365] characterises MMA as 'a paradigm case of violent sport' centred on deliberately trying to injure other people, arguing that competitive MMA fights are an 'intrinsically immoral' activity. Building his thesis around the claim that it is a 'prime instance of treating opponents as worthless objects rather than as intrinsically valuable ends in themselves' [2015: 369], Dixon challenges proponents of MMA to prove him wrong.

In a second articulation of the same argument, Dixon [2016] offers something that few scholars discussing MMA's 'violence' have overtly attempted – an actual definition of violence itself around which to frame his case. He draws on what he describes as 'the admirably neutral account of violence' offered by Robert Simon [Simon et al. 2015: 238], as 'the use of physical force designed to harm others', before adding that 'violence is *prima facie* wrong and stands in need of justification'

[Dixon 2016: 102]. Further, he clarifies that 'it would be sophistical to deny that [MMA is] violent' [2016: 102], since the means of winning competitive bouts depends upon 'hurting and injuring' opponents. Although Dixon's argument offers only the slimmest engagement with the thoughts and experiences of actual MMA competitors, resting otherwise on what is best described as armchair criticism, a similar taxonomical approach to 'violence' appears in many other papers that adopt a more empirically robust perspective (although, for the most part, these offer no overt definition of 'violence'). That is to say, in the vast majority of scholarship on MMA (including most of the papers cited above), the 'violence' of the sport is left unchallenged as a taken-for-granted, ontologically fixed attribute, wherein MMA is casually described as a violent sport or a sport premised upon doing violence to one's opponent.<sup>8</sup>

This pervasive trend is also evident in several studies wherein researchers have, in fact, attempted to problematize such notions of 'violence' as a direct corollary of engaging with the meanings constructed around and through participants' experiences. A decent illustration of this can be found in Abramson and Modzelewski's [2011] ethnography. Anticipating, perhaps, the criticisms of those like Dixon [2015; 2016], they state that the superficial and analytically erroneous arguments of the 'rhetorician or cultural critic' in conflating 'aesthetics with meaning' to suggest the appeal of MMA to fighters is the chance to engage in and celebrate violence, are 'impossible to sustain' once investigating the milieu of MMA up-close [2011: 158]. Calling into question the use of the term itself, they also argue that '*If [MMA] is violence*', it is a peculiar form of codified, agreed upon, and "controlled violence" [2011: 160, emphasis added]. Elsewhere, they note that 'fighters repeatedly invoke the distinction between a sportive contest [...] and what they see as *true violence*' [2011: 160, emphasis added], suggesting that MMA is not experienced as 'truly' violent by its practitioners. However, elsewhere throughout their paper, they still regularly refer to the action of MMA as 'violent' or involving 'violence', without much attention to qualifying exactly what they mean or differentiating between, for example, 'types' of violence, as would seem necessary from the above.

8 In some cases the language used to describe this is particularly misleading. For instance, some refer to heightened 'levels' of violence in MMA compared to other combat sports, implying that they have discovered a way to isolate, quantify and reliably measure certain units of violence across contexts. Others refer to the sport's 'raw' or 'primordial' violence, presupposing a kind of typology that is never defined or explained. Importantly, such claims are often made in ways which suggest an objective judgement on the part of scholars, and not a critical comment on societal perceptions. These kinds of claims do nothing to enhance the analytical clarity of scholarly research on sport and violence.



In light of this trend, Christopher R. Matthews and I proposed a theoretical model for understanding sports-related violence which, we argue, is suitable for analytically differentiating between actions generally understood as violent, but which are experienced very differently by those involved in them in particular contexts. Specifically, we argued that attempts to theorise sports-related violence should attend to both the *force* involved in an action but also the extent to which that action constitutes a *violation* of the individuals involved. In other words, for violence to occur, there must be both force and violation, wherein individuals are forcefully deprived of their ability to autonomously determine themselves and their actions [Matthews and Channon 2017]. We noted that this ‘clarity is vitally important considering the morally evaluative nature of the term “violence” [2017: 760] – as per Dixon’s [2016] framing of even a ‘neutral’ understanding of violence as involving actions which are ‘*prima facie* wrong’. And, since all competitive MMA fights should meet the criteria we associated with force (and upon which others’ casual uses of the term ‘violence’ seem to depend), questioning whether or not violations happen becomes a key analytical focus for evaluating the morality of full-contact fighting sports [see also O’Shea 2019].

Drawing on interactionist sociology, we further argued that the exact conduct of people engaged in ostensibly violent actions, as well as the subjective meanings constructed around the experience of being involved, are crucial to determining whether or not either party has been violated, and therefore whether or not ‘violence’ is a suitable label to describe these acts [Channon and Matthews 2018]. Thus, the notion of *consent* becomes crucial in helping to determine where violence begins and ends. Put simply, if MMA matches are conducted in ways which carefully and faithfully facilitate informed, reflexive, and explicitly consensual actions, then they are not definitively violent, and thus, by extension, not deserving of the typical moral critique they often face.<sup>9</sup> We therefore proposed that this analytically-oriented definition of violence, incorporated into participants’ own accounts of what it is like to fight competitively, can successfully explain why some people might experience fighting in a cage as ‘not truly violent’, and thus, contra Dixon, not ‘in need of [moral] justification’ [2016: 102].

However, while our argument might carry weight with some athletes who have lived out the difference between what we framed as violent and non-violent fights, it offers little to appease Dixon, who states that consent is ‘not the moral trump card that it is often claimed to be’ [2015: 371]. Here, Dixon adopts the position that because MMA fights involve what he interprets as essentially ‘demeaning’ interactions, they cannot

be morally excused by the presence of consent since they nevertheless violate ‘inalienable rights to dignity and against being treated as an object to damage’ [371], which ‘all the mutual consent in the world is insufficient to negate’ [2016: 111]. Furthermore, because MMA fighters ‘consent to letting others treat them as having inferior worth’ [2015: 371], they are just as culpable in failing to respect their own dignity as they are in violating others’. Following this paternalistic dismissal of the consent principle, Dixon attempts to insulate his criticism from what he imagines as an obvious retort regarding sportsmanship in MMA: ‘professional respect among cage fighters [...] cannot transform violent acts into anything more than attempts to hurt and injure’ [376]. He also suggests that the pursuit of a self-affirming challenge through MMA is similarly insufficient to justify its violence, when meaningful self-affirmations can be found elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> Lastly, Dixon repeatedly foregrounds his belief that MMA ‘involves treating opponents as violable – as objects to be destroyed – rather than as ends in themselves’ [380]. For commentators like Dixon then, MMA remains morally problematic due to what is assumed to be an orientation to the other premised upon mutually demeaning processes of objectification.

## RECONCEPTUALISING THE ACTION OF FULL-CONTACT FIGHTS

As readers will have no doubt surmised, I am not particularly impressed with Dixon’s [2015; 2016] work. In particular, I find his lack of attention to the wide body of empirical research on MMA and its athletes inexcusable given the kinds of claims he makes about what fighters intend, what they think and feel about their sport and their opponents, and what meanings should be attached to their experiences in the cage. Within this body of work (much of which was available to read long before his papers were published), there are abundant examples of fighters’ narratives, phenomenological accounts of fighting, and observations of fight interactions that directly contradict Dixon’s assumptions, as discussed at length above. As I hope to have indicated so far in this paper, particularly when contextualised by viewing MMA as edgework, such arguments as Dixon’s begin to unravel in the face of these findings.

Indeed, when confronted with the question of whether they perceive MMA as violent, barbaric, or otherwise immoral, fighters often respond by explicitly foregrounding the role the sport plays in enabling them to experience edgework: ‘we weren’t thugs. We were nice guys, who simply wanted to keep on doing an ultimate sport, measuring

9 For a lengthy debate over the veracity of our definition of violence (but not, necessarily, the associated issue of morality) see Barrowman and Channon [2018].

10 Dixon [2015: 380] lists motor sports, (American) football and mountain climbing as alternatives which do not involve deliberately trying to injure people as the direct goal. Although this does not technically invalidate his point, it is somewhat ironic that he has listed sports which have significantly more incidences of participant mortality as being less morally problematic than MMA.

our capabilities and strengths in the cage' [quoted in Andreasson and Johansson 2018: 7]; 'fighting can look brutal, even to me [...] but it's about your character, to become and appear as something, in front of the crowd and the opponent' [quoted in Stenius 2011: 91]. This troubles the assumption that fighters lack self-respect by subjecting their bodies to potential damage, as the process is clearly oriented towards reflexive self-examination, self-improvement, and affirmative identity construction [Green 2011; Spencer 2009].

Moreover, as Weimer comments in his philosophical response to Dixon, MMA participants 'fight because they "get something" out of the activity, something that will in most cases relate to a genuine need, and they want to make sure that their opponent "gets something" out of it as well' [Weimer 2017: 266]. Although Weimer's paper is similarly devoid of empirically-derived examples, his argument is built on presuppositions that are incidentally well-evidenced in the research literature. Of particular relevance is that he echoes the claim that fighters see MMA as 'a unique test of character that is unavailable elsewhere' [Abramson and Modzelewski 2011: 166], voiding the patronising suggestion that fighters ought to do something else to get their kicks [Dixon 2015: 370]. Thus, the simplistic characterisation of MMA as violent and destructive fails to understand the unique psychological rewards that it offers participants, the fact that fighters' efforts to 'hurt each other' in the cage are inseparable from the process of producing opportunities for each other to experience these uniquely rewarding sensations, and that fighters generally recognise this phenomenon when articulating the moral meanings of their participation.

Seen in this way, fighters are not 'demeaned' as victimised, worthless objects of one another's violence, but instead become vehicles for, and recipients of, knowledge about themselves and each other, granted through mutually consenting engagement in painful, dangerous, nerve-wracking, high-risk combat. The parameters of what are deemed acceptable risks to take in constituting this edgework – what fighters consent to face, and dedicate their time and energy in preparing themselves to endure, overcome, and master – are unambiguously understood beforehand, and are maintained *in situ* through the institutional structures which enable competitive fights. The rationalised, contained, prepared-for chaos comprising edgework [Lyng 1990] is brought to life by the intentional efforts of fighters who are at once antagonists and collaborators, supporting each other in a quest for knowledge facilitated by what they perceive to be the 'ultimate test' of full-contact, mixed discipline fighting [O'Shea 2019]. That they experience their participation as a path to deeply meaningful reflexivity and self-actualisation, shaping positive self-identities and bonding them to others within an exclusive community of peers, puts the lie to the suggestion that fighters do not see themselves and their opponents as intrinsically valuable 'ends in themselves'. When examined on

fighters' own terms, competitive MMA is seen as more-or-less the exact opposite, with would-be antagonists playing an important role in enriching one-another's lives [Brent and Kraska 2013].

To conclude my argument then, I propose that edgework be used as a conceptual device to shift academic discourse on the action of MMA away from a simplistic, one-dimensional and empirically questionable framing as 'violence'. Unqualified use of this term is currently common throughout the literature on this sport, simultaneously ignoring the voices of athletes who explicitly state that they do not experience MMA fighting as violence [see Abramson and Modzelewski 2011; Andreasson and Johansson 2018; Stenius 2011], while inadvertently reinforcing the foundations of a stigma surrounding the sport that many authors otherwise recognise as problematic. In its place then, I propose using the notion of mutually constructed risk. Within a paradigm that recognises the importance of both force and violation for constituting 'violence', along with the necessity of carefully employing this term given its profound moral implications [Matthews and Channon 2017], MMA fights that proceed on a clear basis of mutual consent cannot be fairly described as violent. This does not mean that they do not still involve very real dangers, the likes of which enable participants to mimetically experience the same emotional sensations (i.e., CT/F) generated by 'real' violence [see Collins 2008]. To make sense of the production of this danger as a process framed by consent, and by attending to the nature of the relationship between the individuals involved in such MMA fights, we must acknowledge the high degree of collaboration in producing risks that approximate – but do not necessarily become – violence. In this way, the action of MMA, as collaborative edgework, is best understood as mutually constructed risk, and not violence.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

As a closing series of clarifications, I wish to briefly address both the limits of the notion that MMA is not definitively violent outlined above, as well as some wider possibilities regarding the application of 'edgework' to explaining MMA. Firstly, as Matthews and I have argued previously, the observation that sport fighting is not *inherently* violent is not the same as saying it is *never* violent [Channon and Matthews 2018]. Our argument rests on the recognition and maintenance of mutual consent, which means there are manifold ways in which sports such as MMA can become violent if the interactions occurring within them deviate from those to which participants have explicitly consented. These would include anything participants are subjected to without consent; any instances of consent being manipulatively or coercively obtained or given without proper understanding of what

is being consented to; occasions wherein opponents or others do not respect athletes' withdrawal of consent, or athletes are compelled against their wishes to not withdraw it; any example of consent being given with diminished capacity; and so on. Seen in this light, it is highly unlikely that any kind of fighting, outside of the typical parameters and institutional structures of formal, rationally organised combat sports, can be effectively seen as 'not really violent' [see Jackson-Jacobs 2014: 182 for an interesting exception], as these parameters provide a clear framework around which consent can be constructed and maintained. This perspective also highlights the ethical importance of working to clarify and explicitly foreground participants' agency in determining the conditions of their participation in combat sports, which I see as a very worthwhile endeavour.

Secondly, it has not been my intention to suggest that MMA is always undertaken as a form of edgework, or is always guaranteed to be successful when undertaken as such (my use of examples illustrating the failure of MMA as edgework should have illustrated this, although I suspect there are many more ways in which such failures might occur). Following Bunn [2017], it is crucial to understand that despite edgework involving objective dangers, risk is subjectively experienced and therefore what might constitute a psychologically profound confrontation with a perceived 'edge' for one person may not hold the same significance for another. Bunn [2017: 1312] applies this recognition to critique the role of boxing in constituting edgework; his criticism may just as well apply to MMA. This may particularly be the case considering the distinction between a professional fighter with an extensive history of competitive sport fighting and a debuting amateur (although many of the works consulted above suggest that seasoned veterans still experience MMA in ways that are conducive to edgework). A further distinction regarding amateurs and professionals might be considered with respect to what motivates them [Weimer 2017]; driven by financial gain and hoping to further their careers with victories, rather than to test themselves through intense emotional experience, might mean that professionals are less likely to fit the model of edgework as I have outlined here; or at least, they might experience MMA as edgework in different ways. Such questions as these deserve to be purposefully tested through empirical research, particularly if we accept that edgework plays a role in the moral legitimacy of the sport, as I have argued.

Thirdly, although the question of violence is an important one to consider, the concept of edgework potentially offers more to the study of contemporary combat sports than this alone. Further routes of enquiry might do well to centre the macro-micro conceptualisations articulated by Lyng [1990] to expand on research into the emergence of MMA, and particularly its relative popularity among specific

demographic groups [see Abramson and Modzelewski 2011; Green 2016; Lyng 2018]. Such enquiries may also wish to place a focus on the often uneven power structures that exist within professional MMA in particular, wherein fighters' vulnerability to economic exploitation may be exacerbated by the 'culture of risk' [Nixon 1992] that can be said to exist within this sport. If fighters collectively perceive the courting of danger and acceptance of personal risks as evidence of good character, then efforts at pushing for greater regulations to enhance athletes' safety and welfare may struggle to win broad, grassroots support. As is the case in other professional sports, such initiatives often run against the interests of corporate management, meaning the moral validation of risk-taking among athletes may work against their interests in the context of class-based conflict over the control of athletic labour [see Kalman-Lamb 2019]. As such, the cultural validation of risk-taking among fighters may assume importance in critically appraising a rather different aspect of the ethics of contemporary MMA.

Elsewhere, attention to the insights the concept provides on the role of broader socio-cultural and political-economic configurations in influencing individual risk-taking might see edgework used with good effect to speak critically to what Abramson and Modzelewski describe as the 'sociologically inadequate' [2011: 162] thesis describing MMA's popularity exclusively with reference to men and masculinity. This could be particularly instructive when considering gender-essentialist discourses linking MMA with men's 'natural' inclinations to violence in apparently 'feminising' societies [see Judkins 2015], but also superficial, pro-feminist critiques that see the sport as little more than an exercise in patriarchal reproduction. Finally, given that several authors have noted that edgework carries a certain amount of conceptual baggage regarding masculinity itself [e.g. Laurendeau 2011; Newmahr 2011], scope remains to critically engage with debates in the wider literature on the concept by discussing both the potentially 'feminised' aspects of MMA practice performed by men [see Abramson and Modzelewski 2011: 156–8] and the increasing presence of women in competitive MMA [Mierzwinski et al. 2014]. In these and other ways, it is my hope that this essay can stimulate further, productive use of edgework as a theoretical tool in the expanding martial arts studies research literature.

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